

ICT Policy Development: the Case of Canada

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Abstract. This article reviews the evolution of Canadian government policy in the telecommunications sector and highlights the social programs for disadvantaged groups in order to reduce the digital divide. If Canada is the first country to adopt a national program to expand the public access of Internet and promote universal accessibility of ICT tools by the population, historical factors explain the maintenance of an old tradition in federal policies. Public authorities have an overarching objective to ensure a favorable climate for the industry. The notion of public interest is interpreted as a liberal protection of private interests. Somehow, community organizations have played a major role in the development of strategy against the digital divide, particularly in the Québec context where the model of public / civil society co-conception has proven pivotal for social development.

Keywords: Public policy, ICT, digital divide, community public access to the Internet, public-community co-construction

1. Introduction

Canada has a long tradition of leadership in the field of telecommunications. It has shown initiative and creativity in modern history of telecommunications. The country witnessed, in 1846, the first telegraph message sent from Toronto to Hamilton, only two years after Samuel Morse brought his invention to the American continent. In 1879, it was the turn of the city of Montreal which launched its first telephone switching center. The evolution was continued by the birth of the wireless telephone system of Reginald Aubrey Fessenden in 1900 and the first transatlantic radio communication system by Guglielmo Marconi in 1901. The country is also the pioneer in the field of satellites - the third country to put an artificial satellite in space (1962), just after the former Soviet Union and the United States. Ten years later, Canada was the first to launch a geostationary satellite for non-military purposes. In the late 1990s, it ranked first in terms of penetration rates for telephone and cable television among the G7 countries and became the first country in the world to connect all its schools and public libraries to the Internet.

Although the policy statements express the view that the government wants to benefit all Canadians the advantages of high speed Internet, the country sees its leadership in connectivity continues to deteriorate. In 2010, Canada was in 13th among 33 OECD countries with respect to penetration of broadband. Thus, in 2011, the government, taking the measure of the delay, is committed to develop a strategy to build a digital and global competitive economy.

To understand the current political voluntarism in favor of national companies, it is essential to take into account the history of the development of telecommunications in which the government had made its priority to provide an environment for the industry and economy. As a result, the notion of public interest is

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interpreted as a liberal protection of private interests. It seems that this old tradition continues to be practiced. The deregulation policy launched during the 1990s which was supposed to pro-competition has given the way to create a “natural oligopoly”. As confirmed by CRTC, the public regulatory authority for broadcasting and telecommunications, one reason for Canada’s slippage in terms of broadband penetration may be the price caused by the highly concentrated market controlled by a handful of companies.

2. Public stakes for ICT, "Techno-Economic" Paradigm, Interventionism and Social Movements

The tools, techniques and resources for information processing and transmission, known as Information and Communication Technology (ICT) are an important part of our daily lives with the label of “public interest”: telecommunication networks, government, education, employment, transportation, personal services, etc. In addition to the values attributed to the use of ICT in order to achieve the objectives of public utilities, the presence of high-performance digital networks is likely to exert leveraging on the territory’s economy. These characteristics make them to be an important object of public policy for the North and the South countries. There are two competing positions in regard to public intervention: the first one legitimizes the state obligations in defending the public interest; the second one moves toward the economic and neoliberal logic, tries to dispossess public regulatory functions and exploits ICT by subjecting them to the laws of the market (Vedel, 1996; Sénécal, 2004).

The supporters of the techno-economic doctrine have focused themselves solely on the economic and/or industrial dimension of development. Instead, the proponents of political activism opt for the social and cultural development objective, with a government taking a leadership role to ensure the ICT services are accessible to all. The technicist vision, saving ideology of information technology and networks (Mattelart, 1999), adopts a "top-down" approach based on building the promotional perspective or an autonomous construction of generic technologies while the users are considered as a simple process of the system. The social vision leads a process of "bottom-up" or "social-pull" based on a complex interdependence system among technology, economy, social and culture.

As part of the social vision, user acts as the co-developer of the innovation (Eveno and d’Iribarne, 1998). We find the social movements logic developed by Michel Sénécal (2004). This logic is the result of citizens’ collective attempts for more freedom of expression and communication. These social practices are reflected in the case of Quebec, focused on the responsibilities sharing between the government and community organizations (Villancourt, 2002, Bourque, 2000), a co-construction report particularly determining in the 1990s.

The hyper-technical approach is taking a dominant place, especially in the majority of governments, international agencies and industries. They advise a development model based on an optimistic view of growth in which the technologies are merely to control and provide products and services at the request of private entrepreneurs and public authorities. Public interventions race to focus on the perspective of economic achievement on one hand, and limit explicitly to correct or support the industrial logic, on the other hand. Attracted by the profits in the areas considered economically viable, the companies with “the know how” in networks development are directing their efforts to these areas and concentrating their investments there, while disdaining the less profitable markets (Drewe, 2006). Therefore, much of the population is neglected, which actually increases social tensions and territorial disparities and forms the “digital desert” (Dupuy, 2007). In response to this source of inequality, the governments prioritize public policies and operational strategies like “technological push” (Eveno, 2004). This may improve some situations, but leaves aside the problems caused by social inequality, poverty and exclusion that ICT development only increases (Klein and al., 2006). The digital policies are thus both important means for economic development and, in some way, an additional tool of exclusion and poverty for some groups of the population (Eveno, 1998).

3. The evolution of Canadian federal ICT policy

Regarding the evolution of public policies in support of ICT at the federal level, four periods can be distinguished:

1. From 1852 to 1969: the era of “laissez-faire” policies. The government’s intervention was minimal. The telecommunications industry enjoyed a position of "natural monopoly" and a climate for their interest.
2. From 1969 to 1993: an increased role of the government. The decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in 1989 ruled the national network of telecommunications as the exclusive federal jurisdiction.
3. From 1993 to 2000: deregulation to facilitate competition. The government showed a proactive voluntarism using ICT to maintain and strengthen the economy. The programs with social considerations were emerging which aim to provide universal and affordable access to the people and to bridge the digital divide.
4. 2000 till present: dependence increased on market forces and time of “broadband”. The focus on social digital programs has been reduced. The government acts with some uncertainty. However, there is also the struggle of community groups for defending excluded population through ICT project.

The history of telecommunications policy in Canada dates back to the year 1852 when the *Telegraph Act* was passed by the authorities. The system was followed immediately by a liberal model. Unlike Europe and England where governments had a monopoly on telephone and telegraph services, Canada has chosen to leave the operating rights to private companies. Each province had its own decision to establish laws for regulating local services. This multiple regulations model was very criticized for its inefficiency and lack of protection for the interests of users. Accordingly, an old tradition was formed aiming to establish a climate in which the interests of economy and industry took precedent over the needs of the public. Industrial or organizational giants, such as *Bell Canada*, *Trans-Canada Telephone System* enjoyed a monopoly in the telecommunications market and a control over system access and service rates. The telecommunications sector remained in a chaotic situation where the government was deprived of the strategic role. It remained until the late 1960s when the authorities realized that the country lagged behind in the development of new technologies compared with American counterparts.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the federal government accelerated the reform of ICT policy. Two events have had real repercussions in the history of Canadian politics: in 1989, the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada in which the power to regulate the national network of telecommunications becomes an exclusive jurisdiction to the federal government; the entry into force of the *Telecommunications Act* in 1993 - the first law encompassed the entire telecommunications sector which was included in the transport field during a nearly eighty years. The major impacts of the Act: it paves the way for deregulation which legitimates the government’s abandonment of its regulatory responsibility.

In 1998, the government launched the initiative “*Connecting Canadians*”, highlighted the government's will “*to make Canada the most connected country in the world*²”. The government demonstrated a commitment to deliver sustained effort for ensuring universal access with an affordable cost. But this direct public intervention was under certain conditions: “*If market forces do not allow such access, the government is prepared to intervene to enable all Canadians, regardless of income or place of residence, to benefit affordable essential services of the Information Highway*³”. With this in mind, the new ICT social policies emerged.

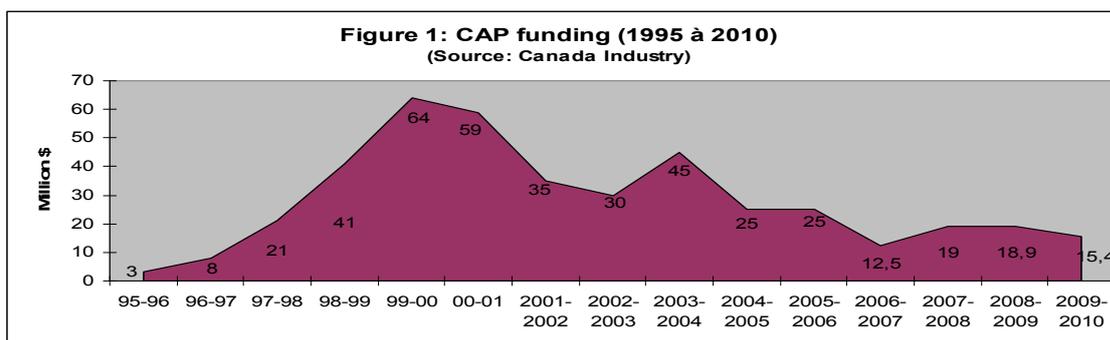
It must be noted here the Community Access Program (CAP), the backbone of “*Connecting Canadians*”, has built, for around a decade, a national network of community centers for providing ICT access to disadvantaged groups, including people on low incomes, seniors, women, aboriginals, immigrants, etc. The CAP was launched in 1994 under the government’s priority to boost economic growth in rural and remote

2 Discours du Trône, 1997.

3 Gouvernement Canadien (1996), *La société canadienne à l'ère de l'information : Pour entrer de plain-pied dans le XXIe siècle*, p.25.

areas. It was done to increase Internet access through the Community Internet Access Center (CIAC), including public physical access to computers connected to the Internet and skills training. The successful experience achieved in rural had prompted the government to extend the program to urban areas in 1999, with the goal of 10,000 sites in the following years. The program consists of three components aimed specifically at: 1) equipment financing; 2) training and activities for disadvantaged groups and persons with functional limitations or with low levels of literacy; 3) opportunities for youth to gain work experience by their intervention in the CIAC.

Despite the positive results registered by the government in terms of awareness-raising among disadvantaged groups, about the advantage of the Internet and online tools, and its necessity, pertinence and success in bridging the digital divide in the country, the program CAP has not been saved in the wake of budget cutting for social programs. Since 2004, the program has seen its funding slashed: the budget allocated at the national level reduced from \$ 64 million for 1999-2000 to \$15 million for 2009-2010, a drop of 76% (Figure 1).



The government hesitates between the gradual cutting of subsidies or a total withdrawal. The program has been placed in jeopardy several times. Today, the Community Internet Access Centers are still performing their duties to help the groups and areas fight the digital divide. It is an achievement that owes much to the mobilization of many community organizations. These organizations, acting together, call on the government for a public recognition of the needs of the disadvantaged groups they represent. They argue that these groups are still facing a very important digital exclusion, and the community access which support 100,000 Canadians a day are indispensable for addressing it, particularly through individual accompaniment and training.

4. Key Findings and Conclusion

Governments are aware of the difference between the areas covered and the areas which are not. They do seek to fill the gap in rural areas. However, the methods adopted continue to leave problem solving to market forces and follow the “top-down” model. The universal access initiatives seem a timely response to the problem of digital divide in the country.

The practices of social policies around the CAP show that the community-based organizations are important social and political actors in the negotiation and also the development of strategy against the digital divide. In the context of opportunities and tension presented by ICT, they support a new solidarism based on the use of ICT as a tool of inclusion. They have managed to integrate the digital programs into their mission through which positive effects were observed on strengthening citizen participation and empowerment.

However, the model of public / civil society co-conception is being weakened by the neoliberal policy-making mainstream and is moving more and more to a co-production partnership (Vaillancourt, 2009). Facing to the new forms of political domination, some community organizations should review their original mission to find alternative financing solutions which can sometimes deviate from their community-based mission and force them to apply business approaches.

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