

IMPROVING PUBLIC ACCESS TO AND USES OF INFORMATION

Public Access

Reliable access to information, which is essential for knowledge-based decision making, involves both physical access (connection to communications networks) and access to information itself (the content and services communicated through the network). Access must be open and unrestricted, available at the right time, and affordable.

With its vast domain, geographical variability, seasonal climate, and widely distributed and culturally diverse population, Canada faces many challenges in providing good communications and information services. Canada has met this challenge in part by consistently working at connecting as many households and businesses as possible to communications infrastructure. In 1998, 99 percent of Canadian homes had telephones; 96 percent were connected to cable and 74 percent accessed it. More than 45 percent of Canadian homes had a computer, 32 percent had a modem, and 25 percent had Internet access. Thirty-one percent of Canadian small and medium-sized businesses were connected to the Internet.

The Community Access Program, a key component of the federal government's Connecting Canadians initiative, aims to provide Canadians with affordable public access to the Internet and the skills they need to use it. Further to this initiative, Industry Canada recently announced its intention to make high-speed broadband Internet services available to businesses and residents in all Canadian communities by 2004. Access to high-speed broadband will provide the foundation for improved services such as distance learning and telehealth and improve the access of small business to broader markets.

In March 1999, Canada succeeded in becoming the first country in the world to connect its public schools and libraries to the Internet through the SchoolNet and LibraryNet programs. Building on this success, SchoolNet continues to work with the provinces, territories, and the private sector to extend connectivity from schools to the classroom. The Computers for Schools program provides Canada's schools and public libraries with surplus computer equipment and computer software donated by governments, businesses, and

Official Language of Choice

Canada recognizes that information must be available to all in the official language of their choice. Although English is the current language of choice on the Internet, the Government of Canada wants to ensure that content is available in both of Canada's official languages, English and French. Programs such as Francommunautés virtuelles seek to enhance and increase French-language material, applications, and services on the Internet.