

THE IMPACT OF BROADBAND INTERNET ON RURAL, REMOTE, AND FIRST NATION SENIORS IN BRITISH COLUMBIA

The Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) is funding a study by researchers at SFU to examine how broadband Internet affects the health and security of rural seniors in BC. The project involves the collaboration between the Centre for Policy Research on Science and Technology (CPROST), the Institute for Canadian Urban Research Studies (ICURS), the Interdisciplinary Research in the Mathematical and Computational Science Centre (IRMACS), and the GRC.

While the potential of broadband Internet and broadband-enabled technologies are increasingly acknowledged as providing seniors with an interactive lifeline to the world, empowering them to live more robust, healthful, and independent lives, a significant number of seniors across Canada do not share equal access to this service. This 'Digital divide' is due to the fact that even though Canada has one of the most advanced information and communication technology (ICT) infrastructures, its rural, remote, and First Nation communities do not have reliable and sustainable access to broadband Internet. Digital divide is an umbrella term that refers to this gap between people with effective access to information and communication technologies and those with very limited or no access at all. There are many variables at play when discussing the digital divide. Specifically, having a lower income, being less educated, being older, and living in rural and remote communities are found to decrease accessibility to broadband Internet, thus marginalizing people from the benefits of technology based services. . Ramirez & Richardson (2005, p.300) clarify that, "the digital divide is not only about physical access to phone lines and computers, it is also about becoming aware of the values of telecommunication services, having access to training on a range of computer and information-related skills, and to having an occupation where the relevant uses for the technology yield added value or savings."

To address this issue, BC's Connecting Communities Agreement (CCA) program has partnered Telus with the Canadian government in providing broadband to communities where the market is unable or unwilling to serve. Additionally, British Columbians in up to 50 rural and remote locales will soon have broadband connectivity through the Connecting Citizens Grant Program, a \$5.2 million, multi-year grant program that provides up to \$50,000 per project. The current study takes advantage of this government incentive by observing how broadband impacts on previously unconnected communities and increases penetration in others. Seniors will be able to seek health information more efficiently and have better links to health services, while social networking may decrease social isolation. Universal access to the Internet is in line with an "active aging" agenda to create supportive environments to enable healthy aging in the settings where older Canadians live.

Ramirez, R., & Richardson, D. (2005). Measuring the impact of telecommunication services on rural and remote communities. *Telecommunications Policy*, 29, 297-319. Retrieved June 2, 2010, from Academic Search Premier database.