

CHARACTERIZING THE INTERNET AS AN ESSENTIAL ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCE: RESULTS FROM A STUDY AT THE NATIVE MEN'S RESIDENCE

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of research into the role of the internet in supporting the day-to-day activities, rehabilitation efforts, and essential service needs of clients and residents at the Native Men's Residence (Na-Me-Res), a homeless services and outreach shelter operating in Toronto, Canada. The motivating interest of the study is to ascertain the extent to which the internet constitutes an essential technology resource that facilitates the delivery of Na-Me-Res's core services, as well as in the rehabilitation and employment activities of its residents. The results highlight the way precarious and unstable internet access can compromise the abilities of Na-Me-Res clients to secure employment and long-term housing, as well as their overall well-being.

Résumé

Dans cet article on présente les résultats de recherches sur le rôle que joue l'Internet en appui aux activités, aux efforts de réhabilitation et aux besoins essentiels quotidiens de clients et résidents de la résidence des hommes autochtones (Na-me-res), un refuge offrant services et contacts aux sans-abris, qui se trouve à Toronto (Canada). Le but de l'étude est d'établir dans quelle mesure l'Internet constituerait une ressource technologique essentielle facilitant les services de base offerts par le Na-mes, ainsi que les activités de réhabilitation et de travail de ses résidents. Les résultats font ressortir à quel point un accès internet précaire et instable peut mettre en péril les possibilités, pour ces clients, de se trouver un emploi et un logement stable, ainsi que leur bien-être général.

Introduction

This study examined the role of the internet in the provisioning of core services at Toronto's Native Men's Residence (Na-Me-Res), and in the day-to-day routines of its clients. The underlying motivation of the study is to ascertain the extent to which the internet can be characterized as an essential technology resource that supports Na-Me-Res's operations and the remediating activities of its clients and residents. The organizational practices of essential service providers, like Na-Me-Res, provide a salient entry point for research concerned with the role of the internet in facilitating a range of basic needs-focused activities and practices.

While much of the discourse surrounding the use of the internet in daily practice tends to be framed by a neo-liberal logic, one concerned with the economic potentialities of the technology (Bell Canada and Its Affiliates, 2015; McChesney, 2013; Winseck, 2008), this researcher suggests more attention be directed towards the social-infrastructural characteristics of the technology. As more and more essential and publicly provisioned services, like healthcare, education, and transportation, embed internet-based technologies into their service delivery models, internet access has itself emerged as a de-facto compulsory affordance — one that is necessary for civic participation at the most basic level. Considering internet access at the intersection of basic needs provisioning illuminates the divide between commercial and public interests that lies at the heart of policy narratives surrounding universal internet service delivery (Shepherd, 2018). Internet service delivery in Canada is predominantly commercial, lacks statutory protections, and interconnects public and non-governmental service providers whose activities are critical to the well-being of vulnerable communities who themselves are at risk of precarious and unstable access to the internet (Gonzales, 2015; The Affordable Access Coalition, 2015).

Precarious & Unstable Internet Access in Vulnerable Communities

Many of the problems associated with technology marginalization have been framed against the concept of the digital divide, an umbrella term used to encapsulate a host of social and technical barriers which, collectively, can limit one's ability to constructively leverage digital technologies in one's daily life. The concept is not without criticism, chiefly with regard to the intentionality of the stakeholders employing it. Among the more researched aspects is the observation that the concept provides an overly deterministic, prescriptive and normative perspective of technological disenfranchisement (Eubanks, 2011; Raboy

& Shtern, 2010; Warschauer, 2003). In the Canadian context, attempts to overcome the digital divide in low-income, rural, and marginalized communities have often been characterized by an emphasis on facilitating access to material technologies in pursuit of largely economic outcomes in remote and under-served regions (Clement et al., 2012; M. Graham et al., 2012; Strover, 2014). The problem with this approach is that it fails to account for the complementary user literacies required to realize the benefits of access to these technologies, and it tends to characterize the digital divide as a rural problem. Assumptions about broadband diffusion and generalized access within urban areas can preclude consideration of the disconnected spaces that are characteristic of any highly networked environment (Dailey et al., 2010, p. 38; S. Graham & Marvin, 2001). Research examining urban broadband disenfranchisement illuminates how connectivity divides in otherwise “wired” cities tend to further disenfranchise communities already suffering high levels of poverty, employment instability, and housing precarity (Dailey et al., 2010; Middleton, 2009; Straubhaar et al., 2012).

Confounding the problem of unrealized potential in relation to internet access is the amplification of surveillance that can be enabled by those same technologies. The digital platforming of social welfare services, such as food bank programmes and social housing, constitutes a superordinate layer of surveillance that is not similarly experienced in middle- to high-income communities (Oyedemi, 2012; Stevenson, 2009). In Canada’s largest social housing organization, for example, affordable broadband internet service plans are made available through incumbent telecommunications service providers (TSPs). One such programme, Rogers Communications’ Connected for Success service plan, offers qualifying residents of the Toronto Community Housing Corporation access to fixed broadband services for \$10.00 (Cdn.) per month (Rogers Communications, 2016). A critical examination of the programme reveals some problematic characteristics. On the technical side, download and upload speeds fall well below the basic service targets set by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission’s (CRTC) (50Mbps download/10Mbps upload), and the plan itself is limited to 100GB of data transfer per month (Nordicity Group Limited, 2017; Rogers Communications, 2016). The qualification criteria for the Connected for Success programme requires that applicants provide proof of social housing residency. This, by default, segments applicants in terms of low-income status, and may constitute a form of data collection whereby access to essential internet services is made contingent on accepting surveillance associated with poverty. When we examine internet exclusion in the context of lived experience, it is important to consider the roles of community intermediaries in the digital information ecosystem. Christo Sims (2013) and Mark Warschauer (2003) provide a perspective on how community organizations, such as public libraries and schools,

function as liaisons helping low-income communities to achieve constructive outcomes in their uses of digital technologies. In light of the distributive prerogatives that underpin most examples of public policy in Canada which intends to redress internet connectivity gaps, these intermediaries are often the first and only community internet access points. The efforts of community intermediaries reflect a contemporary sensibility towards the community informatics approach to addressing the needs of distinct communities in urban and rural areas alike (Clement & Shade, 2000; Warschauer, 2003). This approach also demonstrates how, given provisional access to technology resources (e.g., high-speed internet connectivity), individual communities should be encouraged to make differentiated use of digital information resources.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews with Na-Me-Res personnel and shelter clients were undertaken with a view to examining use of the internet in three primary areas: the localized practices of individuals, practices between organizational personnel, and those between Na-Me-Res and its external stakeholders. In each of these areas, the participants were asked to describe the outcomes of their internet supported practices, their perceptions towards the enabling or constraining characteristics of the technology, as well as the availability of alternative, non-internet-based resources that could be employed in lieu of internet access.

The participant focus of the study attempted to reconcile the perceptions of staff, clients and residents towards the internet through organizational practices. Although the interview questions followed a similar trajectory, they were differentiated between the staff, and the client and resident participants. In both cases, the participant's history with Na-Me-Res was first established, followed by a discussion about any experiences they may have had as an internet user. Staff members were guided towards describing their perceptions of the relevancy of Na-Me-Res programming in the lives of clients, and a deeper discussion of their perceptions towards the role of the internet in facilitating the daily practices of the organization. Shelter clients and residents were engaged with a view to uncovering the deeper meaning of Na-Me-Res's programs and services in their lives, and what role, if any, the internet plays in their daily activities.

In an effort to ascertain how essential the internet is in supporting organizational activities, staff participants were asked to identify the consequences of internet service disruption in terms of its effect on their efficiency and activity range, and to identify any offline resources that might be employed in lieu of internet access. Where organizational members have adapted unique internet practices as a complement to

non-internet-based resources, internet disruptions are unlikely to result in major frontline service disruptions. By contrast, where key organizational practices are contingent on internet access, and absent viable offline alternatives, the outcomes of internet disruptions are likely to be more widespread. The suggestion here is that any localized disruption to internet service within Na-Me-Res may be reflected in its broader service capabilities.

Participants

The study sample was limited to organizational employees from Na-Me-Res's core service areas and operational units, as well as five clients and residents for a total of ten participants. The organization employee sample range (Table 1) comprised three senior staff members situated in an oversight role relative to a program service area, as well as two staff members functioning in a more centralized, operational capacity. Employee sampling was non-random and cross-sectional, with participants engaged across a range of operational areas.

Table 1 - Organizational Employee Participant Sample

<i>Employee Participant</i>	<i>Practice Area</i>	<i>Practice Outcomes</i>
1	Sagatay	Facilitates life skills development programs including employment, and health awareness
2	Fundraising & Development	Engages with donors and community funding stakeholders
3	Operations	Oversees daily operations, including finance, IT support, and facility management
4	The Men's Residence	Facilitates temporary housing and shelter needs of clients
5	Outreach Services & Support	Facilitates services, outreach and transitional support for homeless populations living outdoors

The client and resident sample (Table 2) included one participant from each of Na-Me-Res's core practice areas, with participants #6 - #8 engaged with multiple programming areas:

Table 2 - Client and Resident Participant Sample Range

Client/Resident Participant	Programs & Services Utilized
6	A temporary shelter resident who participates in the Ngim Kowa Njichaag and Sagatay programs
7	Participates with the Sagatay and Mino Kaanjigoowin programs
8	Temporary shelter resident who volunteers with Outreach Services Unit
9	Participates in Ngim Kowa Njichaag program
10	Engaged by the Outreach Services Unit

The Native Men's Residence: Organizational Background

Na-Me-Res is an urban homeless shelter and outreach services provider engaged with male members of Toronto's Aboriginal communities. The facility hosts a 63-bed shelter, and provides transitional and long-term housing, mental and physical health care, addiction rehabilitation, and street outreach services for homeless and at-risk community members. Organizational structure comprises five key service areas focused on long- and short-term housing support, mental health and addiction counseling, transitional and life skills support, cultural reclamation services, and a mobile street outreach team tasked with providing care and support to homeless populations living outdoors. Na-Me-Res's client population encompasses members of Toronto's Aboriginal communities, as well as non-Aboriginal persons in need.

Na-Me-Res Services Overview

First opened in 1985 as a 26-bed emergency shelter, Na-Me-Res's programs have evolved in response to a myriad of cultural, social and economic risk factors facing homeless and transiently housed Aboriginal men in Toronto. The shelter and housing services offered by Na-Me-Res facilitate both emergency relief, as well as transitional support to help homeless men secure stable, long-term housing. In its current state, Na-Me-Res's housing facilities include a 63-bed residence, an emergency shelter, and a transitional housing facility for recently released Aboriginal offenders. Na-Me-Res also employs a number of support programs with a view to remediating the complex social risks associated with homelessness. Life skills training is provided through a 3- to

6-month training program offered through Sagatay, which incorporates employment skills, writing, reading and communication workshops, nutrition and diet education, as well as resources to help clients overcome conflict. Addiction and mental health support programs are available to clients who struggle with substance abuse, depression and low self-esteem, and the shelter facilitates access to traditional healing and cultural support from the Elder community.

The complex and interrelated risk factors that inform poverty and homelessness situates Na-MeRes as liaison between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal service providers alike. Na-Me-Res’s programs and services provide for the basic, essential and transitional needs of the homeless, while simultaneously mediating their relationships with law enforcement, correctional services, the municipal and provincial governments, as well as healthcare and education providers. Table 3 outlines the five programming and service areas employed by Na-Me-Res that intersect with the key risk factors informing homelessness:

Table 3 - Na-Me-Res Key Programming & Services

The Men’s Residence	Facilitates temporary housing and the emergency shelter needs of clients
Outreach Services & Support	Facilitates outreach and support for individuals living on the street
Sagatay	Facilitates transitional housing and life skills development programs in communication, employment, and health awareness
Mino Kaanjigoowin	Facilitates mental health and addiction counseling support
Ngim Kowa Njichaag	Facilitates and supports culture, identity, and reconciliation in accordance with traditional teachings

Risks & Vulnerabilities Faced by Aboriginal Men

Aboriginal peoples constitute a distinct segment of Toronto’s homeless population, are overrepresented on city streets and in city shelters, and are disproportionately exposed to the risks associated with homelessness (Golden, Currie, Greaves, & Latimer, 1999; Patrick, 2014; Skye, 2013). Aboriginal men, in particular, evidence the lowest levels of in-

come and education, the highest rates of transient/temporary employment, and are least likely to have secure housing. Subsequently, 66% of the total population of homeless Aboriginal peoples in Toronto are male (McCaskill et al., 2011). Accompanying the milieu of risk factors that inform the living experiences of Aboriginal peoples in Toronto, data collected by outreach agencies also point to higher rates of premature death amongst Aboriginal males. Aboriginal men aged 35-49, a demographic that is particularly susceptible to the risks correlated to homelessness, evidence premature mortality rates that are nearly four times those of non-Aboriginal males (Shah, 2005; Trojan, 2014), constitute 71% of all murdered Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Andrew-Gee, 2015), and are seven times more likely to become homicide victims than non-Aboriginal men (Mulligan & Miladinovic, 2015).

Aboriginal men face a multiplicity of interrelated risk factors that include a lack of transportation, substance and alcohol abuse, mental health issues, and barriers to employment and education. The absence of secure and stable housing has been shown to compound and exasperate these risk factors (Skye, 2013). Once an individual is homeless, the stigmatization of “being homeless” can negatively mediate encounters with public and private service providers, while exposure to violence and abuse in and out of shelters becomes increasingly likely. As feelings of hopelessness develop, a sense of powerlessness in one’s ability to extricate oneself also begins to emerge. Antipathy towards the homeless, reflected through their contacts with healthcare providers, education providers, police, courts, and the general public itself, has an anchoring effect on the homeless which can debilitate their self-esteem and limit their feelings of self-empowerment.

Analysis of Interview Data

Na-Me-Res’s core programs and services intersect with the most prevalent social, cultural and economic risk factors associated with homelessness amongst Aboriginal men. From emergency intervention to transitional care, the range of remediating services Na-Me-Res provides illuminates where the organization is situated across the lifecycle of homelessness. Given Na-Me-Res’s primary role as a critical and basic needs provider, its organizational capabilities are expressed through the frontline relationships that exist between its staff and the client/resident community it serves. A range of organizational tenure, rural and urban backgrounds, and client histories with Na-Me-Res’s services were represented amongst the staff and client/resident participants interviewed. The study on the perceptions participants have towards the role of the organization in the daily lives of its dependent community members illuminates two significant themes, which are outlined below: a reconcil-

iation of service outcomes with community risk factors, and the adaptability of the organization over time.

Reconciling Perceptions of Need with Community Risk Factors

Of the five client/resident study participants, each was individually engaged with at least one of Na-Me-Res's core service programs, with three simultaneously engaged in multiple service areas including addiction and mental health support, life skills development, and transitional housing support. When asked for their thoughts on the role Na-Me-Res plays in their lives, clients and residents gave responses showing a range of personal experiences connected to the community risk factors faced by homelessness Aboriginal men.

One Men's Shelter resident describes how a history with alcohol addiction contributed to his separation from his family, ultimately leading to arrest and a subsequent re-engagement with Na-Me-Res while he pursued treatment and support:

I got arrested when I was on the streets during the cold alert, I went to my ex- girlfriend's and slept in basement and she called the cops and charged me with domestic. – Client Participant 6

Another client described a pattern of transient, insecure housing provisions prior to coming to Na-Me-Res:

I had a place, but I didn't last there very long because my roommate attacked me in my sleep. – Client Participant 8

Though many clients and residents had been able to secure temporary housing on their own, many articulated the role of alcohol and substance addiction in contributing to unstable environments, so that they often found themselves sharing accommodations with other drug and alcohol addicts, and creating environments that were ill-suited to treating addiction.

The need for a "clean and safe" treatment environment was highlighted as essential by several participants, as a number of clients described being targeted for assault in treatment facilities outside of the Aboriginal community. Both the emergency shelter and the transitional housing facility run by Na-Me-Res offer accessible, culturally appropriate provisions in this capacity:

They're giving me stability housing wise, so it eases a lot of trouble for appointments, so people can find me for appointments, it gives me a contact place so my doctor can find me, I'm getting treatment for alcohol addiction at women's college

hospital where they give me medication to ease my cravings, and my family doctor is going to treat me for Hep C, so basically I need housing stability and this is a stepping stone. – Client Participant 9

Alcohol and substance addiction constitutes a significant, ongoing risk factor amongst homeless Aboriginal men (Golden, Currie, Greaves, & Latimer, 1999), and was subsequently identified as a primary needs based outcome in the responses of clients and residents:

I've gotten the time to work through my problems in a safe environment, without the negative influences that caused me to fall back into addiction in the past. – Client Participant 7

In addition to the risks of violence and abuse (both systemic and from the general public), the problem of alcohol and substance addiction are compounded for those homeless men living on the streets. Since its inception, Na-Me-Res has maintained its street outreach service with a view to providing relief and support for the most vulnerable cross section of the homeless population:

A lot of us come in from off the streets ... abusing drugs and alcohol, that's common in our stories, and having mental health issues, depression and anxiety, other issues but generally depressed and feeling hopeless, here we can get time to recover from that and to help us to set goals for our lives. – Client Participant 8

I'd see them down at Bathurst/Queen, especially during the winter months, I'd be there all weekend, and by 4:30 in the morning we'd be coming out of there drunk and so sick, and they'd be there to help, they'd bring us stuff. – Client Participant 10

Homelessness has a compounding effect on the abilities of individuals to seek employment. In addition to the life skills training and educational programs provided by Na-Me-Res, a stable address is essential throughout the transitional process:

If you're working on a resume it's helpful, usually if you're looking for a job they'll ask for an address, especially if you don't have a phone. – Client Participant 6

Responses gleaned from Na-Me-Res staff when asked for their perceptions of the role of the organization in clients' lives illuminate a similar

correlation between service outcomes and targeted risk:

The shelter saves people from moving directly on the street, by offering support for the family, mental health or substance issues someone may be facing that causes them to be isolated in their current space. – Staff Participant 5

The overlapping risks faced by homeless Aboriginal men are implicated throughout the lifecycle of homelessness. Na-Me-Res's Operations Manager describes how the organization's programming is situated along this continuum:

When you get someone out of corrections and give them four walls, they don't know what else to do, how to maintain their housing and their lives ... when an aboriginal client gets housed in Toronto they are referred to our aftercare service, so we stay with clients for at least a year to ensure that their housing is maintained, show them where the foodbank is etc. ... give them the basic life skills you or I may take for granted. – Staff Participant 3

Adaptation of Organizational Services Over Time

While clients and residents tended to frame the role of Na-Me-Res in their lives in terms of material benefits and immediate stability, staff members emphasized the ongoing outcomes of organizational services in the lives of Indigenous community members.

We've remained adaptive and changed to the needs of the community ... examples are the change from youth shelter to adult, corrections community release programs, expanded the services that are most needed. – Staff Participant 3

Staff members perceive the role of organizational services in terms of their short- and long-term effects on the rehabilitation efforts of residents, and provide insight into the structuring role their activities play in clients' day-to-day lives. For most staff members, a set of shared values and principles influence their commitment to helping Indigenous men in need. In the case of Na-MeRes, the values of the organization (to remediate homelessness) are reflected in the perspectives staff members have towards the outcomes of Na-Me-Res's services:

Na-Me-Res is completely essential, this organization provides a service that is not duplicated by any other. – Staff Participant 4

Na-Me-Res's adaptation to evolving community need also highlights a crucial, commensurate relationship between the capabilities of the organization and the expectations of its services on the part of clients and residents. The threshold of services provided by Na-Me-Res in the context of the needs of homeless Indigenous men must therefore be used as a frame for assessing how the organization's use of the internet is implicated in its overall capabilities, and ultimately in the well-being of its client community.

Perceptions of Clients & Residents Towards the Internet

When discussing their thoughts on the role of the internet in their lives, both individually and as an organizational technology, clients and residents similarly framed their experiences with the technology as an enabling or constraining influence on their activities. In lieu of stable housing or a personal telephone, three of the five participants described how access to the internet is essential with a view to maintaining an email address for job seeking:

If you're working on a resume it's helpful, usually if you're looking for a job they'll ask for an email address, especially if you don't have a phone. – Client Participant 9

Knowing where and how to access the internet helps to synthesize a stabilizing routine for several clients and residents. Participants alternately described their need to stay connected with friends and family, seek out information about service providers and look up addresses for the facilities that constitute their daily routines:

I use the internet a lot for job searches. Especially if I'm looking for an address, you can use Google Maps, especially when you're looking for a job, you need to know how to get there, who to contact, address, a bus route ... all that stuff. Especially when it comes to other services, just getting there you need to know what social services are available in that area, welly (welfare) office unemployment and all that stuff. – Client Participant 7

The need for routine emerged as a consistent theme in client and resident interviews, both in terms of its positive effect on the treatment programming undertaken by clients and residents, and its role in overcoming the feelings of hopelessness experienced by many homeless men. Where regarded for its constraining influence, participants described the various challenges surrounding physical access to the community terminals provided by Na-Me-Res, and a lack of wireless service within facility itself. All but one of the client and resident participants had ac-

cess to personal devices capable of accessing the internet (smart phones and laptop computers), and all participants described been given a personal USB mass storage device by the employment counseling office on which to maintain employment related documents. While none could recall being apprised of the implications of maintaining their private information on portable devices, one client described having lost possession of his USB stick and smartphone after being robbed at another men's shelter.

For participants who did maintain possession of personal devices, the lack of wireless service provided by Na-Me-Res within its facilities was described for its limitations on their personal activities, requiring them to leave the facility in search of public WiFi access, or rely on the community access terminals in the shelter:

If they had WiFi in here it would help, and that would alleviate some of the tension with people waiting to get on the terminals, it would probably help the people that don't have a cell phone, and I wouldn't have to worry about how much time I have on Timmies WiFi before the manager come and kicks me out – Client Participant 6

The congestion and lack of public terminal availability was described as a problem by many shelter residents:

Some of them practically live on it, they can sit there for hours, sometimes we only have four computers, seems like there's always somebody waiting to go on one, and if they didn't turn them off when it's time to do chores the chores wouldn't get done. – Client Participant 8

Upstairs we have six computers and they're people who are on them 24/7 you know, certain four people who are always on it. – Client Participant 7

One client identified the lack of wireless service as a deliberate response on the part of Na-Me-Res with a view to mitigating the possibility of residents secluding themselves in the facility if the service was widely available:

It would also be nice to have WiFi here, but they're afraid if they have WiFi here people would be on their devices all the time and never go out and live their lives, some have depression issues and they never want to leave here and go out, they just want to stay in and watch TV, like hermits. – Client Participant 7

Only two of the five participants had taken part in the computer skills training provided by Na-Me-Res, though all described the role of resident community members as social resources in supporting the development of their individual internet skills:

I think that the residents would probably help them, because I've seen already, the residents help each other here, The one I learned was free WiFi at McDonalds. – Client Participant 8

A lot of it is common knowledge here, everyone talks to each other here, we utilize ourselves as resources and a lot of guys here are pretty knowledgeable about the internet. You know, who do I talk to about smartphones! Everyone has their strengths here and gets singled out. – Client Participant 9

Access to the internet through supportive technologies plays a key, stabilizing role in shaping the experiences of Na-Me-Res's clients and residents. The responses provided by these participants illuminates how the technology is synthesized into their daily lives by their individuated experiences, their relationships with fellow clients and residents, and the efforts of Na-Me-Res staff alike.

Discussion

Clients and residents of Na-Me-Res variously expressed the necessity of internet connectivity to support their rehabilitation needs, which include securing temporary employment, maintaining eligibility for government income, and securing access to healthcare and social services:

There are a few guys who don't have mobile or email addresses, and they have a really tough time, I let one guy give his caseworker my email address because he didn't have one, but he left the shelter a couple days later and I couldn't send the replies I was getting to him. Don't know what happened with him after that. – Client Participant 7

Mobile services constitute the dominant means of maintaining internet connectivity for clients and residents. Recent literature illustrates a correlation between low-income and mobile services as a primary or sole means of accessing the internet (Fernandez et al., 2020). And though mobile connectivity can be observed as filling a critical gap in provisioning internet access in lieu of fixed, at-home services, mobile services can also be an inefficient, costly, and unstable way for vulnerable com-

munities to access essential online services. A number of participants described challenges associated with maintaining their mobile service plans on the meagre, fixed income streams available to them, as well as the risks of device theft they face inside and outside of Na-Me-Res. Additionally, the racial and cultural stigmatization faced by homeless Indigenous men exacerbates the limitations of mobile devices as a sole point of internet access, with several participants describing their experiences attempting to access the internet through public WiFi networks in retail service establishments:

Getting on a computer in here or at the library is a real pain a lot of the time, so a lot of us use our mobiles. Thing is I can't get a service plan because of my credit, and I got no job, so sometimes I use the pre-paid plans when I get money, and sometimes I try to get on the WiFi at Timmies, but they don't like us hanging around, I've had the cops called [on] me a couple times, so I just move down the street to try and get on somewhere else. – Client Participant 9

Support for internet literacy and skills are widely diffused between and amongst Na-Me-Res's client and resident population. Though formal computer and internet training programs are available, clients and residents nonetheless identified "experts" in the shelter community as their primary social resources in this capacity. Several articulated the common knowledge and tips on "where to go" to find public WiFi hotspots and how to access various types of online content.

A need to feel self-empowered and independent emerged as a persistent theme in interviews with clients and residents, and the ability to maintain social connections with family and relatives still living in remote and rural areas was identified as a critical resource for shelter occupants to remain motivated, and for their general mental health. A number of participants noted that accessing the internet can often mean the difference between "getting through the day" or "falling between the cracks." Having such a significant proportion of their personal well-being made contingent on access to a technology that is taken for granted amongst the general public was widely perceived by clients and residents as a reminder of their subjugated status within Canadian society, and as an indicator of the painful legacy of colonialism they live with every day. In this way, and as members of Canada's urban Indigenous communities, Na-Me-Res clients and residents embody a distinct cross section of precariously connected, and frequently disconnected, internet users who have yet to be recognized as such in any public effort to democratize access to the internet.

Organizational Dependency on the Internet

Na-Me-Res is a small to medium-sized organization with fewer than 60 employees and a fluctuating revenue stream (Native Mens Residence, 2014). Under these conditions its integration of internet-based technologies reflects a need to increase Na-Me-Res's operational efficiency. Through this lens, the concepts of flexibility and agency emerged as persistent themes over the course of interviews with Na-Me-Res staff. The nature of the frontline service work performed by Na-Me-Res personnel requires that they are able to respond to a range of service requests. In this way, Na-Me-Res personnel engaged in client facing activities perform multiple roles: information gatekeeper, client advocate, inter-agency liaison, or emergency services coordinator.

Characterizing the internet as essential in this context illustrates that the technology's primary affordance—its utility in increasing the task performance of personnel—also informs the potential for disruption to those practices should access to the technology be compromised. Staff participants describe how, given the client-facing nature of their practices, localized or organization-wide internet outages constrain their abilities to maintain normal service levels for clients:

Even when we have a small internet outage it definitely does affect our work, simple things like email. An example is our outreach team, they have access to smartphones on the road, when we have a cut in service it's very hard to access necessary information, like google maps to try and find a homeless guy. – Staff Participant 5

Consequently, it is important to consider the expectations and needs of Na-Me-Res's client community when characterizing the internet as an essential technology and when attempting to ascertain the scope and severity of the harm that could be caused by internet service disruptions at the facility. As Na-Me-Res's organizational capabilities have evolved in relation to the affordances of internet-based technologies, so too have the needs of its client community. Staff participants described their ability to cope with internet disruptions at the facility, but also reported that service levels can nonetheless be compromised, requiring adaptation that may be untenable for clients and residents:

It would affect them (clients) in their day to day, things would look very different when documenting everything that we're doing with them and making their referrals, a lot of what we do

is outside referrals. So, I wonder how that would look in regards to someone not knowing how to refer them, and then having to refer them in a crisis. – Staff Participant 1

Na-Me-Res's organizational capabilities situate the shelter within a local ecosystem of Aboriginal service agencies that has evolved in response to the larger social problem of homelessness in Toronto. The perceptions of staff, clients and residents towards the needs of homeless Aboriginal men are important to forming an understanding of Na-Me-Res's efficacy as a service provider, as it is through the relationships between these parties that the organization's core capabilities are expressed in the living experiences of its community. These observations illustrate how the organization has evolved in response to the changing social, political and economic climates informing homelessness, and demonstrate the interplay between Na-Me-Res's organizational capabilities and the service needs of its community.

Conclusion

The vulnerabilities of Na-Me-Res's clients and the risks they face illustrate how access to the internet constitutes an essential technology resource in supporting their rehabilitation, employment, and housing needs. Where employment is concerned, jobs are often scarce, available on a temporary basis, and only actionable through email. In this context, stable and immediate access to the internet is critical with a view to pursuing these opportunities. When shelter residents do acquire internet-capable devices, a lack of financial stability, credit history, or fixed income status can make securing a personal internet service plan unattainable for many. Seeking out internet access in public, such as at libraries or coffee shops, can prove equally problematic. Many clients describe the stigmatization they face as homeless Aboriginal men when attempting to log on to Wi-Fi networks in private businesses, often being chastised or accused of loitering.

A range of scholarship has described access to the internet as an essential technology, one that supports an individual's ability to pursue communicative, political, and economic opportunities. This study describes a distinct example of internet disenfranchisement by illuminating how the basic needs of Na-Me-Res's client community is contingent upon stable access to the internet, both through the organization itself, and as any options for access they can find locally. The results suggest that the continuity of Na-Me-Res's client community is both directly and indirectly coupled to internet access needs, and though staff can adapt to internet service disruptions, the resulting service constraints may be unmanageable for clients. This challenge is underscored when framed against the backdrop of a service organization whose primary role is to

provide for the basic needs of a vulnerable community.

Two propositions have emerged from this effort that directly intersect with policy discussions surrounding universal internet access. The first is a call to shift the discussion surrounding universal internet access from one primarily framed by economic potentialities and the rhetoric of digital economics, to one concerned with the consequences of precarious and unstable access to the internet for basic needs activities. In the context of essential service organizations like Na-Me-Res, the existing challenges and risks faced by its client community can be compounded by disruptions in the organization's technological infrastructure, and through barriers to access they face as individuals. The second proposition suggests that policymakers at local levels of government—those most directly integrated with the delivery of frontline services to vulnerable communities—consider internet access as supporting the most basic standard of living, and as a problem that may be solvable within their existing service portfolios.

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