Community Media and Networking and ICT

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Abstract

Community organizations produce community media to publicize to the larger society the issues and events they believe are important. They network with each other to coordinate their activities and form coalitions for action on common themes. Within alternative media theory and new social movement theory, community media and community networking are the primary means by which community organizations and social movement organizations attempt to challenge dominant social codes, test new ideas, and conduct experiments on existing relations of power. During the past decade, researchers have posited that information and communication technologies (ICT) offer new possibilities for community organizations to further their work on behalf of marginalized groups. This paper analyzes how four community organizations in four different Canadian provinces produce community media and network with other community organizations, drawing on fieldwork data collected as part of the larger Community Intermediaries Research Project. The analysis focuses on: the processes and technologies used for community media and networking, the community media and networking activities and messages, and the social and organizational arrangements that exist and form around these processes, technologies, messages and activities.

Community media and networking and ICT

Introduction

Community organizations address the needs and advocate on behalf of their "community" and particular groups within it. They produce community media to publicize the issues and events they believe are important and network with each other to share information, coordinate their activities and form coalitions for action on common themes. During the past decade, researchers have considered how community organizations can use information and communication technologies (ICT) to further their work on behalf of the most marginalized members of society (O'Donnell, 2003; Downey and Fenton, 2003; O'Donnell, 2001; Ba et al., 2001; Harris, 1999; O'Donnell and Trench, 1999; Trench and O'Donnell, 1997). More recently, researchers have investigated how community organizations use ICT to deliver government services and information, acting as "intermediaries" between various levels of government and the communities they serve (Rideout et. al, 2006).

This paper explores the community media and networking activities of four community organizations in four different Canadian provinces, and the role of ICT in these activities. The analysis draws on fieldwork data collected as part of the larger Community Intermediaries Research Project (Rideout et. al, 2006). We situate the findings within contemporary communications and social theories. By "community media" we are referring to media produced by these organizations for their specific communities. The term "community networking" refers to their activities to link with other community organizations and community members.

Small media, social movements and public spheres

Theoretical frameworks to explain community media and networking remain very underdeveloped. We situated these activities within three related and more developed theoretical areas: small media or alternative media, social movements, and the public sphere.

Community media fit within the frameworks of "small media" or "alternative media" theories. "Small media" are media that can be passed individually from one person to

others - such as posters, pamphlets, information sheets and so on. Studies have shown the effectiveness of small media in community health interventions because they are effective in communicating messages to community members (Pasick, Hiatt and Paskett, 2004). In their analysis of the role of small media in the Iranian revolution, Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi (1997, 1994) note that the distinction between "big" and "small" media depends not on the technologies used but rather on the way technologies are used. In Iran, small media such as audiotapes and photocopied leaflets helped to open a public sphere of dissent, strengthen and extend established cultural networks and communicative patterns, and support an oppositional discourse that led to the mass mobilization. The term "alternative media" refers to media produced by social movement actors - including traditional alternative media forms such as print, video, film, radio, television, and theatre, and encompassing small media. John Downing (1995) defines them as "politically dissident media that offer radical alternatives to mainstream debate."

The second theoretical area that explains the significance of community media and networking is new social movement theory. The community organizations in this study can be positioned as actors in new social movements attempting to increase opportunities for the disadvantaged members of their communities. New Social Movement theory was developed largely by European academics. Rooted in continental European traditions of social theory and political philosophy, it emerged to analyse collective identities and sites of action in addition to the "old" social movement of class struggle and proletarian revolution associated with classical Marxism. The social movement theorist most identified with ICT is Manuel Castells. Using Castells' theoretical framework, the community organizations in this study can be seen as communicating to combat the marginalization and disadvantage of their communities and specific community members. Castells spent 12 years writing his *Information Age* trilogy: *The Rise of the Network Society* (1996), *The Power of Identity* (1997), and *End of Millennium* (1998). A background to this work is his earlier *The Informational City* (1989), which analyses changes in the urban environment resulting from "information flows." His central thesis in this earlier work is that since the end of the Second World War and especially since the 1970s, a combination of capitalist restructuring and technological innovation is the major factor transforming society. In his trilogy on the network society, Castells builds on this analysis to examine in more detail the conflicts in contemporary society, including "the rise of the fourth world" (1998) - groups such as the working poor excluded from the network society - and social movements arising as part of the social

transformations (1997). Castells believes that at the same time that globalisation and "informationalization" are transforming the world, they are also disenfranchising societies. Social movements are rooted in the resentment that people feel because of their loss of control over their lives, jobs and environment. In his later work on this topic (2001), Castells identifies that social movements are built around communication systems by which they can reach out to those who would share their values and affect the consciousness of society more broadly.

The work of Italian sociologist Alberto Melucci (1986, 1989) is the social movement theorist of greatest interest for the current research because his theoretical framework highlights the vital role that community media and networking play in social movements. Using Melucci's analysis, community media and networking activities by community organizations are understood partly in terms of a search for community, primary relations, and collective values. Community media also have a symbolic function - to challenge society's dominant codes. Melucci's work has been used recently for analyzing democratic media activism in Canada (Carroll and Hackett, 2006). Despite the title of his last book, *Challenging Codes: Collective action in the Information Age*, Melucci does not analyse the Internet. Social movements, Melucci believes, have the power to reverse the symbolic order, through their alternative use of symbolic codes. Alternative media, including "music, bodily signals and clothing, radios and images, theatre and art, communication networks and virtual reality," can be used to alter and evade the codes imposed by mass society. Melucci believes that messages produced by social movement actors help the social movements to articulate and publicise to the rest of society the themes they consider important, and to enable political actors to receive the movements' messages more clearly. Cultural practices common within social movements - ranging from dissemination of alternative information to consciousness-raising and forms of psychotherapy - help maintain the movement, by providing alternative forms of self-understanding, friendship networks guaranteeing contact with sympathetic individuals, and many opportunities for friendship.

Public sphere theory is the third approach to understanding the function of community media and networking. The concept of the public sphere is theorised most comprehensively in the work of Jürgen Habermas (1989 [1962]). He believes that the growth of capitalism in the 18th and 19th centuries allowed a public sphere to emerge but that it declined along with the general increase in information management, entertainment, and commodification - developments contributing to narrowing the range

of public discussion and debate. As conceptualized by Habermas, the public sphere is an arena, independent of government and partisan economic forces, dedicated to rational debate and opinion-formation amongst citizens. Key elements of the public sphere include universal access, voluntary participation, rational argument, the freedom to express opinions, and the freedom to discuss matters of the state and participate outside institutional roles.

Habermas's treatise on the public sphere, published in German in 1962, found an immediate and receptive audience in Europe and, after its translation into English in 1989, in North America and Britain, where it stimulated significant debate. Feminist Nancy Fraser (1992), one of Habermas's most significant critics, believes his theory of the public sphere is substantively flawed, particularly in its failure to develop a post-bourgeois model of the public sphere. Fraser questions the central tenets of Habermas's vision and proposes instead an alternative framework, including the concept that a single public sphere is not always preferable to a nexus of multiple publics. Habermas's theory of the public sphere assumes that confining public life to a single, over-arching public sphere is positive and desirable, and that a proliferation of multiple publics is a departure from democracy. Fraser argues instead that in stratified societies - characterised by unequal social groups in structural relations of dominance and subordination - parity of participation in public debate is not possible. In fact, existing inequalities are exacerbated in a single public sphere with no alternative arenas for debate amongst the excluded groups. Fraser calls these alternative arenas "subaltern publics" - "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (1992:123). These subaltern publics revolve around alternative media.

Another version of this argument linking alternative media with multiple public spheres has been articulated by John Keane (1995). Keane's central concern is the decline of public service broadcasting, arguing that the "old hegemony" of state-structured and territorially-bound mediated public life is being replaced by networked spaces of communication not tied to territory, and not resembling a single public sphere within a nation-state framework. Keane distinguishes among "macro-public spheres," hundreds of millions of people enmeshed in disputes at the global level; "meso-public spheres," millions of people interacting at the nation-state level; and "micro-public spheres," with dozens, hundreds or thousands of disputants interacting at the sub-nation-state level. These are not discrete spaces but overlapping networks defined by the lack of

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differentiation among spheres. Micro-public spheres are the site for alternative media. Micro-public spheres - the contemporary counterparts to the coffeehouse, town meeting, and literary circle of early modern public spheres - are a vital feature of contemporary social movements, concerned with producing, defining and redefining symbolic meanings. In Keane's view, social movements comprise low-profile networks of small groups, organizations, initiatives, local contacts and friendships submerged in everyday life. These networks use various means of alternative media and communication, including telephones, faxes, photocopiers, camcorders, videos, and computers, to question and transform the dominant codes.

Methodology

The data analyzed in this paper was collected as part of a larger research project investigating in part the use of ICT by community organizations to deliver government information and services (Rideout et al., 2006). Fieldwork was conducted with four community organizations in four different provinces - Manitoba, Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador. These organizations provide a wide range of services, such as skills training and health services to populations with special needs. The four organizations each have a different focus in terms of the population they serve and the specific messages they produce. The "Mental Health Organization" provides services to people with mental health issues in a large urban centre. The "Employment and Training Organization" is concerned with people who are unemployed, under-employed or who have skills or literacy deficits in a rural region. The "Community Development Organization" is focused on residents living in a specific high poverty and high unemployment neighbourhood of a large city. The "Minority-language Health Organization" is concerned with health and wellness among the minority-language population of a large urban centre.

The mixed-methods approach for this study included interviews, focus groups, and content analysis of documents produced by the organizations. The data analyzed for this paper included transcripts of 33 staff interviews, four staff focus groups and four community member focus groups. A wide range of staff roles was included in the interviews and focus groups: directors, managers, outreach workers, project coordinators, and front-line staff. The data were analyzed thematically using the NVivo software program. Quotes from the interviews are included to illustrate the themes. The

content analysis focused on the organizations' websites as well as printed materials collected during the fieldwork.

Our general analytic approach to the data is new media analysis. Our review of key new media texts - primarily Lievrouw and Livingstone (2006) and also McQuail (2005) and Downing, McQuail, Schlesinger and Wartella (2004) - led to a framework with five elements or themes for analyzing the fieldwork data: the processes and technologies that enable communication; the people and organizations using these processes and technologies; the activities that people and organizations engage in using these processes and technologies; the messages they produce, receive and exchange; and the social and organizational arrangements that exist and form around these processes, technologies, messages and activities. These five themes interact with each other in an iterative process. We reviewed the data using this thematic framework in the context of community media and networking, looking also for relations among the themes.

Research findings and discussion

Processes and technologies for community media and networking

The community organizations studied are using a wide range of processes and technologies for community media and networking, illustrated in Chart 1 below. A significant finding is that some processes and technologies involve either more or less tension with existing organizational arrangements, as indicated by shaded areas in the chart. The technologies and processes involving the least tension are paper brochures, documents and newspapers.

Chart 1: Technologies used for community media and networking

"Lower tension" technologies (shaded indicates least tension)	"Higher tension" technologies (shaded indicates most tension)
Brochures - paper	Camcorder
Camera - digital	Email - attachments
Documents - paper	Email - interpersonal
FAX	Email - lists
Newspapers - paper	Postal communication
Newspapers – digital	Telephony - basic
Radio (reception)	Telephony - conference calling
Television (reception)	Telephony - mobile
Video - analogue	Telephony - voice mail
Web - search engines	Video-conferencing
Web - services	Webpage - organizations'

Also as indicated in the chart, using email and producing an organization webpage are the technologies and processes involving the most tension with the existing organizational arrangements. For three of the organizations the tension was primarily related to their funding, which was inadequate to cover the resources required to use email effectively and produce an organization website, such as staff training and computer hardware, software and maintenance. For example, the Community Development Organization's website is severely out of date - during the community member focus group, one participant called it "pathetic." A staff member explained that website maintenance is not a staff function and nobody in the organization has website maintenance skills. Similarly, the Mental Health Organization's website was set up by student volunteers from a local college. However, because of a shortage of human resources, keeping the website updated has been a problem.

> *"Our website it is horribly out of date… There was a staff person who was, let's call it web-friendly. But this person was laid off due to lack of funding so now there is nobody within the organization's staff that has the time and technical skill to do this."* (Mental Health Organization - staff focus group)

This finding is significant because clearly it is the older, analogue technologies based on paper that fit more comfortably within the processes of the community organizations studied. The digital technologies of email and websites that offer new possibilities for community media and networking have a much more difficult fit. Clearly it will take more time before the digital technologies gain widespread acceptance and use among community organizations. Small, paper-based media are of more central importance to these organizations for community media and networking.

People and organizations using these processes and technologies for community media and networking

All four organizations in the study have significant and lengthy histories of community organizing and service for community members. The messages they produce and community networking activities they engage in have remained fairly stable.

What have changed are the people working in these organizations, the technologies they use, and their organizational arrangements. In all four organizations many senior staff members have remained with the organization for a long period. The technologies the organizations use for community media and networking have of course changed over time as new technologies have been introduced - the organizations have all been using computers and the Internet for some time. Their organizational arrangements have also changed over time - in the past decade, three of the organizations have lost significant amounts of core funding which has had a negative impact on their ability to retain staff, leading to high staff turnover.

The staff members producing the community media and engaging in community networking activities had variable levels of ICT skills. None of the organizations had a staff training policy in place and in two organizations some staff members indicated their ICT skills were inadequate. For example, the in the Community Development Organization, some staff members are proficient in ICT while others have only very basic computer skills. One staff members said it is faster to write a letter by hand.

Staff members in different organizational roles used different technologies for community networking, and this was not consistent across the organizations. For example, one of the outreach workers in the Community Development Organization rarely used email to

network with other community organizations and community members, whereas the outreach workers at the Mental Health Organization used it extensively, as illustrated in the quote below:

> *"A lot of what [the outreach workers] do is network - we are in touch with other agencies. [This city] has really good networking; we know a lot of other people from other agencies. We meet once a month and we email back and forth and just also information going out with the minutes from the meetings, updates, this kind of thing. 'Have you seen this client?' That goes back and forth, so there is quite a bit of email going back and forth that way."* (Mental Health Organization - staff interview)

Only one of the organizations - the Community Development Organization - provided a venue for community members to themselves become community media producers. Its community newspaper, the *Broadcaster*, offered production opportunities for community members that increased both their networking capacity and their social capital.

> *I write for the Broadcaster too fairly regularly and I found like interviewing people on the street and interviewing business owners and stuff like that, it's really been an enjoyment to me. So socially it's enhanced my sense of well being because people will see me on the street, 'Oh hi John how you doing', they recognize me from the Broadcaster because I've either interviewed them or whatever. It is plus a little extra pocket money from time to time, and I can treat myself to a Big Mac or whatever.* (Community Development Organization - community member focus group)

This series of findings - that ICT skills levels vary considerably among staff members, that there is high staff turnover, and that different staff members use different levels of ICT according to their roles within the organizations - is significant. It suggests that although the organizations may appear to have stable media and networking activities, in at least three organizations there is considerable uncertainty and instability in their capacity to use ICT for community media and networking. The unsustainable staff and ICT training situations suggest that there will be inconsistency in their use of ICT for community media and networking and therefore in how the organizations' messages are disseminated.

Messages produced for community media and networking

All the organizations studied offer messages of solidarity and support for the particular struggles of their community members: people with mental health issues, people who are unemployed, under-employed or who have skills or literacy deficits, residents of a high-poverty and high-unemployment neighbourhood, and the minority-language population of a large urban centre.

All the organizations produce messages advocating a community-oriented approach - underlining the importance of providing services and information appropriate to the specific needs of community members and encouraging their active participation in the development of their communities. For example, the Minority-language Health Organization produced and distributes a document describing the importance of culturally-appropriate services and community involvement in service provision and community development.

> *The importance of providing culturally-appropriate services to minorities is becoming increasingly accepted as the **key** to successful minority community development. Just as important, but not as well promoted, is the importance of minorities taking an active role in providing these services. Not only will their participation ensure a more culturally responsive service, but it will also improve the community's sense of self-reliance and cohesion, two elements that are essential for the long-term sustainability of a community.*
> (Minority-language Health Organization, document)

All the organizations produce messages positioning themselves as alternatives alongside the mainstream: their way of approaching social challenges is different from that of the government and mainstream society, specifically because they place the needs of their community members first. For example, the Mental Health Organization works with people with mental health issues. In pamphlets and on its website, the organization describes its mission in terms of being an alternative to the provincial government's de-institutionalization of psychiatric hospitals, which returned hundreds of severally mentally ill persons to their local communities.

> *Unfortunately, there were virtually no community-based programs designed to support these individuals. Many persons with mental illness were discharged from hospital*

and became severely ill again due to a lack of available
supports. They returned to hospital, were stabilized on
medication and discharged only to become ill once again.
This ongoing, continuous cycle became known as the
"revolving door syndrome". [The Mental Health
Organization] was developed as a grassroots organization
in the 1970s by a group of parents with mentally ill
children, mental health professionals and community
leaders. It was designed as a community-based mental
health facility to provide supports in the community to
persons upon discharge from hospital. (Mental Health
Organization, website)

All the organizations produce messages emphasizing the historical context of its
struggle. For example, the quote from the Mental Health Organization above and
another, below, from the Skills and Training Organization that traces its history to the
broader social movement of community action and community collectives in rural areas:

The Rural Development Movement began in the 1960s
when people felt they were being ignored by decision-
makers. They banded together in groups of communities to
try to solve their own problems. (Skills and Training
Organization, website)

Another finding was that the discourse of the workers face-to-face - both to the
researchers and to the community members present during the fieldwork - was much
more radical and oppositional to government approaches and policies than in the
organizations' written materials - brochures, pamphlets, website. This finding is
significant because it suggests that the organizations have different messages for face-
to-face communications and written communications for a more public audience.

Community media and networking activities

All four organizations are producing and using community media with some variations
among them. For example the Minority-Language Health Organization has an
informational website, publishes pamphlets, and uses existing local community media,
particularly local radio, to publicize its programs and activities as well as job
opportunities. The organization also posts information on the province's website. The
Community Development Organization has an informational website, publishes
pamphlets, and publishes a community newspaper distributed widely in the

neighbourhood that profiles community residents, issues and events. The organization also uses local radio to publicize events.

All four organizations are also actively engaged in community networking. For example, the Mental Health Organization staff members network with community members, with other community and social service organizations to provide referrals for community members and to work on committees and coalitions of groups advocating for people with mental health disabilities, and with international associations working on mental health issues. The Skills and Training Organization staff members network with community members and with a provincial network of community organizations providing services to minority language speakers. They also network to partner on health service delivery, to organize local projects, and to provide health information and support to community organizations in isolated and rural communities across the province. One staff member explained:

> *"In our [area] we have an umbrella group of development associations. That is, we have seven development associations here in this area. We meet probably three or four times a year we all come together."* (Skills and Training Organization - staff interview)

All the community media and networking activities are indicated in the following two charts. Chart 2 illustrates the activities conducted using the "lower tension" technologies discussed earlier, indicating that the organizations find it easiest to use analogue media - paper-based brochures, documents and newspapers - to reach out to their communities.

Chart 2: Community media and networking activities and "lower tension" technologies

"Lower tension" technologies	Uses by community organizations for community media and networking
Brochures - paper	• Disseminate community resource information • Disseminate information about programs and services
Camera - digital	• Produce images used in brochures • Produce images for community newspapers
Documents – paper	• Advertise services and programs to community members and employers • Format for reports to some external organizations • Format for some communications with community members, such as holiday cards • Format for some professional communications (i.e. letters)
FAX	• Transmit information and reports to external organizations • Exchange information about programs with other organizations
Newspapers – paper	• Source of general news for staff • Publish community newspaper
Newspapers – digital	• Sources of general news for staff • Publish community newsletters on website
Radio (reception)	• Broadcast information about the organization and its events and services • Exchange information for community networking • Source of general news
Television (reception)	• Source of training information • Source of general news
Video - analogue	• Source of educational information made available to community members, including: job training, nutrition, medicine, and other political and social content
Web – search engines	• Search engines cited were Google, Yahoo • Locate potential funding sources • Gather domain-specific information, including: labour market, educational • Gather information for grant proposal writing
Web -- services	• On-line telephone directories • Locating resources in external organizations • Chat facilities to meet with project partners

Chart 3 below illustrates community and networking activities involving more tension for the organizations, highlighting the earlier finding that the digital technologies of email and producing an organization website were associated with the most tension. The activities associated with these digital technologies include networking with other community organizations and disseminating information about the organization locally, regionally and nationally. This finding is significant because digital technologies allow messages to be disseminated more widely - they can be easily replicated and forwarded endlessly at no cost. Given that it is the digital technologies that involve the most tension

with the organizations, this suggests that their messages are having limited
dissemination because they can not be easily produced for further dissemination.

Chart 3: Community media and networking activities and "higher tension" technologies

"Higher tension" technologies	Uses by community organizations for community media and networking
Camcorder	• Record presentations for dissemination • Make collaborative videos about programs
E-mail – attachments	• Exchange documents with external organizations • Send information to board members
E-mail – interpersonal	• Communicate with community members • Intra-organizational communication • Inter-organizational communications
E-mail – lists	• Exchange newsletters with external organizations • Transmit newsletters and information to community members and community members • Exchange information with other community organizations and coalitions
Postal communication	• Exchange formal documents (often required) • Exchange professional correspondence • Exchange social correspondence, such as holiday card
Telephony – basic	• Staff-staff and community member-staff communications • Communicate with external organizations • Network with external organizations • Communicate with political representatives • Fund raising
Telephony – conference calling	• Facilitate consulting between community members and third parties • Meet with project partners
Telephony – mobile	• Specific needs for staff in mobile job functions, such as: bus drivers, staff who make home visits, outreach workers, and community gardeners
Telephony – voice mail	• Communicate asynchronously with community members • Receive information from community members and external organizations
Video-conferencing	• Network sub-offices in different communities • Link with groups geographically distant in its wider network
Webpage - organizations'	• Disseminate information about the organizations' programs and services locally, regionally and nationally • Gather information about external organizations

Social and organizational arrangements existing around community media and networking

Three aspects of the existing social and organizational arrangements played a major
role in the organizations' use of ICT for community media and networking activities. They
are discussed below.

1. Organizations' low level of sustainable resources and low prioritization of building ICT capacity

Three of the organizations studied had insufficient operational revenues and were in a continual state of stress over lack of funds. In this environment, the organizations had many urgent spending priorities other than ICT, and this led to a situation where all three have inadequate ICT capacity.

For example, the Mental Health Organization has significant ICT hardware, software and network barriers and lacks capital funds for computer equipment. There is no central server. Before it can upgrade its ICT systems, it needs to upgrade its electrical power supply, which is prohibitively expensive. Not all staff members have computer and Internet access at work, making it impossible to communicate internally by email. The organization's client database crashes consistently and it cannot afford to upgrade it. Its computers, acquired through donations or private foundation grants, are old and incapable of running newer versions of basic software. It has a "terrible" phone system that makes it difficult for community members to contact the organization. After attempts to upgrade the phone system, staff concluded it needs a complete overhaul which the organization cannot afford. The organization's ICT problems cause considerable stress because it does not have computer support staff. It tried using volunteers from the private sector for computer support but the process was unreliable and slow. The organization has no receptionist or administrative support staff, so all ICT issues are dealt with by the co-directors or program staff. It cannot find sustainable funding for computer support, ongoing maintenance, and hardware and software upgrades. Computer crashes are common. Some days the computers do not work and nobody knows why.

In a second example, the most obvious ICT challenge facing the Community Development Organization is inadequate ICT hardware and software. Its telephone system is inadequate and it is difficult, sometimes impossible, to reach staff by phone. Its computer network was not operational at the time of the fieldwork and it has only one printer. It has no internal email system and not all staff members have an email address. It lacks software for anything other than basic operations. Staff often compile reports on their home computers. Its email system is unreliable to the extent that some staff

members have stopped using email for contacting community members. Another explained that his computer is unreliable after having been permeated with a virus that he does not know how to remove.

> *It has been better in the last couple of weeks but I don't rely on it, I can't rely on it. It's like having a shovel where the handle keeps twisting off. You use it because you have to but you don't want to undertake anything really big with it because if it fails on you you've got nothing.* (Community Development Organization - staff interview)

2. Low level of ICT use by community members and their preference for face-to-face communication

For all the organizations studied, their community members' low levels of ICT use is a considerable barrier to their use of ICT for community media and networking: when only a limited number of community members use ICT, the organization cannot use ICT for effectively reaching its community members.

In the focus groups, community members expressed a clear preference for face-to-face communication over email for communicating with the organization. The fieldwork found that many community members do not access and use computers and ICT primarily because of their high cost. In some cases, community members have a bad or no credit rating and be unable to buy a computer.

Community members without home computer and Internet access can - in theory - use public access sites. However the free computer access points in the communities studied are heavily used, making access difficult. In one community, there is no public Internet access for visually-impaired persons and in another community, non for persons using a wheelchair. Staff at the Mental Health Organization believe that public Internet access points are not often appropriate for its community members with mental health issues.

Three of the four organizations provide their community members with drop-in access to dedicated computers and the Internet in their organizations. However these organizations do not have sufficient capacity for ongoing maintenance of these computers. At times, there are not enough computers available in these organizations to

meet community member demand, resulting in long waiting times and frustration for community members.

Community members' low capacity for using ICT is another significant challenge to using ICT. Across the research sites, some community members were very proficient with computers but many were not and would need training in order to access and use ICT more effectively. Literacy levels vary, and providing written instructions for using computers would not be appropriate for many community members. Many do not use computers, do not want to use computers, or are not familiar with computers.

> *"One of the biggest problems is we could send them all [the email] we want but if we are sending a signal that they don't understand or are not up-to-date with there is no point. There really isn't because I met with neighbors here in the block who wouldn't have a clue when I was talking about email. What's that? Just common sense, like what is that? Never seen a computer, what is a computer. So that would be completely out. So I am talking almost half the population wouldn't know what a web site is, they'd think about spiders."* (Community Development Organization, staff interview)

Staff at the Minority-language Health Organization expressed concern for the large number of senior clientele, many aged 75 years and older, who are intimidated by many information technologies. For example some have trouble with telephone messaging and others are uneasy around computers and cell phones.

> *A simple example could be the senior who all of a sudden sees the home care nurse coming in with their laptop, doing client notes on the computer. For a senior who is not very comfortable with technology and who just hears these stories, all of a sudden that can become very intimidating. So you have to be very careful that ... you're sensitive to the clients and the people you're serving.* (Minority-language Health Organization - staff interview)

In the focus group for community members at the Skills and Training Organization, participants expressed frustration with not having ICT support when problems arise, including difficulties with outdated websites and dealing with pornographic websites. One staff member later explained that some of its community members are very fearful of technologies such as computers, fax machines and cellular phones and that many

people living in rural and remote communities, especially older people, are apprehensive about using computers.

3. Staff and organization preference for face-to-face communication

All the organizations studied prefer face-to-face communication with community members.

One earlier finding discussed is that within each organization, staff have different levels of ICT capacity and that no organization has a staff ICT training policy. Staff with low ICT skills will obviously prefer non-digital processes and technologies for community media and networking. An ongoing challenge related to staff ICT training is the lack of funds to replace a staff member in training, with the result that staff members are expected to undertake training while also doing their jobs:
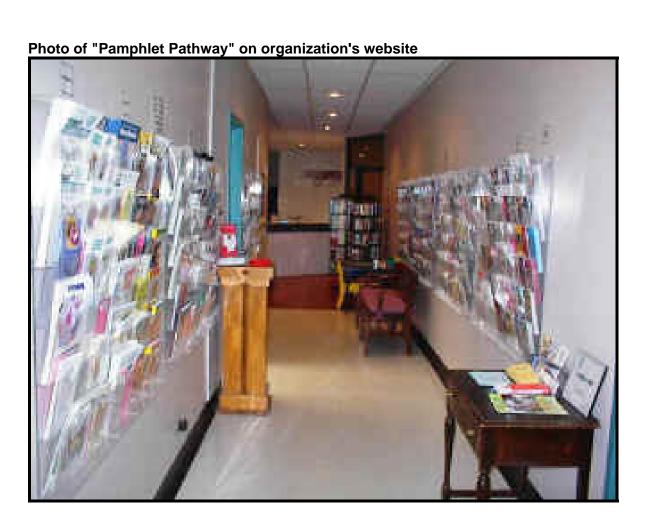
> *"You cannot have training while you're doing something else. So the person has to be replaced and that …. that incurs costs. They expect you to do the job, and then you know… you learn at the same time. As the phone rings five times and then, you know, you answer a whole bunch of other things, so that is not a good way to learn."* (Minority-Language Health Organization - staff interview)

Staff preference for face-to-face contact with their community members may also be related to the nature of social services work, with people attracted to the profession for the opportunity to engage personally with people. As well, academic training for social workers focuses on people skills rather than technical skills, with the result that many social services workers are unfamiliar or uncomfortable with computers and email. As one described:

> *"There aren't a lot organizations or coalitions or associations, committees whatever that we would [communicate with] strictly viz a viz in a technological way. It is usually face-to-face or over the telephone. So there is not a lot [of email use for networking] and I think that is because most people in social services don't have a lot of technology background."* (Mental Health Organization, staff interview)

The organizations' preference for face-to-face communication is illustrated by an image

on the website of the Minority-language Health Organization. This organization was the only one studied with adequate funding and ICT capacity. Among the four organizations, it has the most developed and up-to-date website, with all the content in both English and French. Its website includes the following photograph of its "Pamphlet Pathway" which can only be accessed by visiting the organization in person. The Pamphlet Pathway contains many publications the organization could have made available on its website but did not.

Photo of "Pamphlet Pathway" on organization's website

Summary and Conclusions

Our analysis of the fieldwork with four Canadian community organizations focused on five themes and the relationships among them. These five themes are core elements of new media theory, and in the context of the current study they relate to the use of ICT for community media and networking by these community organizations. The themes are: the processes and technologies that enable community media and networking; the people and organizations using these processes and technologies for community media and networking; the messages they produce for community media and networking; their community media and networking activities; and the social and organizational arrangements existing around these processes, technologies, messages and activities.

First, we found that it is the older, analogue technologies based on paper that fit more comfortably with the existing organizational arrangements of the community organizations studied, and that the digital technologies of email and websites have a more difficult fit. This finding suggests it will take more time before the digital technologies gain widespread use among community organizations and small, paper-based media will continue to be used for community media and networking for some time. Second, although the organizations studied had a long history within their communities, there was considerable staff turnover. ICT skills levels varied among the staff members, different staff members in different organizational roles used different levels of ICT, and there were no staff ICT training policies in place. In three of the organizations the skills base for using ICT for community media and networking was unstable and insecure. Only one of the organizations provided an opportunity for community members to participate in community media activities.

Third, all the organizations offered messages: of solidarity and support for the particular struggles of their community members; advocating a community-oriented approach that underlined the importance of providing services and information appropriate to the specific needs of community members; encouraging the active participation of community members in community development; positioning themselves as alternatives against or alongside the mainstream; and emphasizing the historical context of their struggles. A significant finding was that the face-to-face discourse of the community organization staff was much more radical and oppositional to government approaches and policies than in the organizations' written materials.

Fourth, all the organizations engaged extensively in community media and networking activities. Those activities associated with the digital technologies of email and websites included networking with other community organizations and disseminating information about the organization locally, regionally and nationally. Considering the organizational tension around using these digital technologies, the primary benefits of digital technologies for community media and networking - allowing messages to be replicated easily and disseminated widely - are not being realized: the messages from the organizations are not reaching their widest possible audience.

Finally, we found three aspects of the existing social and organizational arrangements that played a major role in the organizations' use of ICT for community media and networking activities. Three of the organizations were in a continual state of stress over lack of funds, had many urgent spending priorities other than ICT, and had inadequate ICT capacity. For all the organizations, their community members' low levels of ICT resulted in not using ICT for community media and networking. All the organizations preferred face-to-face communication with community members.

Looking back at our earlier discussion of small media and alternative media, the findings support the concept of community media as small media that reinforce and possibly extend established social and cultural networks in the community. Small media that are paper based - such as pamphlets - are more central for community media production than the digital media of websites. Tensions with using ICT – email, Web site production - for community media and networking are related to the organizations' funding situation, the low ICT use by community members, and the preference by staff for face-to-face communications. The community media produced by the organizations are not alternative media in the sense of offering radical alternatives to mainstream debate.

All the organizations are extensively engaged in community media and networking. Community organizations are clearly actors in social movements – struggling for inclusion and rights for people with mental health issues, minority language speakers and so on - and their long history of struggle may indicate their specific roles within social movements as actors providing a sustainable and reliable presence. The messages they produce and community networking activities they engage in have

remained fairly stable over long period of time. However the messages produced in writing do not support an oppositional discourse that radically challenges the mainstream. The more radical discourse is confined to face-to-face communications with organization staff while the organizations' written communications contain messages that are less radical and challenging. Face-to-face communication, which is more radical and oppositional, plays a vital role in maintaining relations with community members. The organizations produce community media help to articulate the themes they consider important and they use these media to reach out to community members with their messages of solidarity, support and understanding.

In the context of public sphere theory, our findings clearly position community organizations as operating in parallel public spheres with their community media and networking activities aimed more at their specific communities rather than reaching out to new communities and engaging in a critical way with the mainstream. In this sense they resemble Keane's "micro-public spheres" - low-profile networks of initiatives and local contacts submerged in everyday life that use various means of communication and small media to maintain themselves and articulate common themes. Digital technologies play a low-key role in these micro public spheres.

One area for future research could be the strong role of community members in determining the technologies used by community organizations. The digital divide in disadvantaged communities has an impact that has not previously been recognized on community organizations and by extension, on their community media and networking activities.

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