# Finding an Aboriginal Digital Voice

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## Introduction

A great deal has been written in recent years about the promise Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) hold for better, more efficient and more democratic government. These innovations — whether they relate to Government-on-Line (GOL) initiatives, enhanced public consultations or horizontal management — are often referred to as "e-government." But what exactly do we mean by e-government?

While there is no consensus on a formal definition, in our view it is useful to think of e-government as the way in which governments use ICTs to (1) improve service delivery to citizens; (2) collect, manage, use, share and protect information as a public resource; and, (3) enhance their relationship with citizens through more meaningful engagement. The question is whether this conception of e-government is relevant to, and fits the needs of, Aboriginal peoples in Canada.[1]

A cursory look at the issues and options facing Aboriginal communities[2] suggests the short answer to that question is yes. The three dimensions of e-government — service delivery, information as a public resource and citizen engagement — are not only relevant in an Aboriginal context but the opportunities offered by the new technology may in some respects be a particularly useful tool in creating opportunities for Aboriginal peoples to catch up with the rest of the population. ICTs hold the potential for Aboriginal communities to break down the barriers of geography and scale to address critical cultural, economic and social needs.

Of course, e-government is not a panacea. ICTs are not in themselves benevolent, and there could be negative impacts on Aboriginal communities if ICTs are not applied in a way that is suited to them. Specifically, we must be mindful that ICTs do not erode the cultures of Aboriginal peoples, and we must ensure that all segments of the Aboriginal community are engaged and included in the process of moving forward. But with these caveats, improving service delivery, ensuring information remains a public resource and strengthening citizen

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[1] In this paper, "Aboriginal" refers collectively to the First Nations, Inuit and Métis.

[2] "Community" in the context of this paper broadly refers to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across Canada. This term encompasses on-reserve, off-reserve, and urban populations as well as social and cultural communities of people such as youth or elders. Further, it includes a community of people within or part of organizations.

participation in public decision-making can be a workable framework to enable Aboriginal communities to explore how ICTs can be put to the service of Aboriginal peoples.

Underlying the three dimensions of e-government, however, there are fundamental issues of infrastructure and capacity whose resolution will ultimately determine the success of Aboriginal e-government. High quality online service delivery, rapid access to and use of information, and meaningful interaction between citizens and governments requires a minimal level of ICT resources, skills and infrastructure that for most Aboriginal Canadians and communities are simply not a reality. Moreover, the creation of the needed infrastructure will require genuine collaboration and partnerships that extend well beyond Aboriginal communities to include governments at all levels as well as the private sector.

To ensure Aboriginal communities take full advantage of the opportunities of e-government, it is imperative that a broad national dialogue be held both within Aboriginal groups and with the broader Canadian community to begin to craft answers to some of the challenging questions being raised by the technology. It is our hope that this discussion paper will aid in that process by outlining some of those issues for discussion.

## Ensuring Public Services Respond to the Needs of Aboriginal Communities

Governments everywhere have been experimenting with new ways of using ICTs to deliver public services more directly and efficiently to citizens and make government services more citizen-centred, user-friendly and interactive. The core idea behind the transformation is one of organizing government around the needs and priorities of citizens rather than of governments themselves, and encouraging seamless service delivery across departmental and governmental lines.

Seamless service will enhance an Aboriginal citizen's experience with government as service provider in much the same way as it would any other individual citizen. In addition, however, improving service delivery also means closing gaps in service — particularly for northern, rural and isolated communities — that are geographic, linguistic and community-specific. Online distance education, language training and tele-health are a few current examples of how ICTs can bring much needed high-quality services into communities that otherwise have chronic shortfalls in the resources and skilled professionals that underpin the services that most other Canadians take for granted. ICTs also create unparalleled opportunities for service *specialization* — the tailoring of services or their mode of delivery to better respond to particular needs — and *clustering* — the bundling of services that may be delivered by different departments or governments around common needs — to meet the unique demands of local communities.

In many ways, this new wave of community-centred service delivery and the new generation of ICTs, which are more user-friendly and interactive, allow services to better respond to the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and the varying circumstances of Aboriginal communities in addition to individual needs. The capacity to tailor services is especially important to growing segments of the Aboriginal population, such as youth and Aboriginal people living in urban centres, who may or may not have a connection or affinity with traditional communities. For instance, it is easy to imagine new online service possibilities for preserving or even re-establishing the connection with Aboriginal people who, for whatever reason, chose to leave the reserve or their home communities.

Using the technology for professional education, training, mentoring, information sharing and networking are other ways of increasing the quality of services and support systems for

individuals working in remote and isolated communities. Evidence of this potential is already emerging in examples such as online help desks that serve communities right across Atlantic Canada and Aboriginal youth networks in Northern Ontario that reach out to and engage other young people. Of course, major advances in service improvement through the use of technology will require extensive collaboration among communities and service delivery partners, as well as a willingness among governments to move towards community based approaches.

In short, recent innovations in seamless service and citizen-centred government could contribute to tailoring services to the particular needs of Aboriginal groups and individuals. The result could mean enhancing the availability and quality of services and connecting Aboriginal peoples living apart but with common community ties, cultural ties and shared interests.

Of course, we are still a long way from this. Significant barriers to an integrated approach exist both within government and across jurisdictions. Program and federal-provincial silos often push Aboriginal governments into the same entrenched vertical structures as federal and provincial governments. The historical difficulties that the federal and provincial governments have had in collaborating on Aboriginal issues presents its own special challenges in forming the partnerships that are necessary to move forward quickly on building the foundations for Aboriginal e-government. As is the case with all governments, a shift to a more horizontal, integrated service delivery approach would represent a major organizational change, but it is one that corresponds more closely to the Aboriginal view of service delivery, which is generally more holistic.

Imagining the future, one can envisage Aboriginal e-government evolving toward Aboriginal-controlled open terminals for single window access - "an availability network" - to countless services from all levels of government. These highly accessible terminals would include both video and voice capacities to maintain human contact, and could include simultaneous translation into Aboriginal languages, to facilitate their use. Offering a huge variety of choice and open access to the world of services, these terminals would have specialised aspects or domains controlled by Aboriginal communities with mechanisms to regulate and monitor the flow of vital data such as personal information and cultural knowledge. These open terminals could integrate the delivery of a host of services by acting as "service broker" while ensuring community control over privacy concerns.

In order to seize the opportunity of seamless service, community members themselves must determine their priorities and explore whether and how the technology can help them reach their goals. To be successful in the long term, technology must be made relevant to and serve the community, and not the other way around. For the federal and provincial governments this implies opening up their planning processes and committing to meaningful Aboriginal community and citizen engagement in their efforts to put services online. For Aboriginal communities it means collaborating with each other and reaching out to create the array of online service networks that will bring more and better services to their members, and securing the adequate resources to be full participants in their development.

But, how are communities to set those priorities? What is needed to assist communities in fulfilling that vision? What might they learn from the services already available online? How do new online services get created? Is it mainly a manner of building service networks, or do we need to set national priorities for e-education or e-health in order to mobilize the necessary commitment and resources? How is service quality to be assured when the sources of service may be far beyond the reach and control of communities?

# Information as a Resource for Aboriginal Peoples and the broader Canadian Community

If information is the key to prosperity in the new economy, it follows that the richness of that information and the knowledge that can be drawn from it are critical to economic success. As is the case in all communities, better data leads to better knowledge leads to better public policy. But in the Aboriginal context, treating information as a public resource has an additional layer of complexity: how could this effect culture and identity?

On the positive side, having authentic, highly accessible, quality information about Aboriginal peoples can facilitate cross-community and cross-cultural education and learning needed to tackle Aboriginal issues in a meaningful way. But ICTs can pose cultural risks as well as opportunities. For many, the Internet is seen as a powerful force of cultural homogenisation. Identity is lost in the blur of information and there are risks of cultural appropriation and commercialisation.

Issues of culture and identity also raise concerns regarding intellectual property rights, as well as ownership of knowledge, symbols and other culturally sensitive information. What forms of knowledge relate specifically to identity? How does one distinguish what information should be controlled by the community and what information, for public interest reasons, should be more broadly available? Are there general standards that can be developed? Moreover, how does one account for oral traditions and customs in using ICTs to hold and disseminate information about Aboriginal peoples? Can existing cultural protocols be extended and developed to cover e-government practices? What about the concept of a community protected e-space in which information databases are monitored and controlled at the community level and adhere to customary practices and oral traditions? These issues of control and public access will become more pressing to sort out as e-services are developed and expanded and information is more readily accessible.

Reliability of information is critical to policy makers. In this context, however, equal concern must be focused on protecting the integrity of the information. How can this be assured? Would an information commissioner whose function was to monitor and report on information quality and integrity help build and sustain public confidence? Do we need quality standards — ISO standards for public information — to better ensure quality information is consistently available?

From the individual user's point of view, the real challenges are around ease of access and navigating through these vast storehouses to quickly get at information that is immediately relevant. Diversity of language, levels of education and literacy, and lack of access to support resources add to the complexity of these problems within the Aboriginal community. An integral part of making information a public resource for Aboriginal people requires systems that are focused on user friendliness with visual and oral aides and multi-channel approaches to service delivery that offered easy access to assistance. How should this be done? Are there best practices and innovative technological solutions that could be explored, including online translation into Aboriginal languages? How should governments confront these critical problems of accessibility?

## Engaging Aboriginal Peoples

It is often argued that mechanisms such as online consultations, online surveys and e-voting will increase the citizens' role in the political life of their communities and in the public policy process. But if ICTs can contribute to more meaningful dialogue between governments and citizens, what does this mean for Aboriginal peoples? What are the unique

opportunities and challenges for e-democracy in Aboriginal communities?

For starters, most Aboriginal people live outside urban areas in small communities where political discussion and activities are close to home. Not unlike the opportunities relating to service delivery, Internet-based democratic processes may connect Aboriginal people to each other and to non-Aboriginals in ways that could never be envisaged before. For instance, would public investments in wireless technology allow the Government of Nunavut to connect with a host of remote communities that are still beyond reach of conventional means? Might this be a new means to build consensus across a territory that encompasses small isolated communities by formalizing online consultations on critical government priorities?

Moreover, the large and growing number of Aboriginal Canadians living in urban centres raises issues of political and social disconnection to which e-democracy may contribute a solution. Many urban Aboriginal peoples strongly identify with their communities and want ongoing attachment and engagement with community life. ICTs offer powerful tools for developing a two-way connectedness between these individuals and the communities they left behind.

These are indeed promising avenues for change, but they are not without risk or obstacles. First, it is far from obvious that all Aboriginal communities will use the opportunity of technology in the same way — or even greet it with the same enthusiasm. It may well be that some leaders greet it with scepticism or hostility, as a tool to change traditional modes of political deliberation and relationships. How should technology be incorporated into political practices that are internal to Aboriginal communities?

More immediately, however, ICTs may be an effective tool for Aboriginal groups involved in advocacy. At least in the short term, it may be

that this later role will be the more important one for Aboriginal political institutions and organizations, and may well facilitate the introduction of technology within internal governance structures. This challenge highlights the critical importance of the commitment of Aboriginal politicians and leadership. Without the support of Aboriginal leadership at community levels, the benefits and the opportunities derived from ICTs could be non-starters. To work, e-democracy will need champions. In this respect, one of the main challenges will be to find ways to move these debates out of the IT rooms and into the Council chambers. If Aboriginal leaders can begin to embrace the ways in which ICT can be used to address some of the pressing social issues faced within Aboriginal communities, they may also begin to see its potential as a tool for citizen engagement.

Ubiquitous access to technologies will have a huge impact on social, economic, political, and cultural workings of Aboriginal communities. Coupled with the emergence of new Aboriginal institutions to provide services and information that in the past would have come from federal and provincial government departments and agencies, ICTs will have a transformative effect on how Aboriginal governments and institutions will function and relate to their communities and members. It is now up to the communities themselves to shape that transformation.

## Sustainable Capacity: The Foundation for an Aboriginal Digital Voice

Of course, none of this will be possible without infrastructure. Creating the needed capacity is the very foundation for the full and equitable realization of Aboriginal e-government. Disparities in technology and connectivity between Aboriginal and mainstream Canada are well known and captured in concepts like the "Digital Divide." But beyond the relative straightforward issues of infrastructure,

how can Aboriginal communities acquire the necessary skills to match that infrastructure? For example, how do we build ICT tools and support systems, such as online education and training labs to maintain skills and technological capacities, as readily accessible and sustaining elements of Aboriginal e-government?

Access to high-speed broadband service is an absolutely essential building block to achieving Aboriginal e-government. If Aboriginal peoples are to avoid falling further behind, governments would have to approach the provision of broadband access and other related technologies from the perspective of a public utility. Like the railway and the telephone were to the industrial economy, broadband can arguably be described as a critical resource to fully engage in the knowledge economy. Therefore, in our view this issue is a fundamental question of equity and full rights of citizenship.

To succeed in all of this, a partnership approach is essential. In particular, partnerships between Aboriginal communities, governments and the private sector become increasingly important as new systems and applications are created to ensure information is shared, skills are developed, and cultural specificity acknowledged.

## Conclusion:
## Guiding Principles for Building Aboriginal E-government?

Initial public debates around the issue of Aboriginal e-government have made it clear that diversity across communities is an important factor in finding the right Aboriginal digital voice. To be sure, there are commonalities across communities, but there is a strong consensus that there is likely no one model for e-government that can be applied to all Aboriginal communities.

If a model is the wrong way to go, how then should policy-makers and political leaders approach these issues? Would a set of guiding principles aid policy planning as decision-makers chart the course of Aboriginal e-government? Would principles form a basis for collaboration? And if we were to embark on a process of drafting these guiding principles, what might they look like?

As a starter list for such a public discussion, we suggest that guiding principles be formulated in the following areas:

• Firstly, are there preconditions — either technological or otherwise — for Aboriginal e-government? How do we ensure sustainable capacity? Are there minimal levels of connectivity that must be reached before any significant advancement can be made toward e-government? Is there such a thing as a technological critical mass, and if so, what is it?

• Secondly, how can we ensure that the technology is developed in relation to, and at the service of, community needs? How are those needs to be determined?

• Thirdly, any set of principles must address the natural tensions that exist between the competing notions of inclusiveness and diversity. On the one hand, e-government can bring Aboriginal peoples into broader communities by making them full players in the larger democratic process. On the other, e-government can assist Aboriginal communities in protecting and indeed promoting their diversity. What is the right balance between these notions? And how can that balance be included in an action plan for Aboriginal e-government?

• Fourthly, what information will be made available, and who will control it? On the one hand, the democratizing tendencies of ICTs come from their ability to put a greater amount of information at the fingertips of a larger

number of people. However, how can this desire be reconciled with the need to protect traditional knowledge? Is there a limit to information sharing? How do current ideas relating to Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP) fit in with these concepts?

• Finally, how might all of this be done in a collaborative way? How can leaders ensure broad public participation in the debate on the future of Aboriginal e-government? What modes of collaboration — what kind of partnerships — will be needed, and with whom? And perhaps most importantly, how will these partners and stakeholders be held accountable to each other and to the communities themselves?

The challenge for Aboriginal leaders is to engage their communities and forge a consensus on the way forward. To be sure, e-government, be it Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, remains a dot on the horizon. We have made some significant progress, but we are a long way from it.

The critical choice we face is making a decision on what the next step should be. In our view, that is the immediate priority. That is the focus of the Aboriginal Voice Initiative.  We look forward to this dialogue.

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## About the Authors

**Richard Jock**, co-chair of Aboriginal Voice and a Crossing Boundaries National Council member is a member of the Mohawks of Akwesasne. He has held numerous positions in the health field, working for both First Nations organizations and the Federal Government. Currently, Richard is Chief Executive Officer of the Assembly of First Nations. Previous to this he was Director of the National Aboriginal Health Organization, NAHO; Director General for Program Policy, Transfer Secretariat and Planning within Health Canada; Director of Health and Social Services for Mohawk Council of Akwesasne; Ontario Regional Director for Health Canada; Director of the First Nations Health Commission at the AFN; and Director of the National Native Alcohol and Drug Abuse Program.

**Mary Simon**, co-chair of Aboriginal Voice and a Crossing Boundaries National Council member, is now a free lance consultant. Prior to this she was the Ambassador for Circumpolar Affairs at the Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade since 1994. She was the Canadian Ambassador to Denmark (1999-2001), a member of the Joint Public Advisory Committee of NAFTA's Commission on Environmental Cooperation (1997-2000) and the Chancellor of Trent University (1995 to 1999). In 2001, she was appointed Councilor for the International Council for Conflict Resolution with the Carter Center. Mary has devoted her life's work towards gaining further recognition of Aboriginal rights and to promoting the study of Northern affairs.

She began her career with the CBC Northern Service as a producer and announcer. She was subsequently elected Secretary of the Board of Directors of the Northern Quebec Inuit Association and went on to hold a number of positions with the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, Canada's National Inuit Organization. For 14 years (1980-1994), she served as Executive Council Member, President and Special Envoy of the Inuit Circumpolar Conference. Mary has been awarded the National Order of Quebec, the Gold Order of Greenland, the National Aboriginal Achievement Award and the Gold Medal of the Royal Canadian Geographical Society. She is a Fellow of the Arctic Institute of

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**Graham Fox**, BAH, MSc, is the Executive Director of the KTA Centre for Collaborative Government. Prior to joining the KTA Centre, he was involved in active politics, serving as Chief of Staff to the Rt. Hon. Joe Clark, Leader of the Progressive Conservative Party of Canada, press secretary to a candidate for the leadership of the PC Party, as well as senior advisor to a Member of Parliament. Outside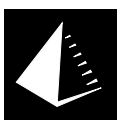 partisan politics, he has worked with the Institute for Research on Public Policy (IRPP), a leading Canadian think tank, as Director of Communications, and then Director of Legislative and Public Affairs. Graham holds an undergraduate degree in history from Queen's University and a master's degree in political science from the London School of Economics.

**Marcia Nickerson**, BAH, MA is the Head of the KTA Aboriginal Practice Group. Marcia has experience in has undertaking small and national scale policy-related research and analysis projects; facilitation of policy work-outs, focus groups and roundtables; federal-provincial strategic evaluations and consultations; and collaboration with Senior Management in forging new policy directions. Most recently Marcia has responsibility for the Aboriginal Voice component of the Crossing Boundaries National Council. Before joining KTA in 1999, Marcia spent several years in the public sector where she acted as a Senior Policy Advisor to the Associate Deputy Minister of Indian Affairs, as a self-government negotiator, and as a Foreign Trade/Team Canada Officer.

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## Aboriginal Voice

**Aboriginal Voice is a Crossing Boundaries National Council project. This is a collaborative initiative between several federal departments and National Aboriginal Organizations to undertake a multi-stakeholder national discussion regarding the impact of information and technology on Aboriginal governance and governments. Aboriginal Voice was launched in March of 2004 with a national roundtable and is now preparing for a series of regional roundtables across the country beginning in the fall. In addition, Aboriginal Voice has created an online space where discussions on aboriginal issues can be fostered. You can find the Aboriginal Voice website at: www.crossingboundaries.ca**

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