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**The Solidarity Network in Formation:
A Search for Democratic Alternative Communication**

by

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**A thesis submitted to
the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research
in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of**

Master of Arts

**Department of Mass Communication
School of Journalism and Communication**

**Carleton University
Ottawa, Ontario
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**The Solidarity Network in Formation:
A Search for Democratic Alternative Communication**

submitted by Patricia Mazepa, B.A., B.Soc.Sc.

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the degree of Master of Arts

Thesis Supervisor

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ABSTRACT

The Solidarity Network (or SoliNet) is an independent computer network that is owned and operated by the Canadian Union of Public Employees. The thesis provides a thorough overview of the history, design, and use of the network from its origins in 1983 through to its transition to the World-Wide-Web in 1996. Focusing on computer conferencing in particular, the thesis uses a case study methodology to analyze SoliNet conferences according to a largely normative theoretical framework which centers on democratic and alternative communication. In comparing theory to practice, the case study contextualizes and considers variables such as access, participation, and political activism to assess how much the potentials for democratized communication and democratization through communication have been realized. The thesis thus identifies democratic alternatives using computer networking, and addresses major challenges.

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Chapter One: Computer Networks and Democracy

1.0 General Introduction

The Solidarity Network (SoliNet) is a computer network that is owned and operated by the Canadian Union of Public Employees (CUPE/SCFP).¹ It is one of a growing number of computer networks which have been developed over the past ten years by people and social groups whose goals are focused on access, free exchange of information, and social networking. Computer networks such as PeaceNet, EcoNet, WomensNet,² and a host of community FreeNets³ demonstrate an increasing use of computer mediated communication by movements dedicated to social action versus market values. They are being held as a beacon of hope even by staunch critics of new information and communication technologies (e.g. Herman 1995; Schiller 1996; and Menzies 1996), and are the basis for predictions of a renewed labour internationalism (Waterman 1990). The existence of these networks and the two-way interactive communication that is afforded by the technology is also being held as evidence of the democratic potential of communication technologies and to offer optimistic forecasts for an increasingly democratic future. New terms such as televoting (Slaton 1992),

¹ Syndicat Canadien de la Fonction Publique.

² These are member networks of the Institute for Global Communications (IGC) which is "dedicated to activism" (IGC Home page). IGC is a cofounder of the Association for Progressive Communications (APC) (c. 1990) which is "an international coalition of progressive computer networks: members are expected to adopt a non-profit structure or reasonable equivalent, to 'reach out to a broad variety of groups and individuals consistent with the principles of APC' and to 'provide access to the network without respect to race, religion, gender or sexual orientation'" (Lewis 1993a:119); see also (Nassr 1994).

³ Community FreeNets provide public access to the Internet and email facilities for no charge, or a minimal (non-profit) charge. They are usually locally based operations (e.g. in Ottawa, the National Capital FreeNet) who depend on the work of volunteers and on the 'donations' of those who can afford to pay for access. (see Wichers 1992; Weston 1994; and Schuler 1996).

teledemocracy (Akerton 1987), hyperdemocracy (Wright 1995), or CyberDemocracy (Poster 1995) refer to the use of computer mediated communication to promote new forms of democracy.

In critical communication research democracy is not a concept usually associated with information and communication technologies (ICTs) (McMullough 1991). Principal questions asked by a critical political economy of communication specifically, focus on ownership, control and access to information and communication resources (see Mosco 1996a), and provide evidence of the decidedly undemocratic development and use of ICTs to increase control over political, economic and cultural resources (Robin and Webster 1983; Schiller 1996), as well as people, i.e. labour (e.g. Gandy 1988; Harvey 1989). It is argued that this capacity for control will be intensified through the use of technology for surveillance (Zuboff 1988; Gandy 1995). In the *Pay-Per Society*, Mosco (1989) suggests that the reason why computers have been so closely associated with democracy is largely due to a "common concern about the state of democracy worldwide",⁴ and a belief that computers can somehow supply the 'technological fix' - "to create democracy where it does not exist and to expand it where it does" (pg. 69). He writes that this combination of a "sense of malaise about democracy and a *deus (ex?) machina*⁵ solution" begs the question of whether computers can bring democracy?, and later asks that given the powerful and

⁴ E.g. see (Schiller 1996:39-40), and (Touraine 1995:325-351).

⁵ A "power or event that comes in the nick of time to solve difficulty" (Sykes 1982:261).

controlling forces at work in the dominant political economy, the question is more importantly....**how?** (Wasko & Mosco 1992).

That computer networks are owned and controlled by unions or socially progressive organizations at all provides some evidence that there is at least potential for increased democracy in communication, as does the two-way interactive capacity which is afforded by computer mediated communication (CMC). We cannot assume however, that the existence of these networks, or the capacity of the technology, automatically means that there is, or will be an increase in democracy as a result of its use. As proposed by Raboy & Bruck (1989b), there are a number of “unresolved questions” to ask of alternative communications (i.e. those that are owned and operated by social movements that are not profit driven) regarding the extent of two-way communication, and the impact or results of these communications as used by social movements on social and political action, i.e. to effect an increase in democracy. Also, given that computer networks are relatively new, there are few studies which critically assess whether the capacity for two-way communication is being fully developed, or ask why or why not this potential has or has not been maximized. These questions are necessary in that they provide the grounds for articulating what we mean when we say ‘democratic’ and ‘alternative’ communication, as well as discovering what possible constraints or limitations there may be. The answers to these questions could also assist in developing practical strategies towards the realization of the potentials of computer technology.

1.1 The Case Study

We can engage in a continual philosophical debate on the essence and meaning of democracy and communication. However, while this debate may be useful, the everyday practices of communication are more compelling. The qualitative research technique of a case study provides a method of examining the everyday practices such that a particular concept like democracy can be contextualized and discussed on the basis of real experiences. The specifics provided by a case study go beyond the functions of CMC that are visible on a computer terminal to the people who operate and use the system. In effect, it examines the processes and social relations behind the technology, which affect its use, and can offer reasons as to why it developed the way it did.

This case study provides the practical grounding to investigate the communication practices of a labour union network which then can be discussed in terms of democratic communication. It is historical in that it will span the previous fourteen years in order to trace the development of SoliNet from its origins in 1983 through to early 1997 during its transition to the World-Wide-Web. Isolating SoliNet before it became one of many networks allows a unique glimpse into the communication relationships and practices within and amongst CUPE and the other unions, social and political organizations and associations who have belonged to SoliNet, and who have now been 'technologically fragmented' in that most of these groups have now obtained

their own email connections, and/or addresses/sites on the Internet independent of SoliNet.

1.2 Research Questions

The thesis is led by two research questions first posed by Wasko (1992) in the introduction of *Democratic Communication in the Information Age* [Wasko and Mosco (eds.) 1992]. The authors in this volume lay out some preliminary theoretical issues which inform critical communication research that understands democratic communication as an alternative to communication as it has been developed in the “dominant political economy” (i.e. the mass media and the use of ICTs for increased control and surveillance). Mosco and Wasko conclude that a critical assessment of alternative communication is necessary in deciding whether the potential for democratic communications is realizable. They provide the following two questions as basis for analysis:

(1) How are communication resources enhancing (or inhibiting) democratic progressive movements devoted to social change? [and],

(2) What is the prognosis for democratized communication, as well as for democratization through media or information systems? (Wasko 1992:6).

To answer the first question, the thesis case study will examine and describe the ‘communication resource’ of SoliNet including its origins, development, and use since its conception in 1983. This includes providing an overview of how it was used, who used

it and why, and identifying to what extent the network helped (or hindered) CUPE both in individual and collective use, as well as the general membership, and other unions, organizations, and associations who belonged to the network. These findings will also provide the empirical data for the second research question, and will be used as the basis to discuss a number of current theoretical postulations on democracy and democratic communications in the context of the case study. The second research question is based on the concept of democratic communications and is composed of two parts as explained below.

The “prognosis for democratized communication” as used here refers to assessing the degree, or extent of democracy in communication, that is, ascertaining how the computer network is being developed and used democratically. Specifically, it attempts to answer the following questions: (1) Are the two-way interactive technological properties of CMC being fully exploited such that the communication practiced on SoliNet is also interactive? (2) Is there equal exchange and accessibility both of communication and information on the network? (3) Are the people who have access to SoliNet able to fully participate? (4) Do they participate, and why or why not? The objective here is to provide an evaluation and assessment of SoliNet as a *communication system* as compared to relatively ‘ideal’ conditions outlined in theory (as will be discussed later in this chapter). The thesis will also draw on CMC research from a variety of approaches, including interpersonal and organizational communication to discuss and explain the findings as applicable.

The prognosis for “democratization through media or information systems” highlights a distinction between democracy in communication and democracy **through** communication. That is, CMC can facilitate democratized communication, however, this does not necessarily imply or lead to activism. In other words, we can engage in democratic discourse on computer networks but to effect change requires aggressive social and participatory political action. Here is where a distinction between democratic communication and alternative communication must be underscored. Democratic communication as used in critical research generally assumes a political orientation towards an intended social transformation; although social transformation may occur by ensuring a ‘democratic discourse’, it does not necessarily mean that the discourse so intended is to produce social, political, or economic change, i.e. democratization in a larger sense. The objective is therefore to describe SoliNet’s contribution to activism, as well as to discuss its effectiveness within these terms.

1.3 Methodology

As was stated earlier, primarily qualitative research methods were employed in a case study of SoliNet, which included the following research techniques:

- (a) Face-to-face, telephone, and on-line (computer) interviews of members of CUPE and other unions, organizations, and associations who had access to SoliNet, including the people who were involved in SoliNet’s development, which includes the decision-makers, technicians and primary users;
- (b) On-line ‘field observations’ as a participating member of SoliNet which includes both observation and some quantitative analysis of the variety of open and closed conferences on SoliNet;

(c) Researching *written* sources of labour union and CUPE history, organizational structure, decision-making and internal communications, e.g. *The CUPE Constitution; Convention Reports 1985-1995; Task Force Reports 1986-1995*; and CUPE newsletters (e.g. *The Facts, Organize, and FastFacts*); and,

(d) Administering three different questionnaires to a representative sample of:
(i) current individual users; (ii) unions, organizations and associations who have (or had) access to SoliNet, and (iii) past members or non-users of SoliNet.

CUPE has never surveyed its SoliNet members (i.e. users or non-users). Since estimations only have been made by the Technology Office which technically runs SoliNet, the questionnaires were administered as supplements to the research techniques described above to enhance both the description and explanation of SoliNet's usage, and to provide for anonymity for additional opinions or comments. The universe of active users (who were conference members) in 1996/7 was estimated to be 370,⁶ of these 200 were individually identified as active members.⁷ The current individual members were sent an electronic mail (email) request to participate in the study by taking the survey using SoliNet.⁸ Of the 200 requests, 50 questionnaires were completed yielding a 25% response rate. The organization questionnaire was sent by regular mail or faxed to the SoliNet contact at the various unions, organizations and

⁶ This number was derived from adding up the user-names of the open conference on SoliNet called "SoliNotes". This conference had the largest membership of any of the open conferences on SoliNet and was taken as a representation of the total current membership.

⁷ Current users were identified on the basis of individually checking each user name to ascertain the last time the member had logged-on to the network. If the member had logged-on in the last six months (November 1996 to March 1997), the member was identified as active and sent an email request.

⁸ The members had to download the questionnaire, fill in their responses, upload the questionnaire back on to the network and send the researcher an email with the file name of the survey. The initial response rate was not high given this procedure, so that the members were also sent questionnaires by facsimile machine (fax) and regular mail.

other associations who had used SoliNet during the recent past (1995 to 1997). Of the 34 organizations that had used SoliNet during this time, 11 replied, with 10 completed questionnaires, yielding a 29% response rate. Past members and non-users were more difficult to locate (there is no record of their names or addresses), such that only CUPE members in Ottawa were surveyed (who were identified from the CUPE phone book) and individually checked on-line as to their status as non-users or non-members. Of the 68 questionnaires that were sent by CUPE internal mail, 17 were returned completed, yielding a 25% response rate. The questionnaires are included in Annex A, and the responses are discussed (as applicable) in Chapters Four and Five of this thesis.

1.4 Limitations

(1) The thesis will be describing and evaluating SoliNet as a computer network to provide a general overview, versus isolating a particular type of conference, or specific set of discursive fields within a conference. Although there will be some observations of the interpersonal nature of the discourse and a discussion of specific conference types, the objective of the thesis is not to provide a sustained and detailed assessment, or an evaluation of the degree of democracy involved in a single communication act, or a specific computer conference. This type of study would require, for example, isolated studies of the text itself and may enter from a different research perspective (e.g. linguistics, interpersonal communications, or gender relations) and would not necessarily be unique to communication within a labour union.

(2) From 1986, SoliNet was developed as an independent computer network; in 1996 the technology office began plans for Internet access and for CUPE's own World-Wide-Web site which was realized in October 1996. Although the thesis will outline the reasons for this change and discuss some of the ramifications of the development, the focus will primarily be on SoliNet as an independent computer network, *prior* to Web access.

1.5 Theoretical Framework

As Deetz (1992) suggests, theory functions in three ways: (1) it directs attention to specific details (e.g. social relations, processes and structures); (2) it helps to organize experience; and (3) it enables useful responses (pg. 71-77). In this way theory is both explanatory and normative, it provides a signpost for social change.

How we conceptualize and talk about others and ourselves influences what we are and will be. Theories function to produce responses that produce ourselves, our social interactions, our institutions, and our collective future. Theories must be assessed in light of the kind of society we want to produce (Deetz 1992:76).

The theoretical framework chosen here guides the thesis to both describe and analyze SoliNet. It centers on the role of communication in social change by focusing on the democratization of communication in particular, on the way to a more democratic society.

As was introduced in Section 1.3 of this Chapter, the concept of democratization of communication is two-fold,⁹ involving both an understanding of democracy in communication and democracy through communication; the basis for this distinction in relation to CMC specifically is elaborated in the following Subsections 1.5.1 through 1.5.3.

1.5.1 Democracy in Communication

One of the criteria for predicting the democratic potential of CMC is based on the two-way interactive capacity of the technology. This capacity can facilitate *democracy in communication* by providing for a relatively equal dialogue between two or more people. Computer mediated dialogue is comparable to face-to-face communication, as Jakubowicz (1993) suggests, which allows for **direct communicative** democracy by:

creating opportunities for everyone to be a 'sendceiver' engaged in participatory horizontal communication, incorporating immediate response and feedback, [which] is feasible only in face-to-face communication, or in mediated communication conducted by means of interactive new media (Rogers 1986), that is, at the level of interpersonal, intragroup, and -- in some cases -- of inter-group communication (Jakubowicz 1993:44).

This capacity is significant because the computer network provides for an expanded 'sendceiver' base which can reduce previous constraints, barriers or limits to both access and/or participation which can be logistical (i.e. separations of time or distance), or social. The latter refers to *social decontextualization*, i.e. since communication is

⁹ (Wasko 1992:7).

computer *mediated* and as yet the receiver and sender do not see each other, traditional social cues such as gender, age, ethnicity, visual or voice differences are not apparent, nor are social hierarchy or status differences necessarily made (e.g. social class, professional or occupational credentials). This quality is thus considered democratic since people are relatively autonomous, and they can communicate on the basis of the content of their messages and their ideas, rather than on social preconceptions or presumptions. Thus CMC can have an “equalizing effect”, that is, all people communicating on the networks are relatively equal by having access. Social psychological research investigates both optimistic and pessimistic accounts of CMC’s “equalizing effect” (Spears and Lea 1994). However, it would seem likely that since people are communicating, any and all number of prejudices and biases, such as sexism,¹⁰ racism, ageism, etc., and status differentials (e.g. vocabulary or education), are possible, as Spears and Lea (1994) conclude:

It is basic to our approach that there are unlikely to be universal effects of CMC because these will be determined as much by the social context, the content of identities, and the nature of social relations. ...[T]he effects of technology cannot be divorced from their underlying social context (pg. 452-453).

The case study provides us with a social context which can be used to identify what possible variables mediate the CMC environment.

¹⁰ See (Herring 1993); also Poster (1995) who provides a caveat on Herring’s study: “Herring wants to argue that the Internet does not foster democracy since sexism continues there, but she fails to measure the degree of sexism on bulletin boards against their face-to-face situations, nor even indicate how this would be done”.

How the communication is structured on the network itself is a larger matter however, since “creating opportunities for everyone to engage in participatory horizontal communication” is a function of how communications on the network is *designed*. CMC technologies themselves are relatively flexible and malleable in terms of design for use, and can be ‘designed democratically’ depending on the intent of the technology developers. In general, due to the computer literacy required, design of the computer network requires a technology coordinator (who could be a member of the social movement or an outside agency) to assist or control network design. The coordinator’s role could range from technology facilitator to controller, depending on the degree of consultation or participation incorporated into decisions on design. Orlikowski, et al. (1995) refer to this process as “technology use mediation”, which they define as the:

deliberate, on-going, and organizationally-sanctioned intervention within the context of use that helps to adapt a new communication technology to that context, modifies the context as appropriate to accommodate use of the technology, and facilitates the ongoing effectiveness of the technology over time (pg. 424).

As this observation reveals, technological facilitation is not built in absence of the social context, such as the existing formal and informal communication networks [i.e. the communication norms of the organization (or cumulated movement) employing the technology], as well as the intent or goals of the users in the further development and use of the technology. This highlights an error made in technological determinist approaches “which view CMC as *inherently*”¹¹ apt to support democracy in

¹¹ My emphasis.

organizations”, and underscores that CMC technologies are embedded in “social contexts” which are “highly specific” (Mantovani 1994). Further research on CMC specifically in organizations, emphasizes the importance of “local contexts of use” (Fulk et al. 1992).¹² For example, in Mantovani’s (1994) review of current empirical studies of CMC in organizations, he concluded that: “CMC does not generally foster democracy in organizations. It depends on the social context, on the history of the organization, and on the regulations ruling the specific networks applications” (pg. 57). Thus, it depends on whether the union’s existing norms, communication practices, goals and/or intentions are to promote democracy on and through the network which will be unique to the case study.

Evaluating the democratic design and use of the computer network is difficult, since, as Raboy and Bruck (1989a:iv) point out, “there is no single working model of democracy”; however, Tehranian (1990) proposes a way of examining the extent of democracy in a communication *system*. Although his intention is to apply it on a more macro-level (e.g. a nation’s media system), it can offer a schema which can be applied to a ‘labour movement communication system’ using a single network like SoliNet to provide an example of how democratic design and usage may be evaluated. Tehranian suggests that the degree of democracy in a communication system hinges on at least the following six conditions:

¹² In (Mantovani 1994:57).

- (1) **interactivity** in the form of multiple feedback systems assumes autonomous centres of power engaged in a system of checks and balances;
- (2) **universality** means both penetration and access to the means of communication;
- (3) **channel capacity** depends on technological abundance as well as how equally it is shared;
- (4) **content variety** is the outcome of true access and active participation in the production of messages. While a democratic communication system reflects the symbolic variety in the social structure, an authoritarian system represses it and reflects only those messages privileged by the authorities;
- (5) **low noise**¹³ is a technical as well as a political condition of rational and intelligible discourse. To the extent that the democratic rules and procedures of discourse have been internalized as the dominant social norms, to the extent that level of political noise can be minimized; and
- (6) **speedy transmission** may be considered both as technical as well as political requirement. The time it takes between the transmission of a message, its reception, and the response to it reflects the technological as well as institutional capabilities for speedy communication.
(Tehranian 1990:6-10 & 52-53).

A reading of these conditions immediately exposes how far CMC has to go before it could be considered a democratic system, given that, for example, universality is (as yet) far from realization. However, for a network like SoliNet as used within a group, social movement or community, it provides a checklist for an assessment of just how much of the potential for democratic communication is actually realized by an organization like CUPE, and can be used as a basis to discuss why these conditions

¹³ Tehranian (1990:8) elaborates that "low noise" as used here refers to "acceptance of the rules of democratic discourse", that is, anyone can participate, that they have equal opportunity to do so, and they can say what they want without censorship (e.g. see Habermas' "rules of reason" in Herring 1993).

may, or may not have been met. Tehranian's intentions were not to provide the model which 'must be', as was stated earlier, CMC use is context dependent, and as such it will depend on the intent and communication practices of the users, which will be explored in this case study.

1.5.2 Democracy through Communication

As Wasko and Mosco (1992) suggest, "democratization through media and information technologies" also refers to the communication and information "strategies of various social movements and groups devoted to social change" (Wasko 1992:6). Democracy through communication is facilitated through the capability for access and interactivity within the computer network which help a movement 'expand the dialogue' through the exercise of a collective voice which can be local, and/or global in scope. Since network access is obtained through telephone lines, access is 'only' limited by existing technological infrastructure and cost of telephone access.¹⁴ As advanced by Myers (1994), the capacity for interactivity provides a social movement with a number of advantages, such as "speed and ease of information transfer" which allows for rapid communication and exchange of information in periods of strike, protest, or confrontation, to solicit and encourage mobilization of support from the members of

¹⁴ The use of 'only' here refers to the relative ease of interconnectivity *after* the technology is in place; for a review of the complexities and challenges of public access see *Working Papers Series in Public Access Networks* (<http://libertynet.org/world/comm-net/papers.html>).

the network, and to pass information on to others through other forms of media.¹⁵ Local struggles can be linked through multiple distribution lists to form coalitions or alliances with other groups for information and sharing of lessons learned towards the mobilization of collective action. This action can be local or international in scale, and may lead to expanding possibilities for democracy through communication. This collectivism is a basis for predictions of a “new labour internationalism” (Waterman 1990) and facilitates “social movement unionism” (Waterman 1993), which refer to the building of coalitions and cooperation between movements towards common goals (Gindin 1995).

Such interactivity and communication exchange can also provide the movement with their own forum to produce messages for and about themselves. The ability to self-represent goes beyond the limitations and agendas of the commercial media, as Weston (1994) submits:

Those who previously had to make themselves presentable to the agencies of mass communication technologies in order to be represented by the technologies, have begun to publicly represent themselves.

Self-representation is held to be democratic in that people in the movement can share their experiences, resources and opinions towards strengthening group identification and political involvement. As Kelly and Kelly (1994) conclude in their study of

¹⁵ Movements can enhance and supplement existing methods of 'off-line' communication with alternative media forms. As Cleaver (1994) recounts on the use of CMC and network communication in the Chiapas uprising in Mexico: “the electronically circulated information and analysis fed into more traditional means of circulating news of working class struggle: militant newspapers, magazines and radio stations” (pg. 142).

participation in trade unions “the most significant correlate of participation was the strength of the respondent’s sense of group identification” (pg. 63). At the same time, however, it must be emphasized that communication on the networks will not be free of conflict. Nevertheless, the recognition and communication between people with similar interests and goals is fundamental to building a community, which, as Aronowitz (1992:23) explains, is a necessary prerequisite to “political self-representation”:

Communication is the condition for the constitution of a common cultural community without which political self-representation is not possible. What is explicitly lacking here, but implied by the category of communication is a concrete theory that links these ‘objective’ preconditions to the process of self-consciousness of a group as a group.

Other factors which enhance the possibilities for political participation include a reduction in economic costs of communication resources and organizational operations as the result of computer network use (e.g. reduction in traveling time, information exchange costs, storage costs, etc.), which can thus be redirected towards political activism. A study by Bonchek (1995) ¹⁶ provides evidence that Internet-based CMC facilitated political participation. Participation was enabled through increased political resources due to the lower organizational costs¹⁷ related to CMC. Bonchek’s study held that lower economic costs facilitate collective action which includes “group formation,

¹⁶ Bonchek conducted an economic study of political movements on the Internet to investigate how Internet-based CMC facilitated political participation. His study involved a survey of seven different political groups ranging from a one-man activist operation to the Institute for Global Communications (a global CMC network).

¹⁷ Bonchek’s study found that political resources were more readily available due to the reduction in three types of organizational costs: communication (preparing, transmitting, receiving and interpreting messages between two or more parties); coordination (collaboration, scheduling, planning and decision making), and information activities (searching, retrieving, and interpreting information) (1995:2.4).

group efficiency, member recruitment and member retention". As he explains, 'reduction in organizational costs allow larger group formation; it frees up group resources for other uses, and provides for an increase in the improvement and quantity of information'. Accordingly, Bonchek argues, if a group's efficiency is improved, member recruitment is facilitated because the group is able to offer more benefits, which can be purposive (satisfaction of contributing to group's stated goals), material, and/or solidary (interpersonal benefits accrued from group-related interactions) [4:3]. Group retention is also supported by these benefits and is "promoted through more informed decision-making" [7].

Political participation and representation is historically the impetus behind social movements, as Phillips (1994) suggests:

Social movements have promoted the democratization of institutions, such as the family, the workplace, the church, that were once considered strictly private institutions. ...Social movements have also made politics and the policy process more inclusive by giving voice to formerly silenced groups, such as minority women, gays and lesbians, disabled persons, and Aboriginal peoples, and by demanding that representations of women and minority populations have a place at the constitutional and policy-making tables (Phillips 1994:188).

This is part of a process that Giddens (1994) calls the "democratizing of democracy":

The democratic qualities of social movements and self-help groups come in large part from the fact that they open up spaces for public dialogue in respect of issues with which they are concerned. They can force into the discursive domain aspects of social conduct that previously went undiscussed, or were 'settled' by traditional practices. They may help contest 'official' definitions of things....

Some such movements are intrinsically global in scope, and thus might contribute to a wider spread of forms of democracy (Giddens 1994:17).

1.5.3 Democracy Expanded

Democracy both in and through communication “relates the democratization of communication to the process of social change” (White 1982:1).¹⁸ Democracy as it is understood here, goes beyond describing “a form of government” as in liberal, or representative democracy, to describing a “form of society” (Hagen 1992) which encompasses the social totality, i.e. to include sexual, cultural, organizational or institutional, economic, as well as political forms of democracy. This expansion has led to different conceptualizations of democracy which can either focus on one area or level of social life such as workplace democracy (Nightingale 1982), or refer to democratization of society as a process towards social reform, or social transformation.¹⁹ A debate of the merits and limitations of these versions of democracy would constitute a thesis in itself. However, democracy as it is understood in critical communication research “means the fullest possible public participation in the decisions which affect our lives” [as Mosco (1989:67) has defined it in “simple” terms]. A variety of conceptualizations of democracy have generally developed in recognition of, or in reaction against, current limitations, barriers or constraints to participation,²⁰ both in liberal or representative forms of democracy, and in other areas of decision making,

¹⁸ In (Hagen 1992:23).

¹⁹ See for example, Aronowitz's (1994) version of *radical democracy*.

²⁰ Such as, for example, social inequities (due to e.g. status differences; social class; gender, age, and/or ethnicity discriminations, etc.) and/or institutional practices or structures which impede participation, such as organizational hierarchies, and other institutional or governmental policies or regulations.

whether in the workplace, the organization, or in other social, economic or political institutions on a local and/or international scale. How increased public participation actually occurs, however, is the subject of many debates. Thompson (1995) for example, argues that participation in decision-making in all areas must become *institutionalized*; he offers his concept of *deliberative democracy* which is:

a conception of democracy which treats all individuals as autonomous agents capable of forming reasoned judgments through the assimilation of information and different points of view, and which institutionalizes a variety of mechanisms to incorporate individual judgments into a collective decision-making process. ...[T]he legitimacy of a decision stems from the fact that the decision is the outcome of a process of generalized deliberation (pg. 225).

Giddens (1994) also places emphasis on the centrality of deliberation in his concept of *dialogic democracy*:

democratization [is] the (actual and potential) extension of dialogic democracy - a situation where there is developed autonomy of communication, and where such communication forms a dialogue by means of which policies and activities are shaped (pg. 115).

"Autonomy of communication" is historically central to democracy. Free speech, freedom of expression, and freedom of the press, which are now "political privileges"²¹ in Canada and the United States, are still considered cornerstones of democracy (Senecal 1995). However, as critical communication research well indicates, what has looked good in principle, has not necessarily been evident in practice: communication has developed into a form of 'mass' media with highly concentrated media ownership,

²¹ (Hagen 1992).

one-way transmission, and 'bottom-line' accountability (e.g. see Smythe 1981; Schiller 1981; Herman and Chomsky 1988). The democratic capabilities, or promise of democracy²² of every new communication technology, from electricity (Nye 1990), to telephone, radio (Marvin 1988), and television (Barnouw 1990; and Kellner 1990), has not been fully realized. In recognition of this undemocratic path of evolution, and of the impact of ICT's which is increasingly global in scope, world-wide organizations like the World Association of Community Radio Broadcasters (AMARC),²³ the Union for Democratic Communications,²⁴ and the Centre for the Development of Instructional Technologies (CENDIT),²⁵ have formed over the years with a common goal to ensure democracy both in and through communication. While these organizations have generally focused on the so-called 'third world' or 'developing countries' struggle against economic and cultural domination, the same goals can be applied to an increasingly dominant media in 'developed' countries, such as Canada.

Common principles of organizations that view communication as the initiator and basis for democracy are exemplified by the international call for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which grew out of the findings of UNESCO's International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems (the MacBride Commission).²⁶ According to the view espoused by the MacBride

²² Mosco (1996b) calls these promises and predictions which forecast, for example, universal access to technologies and information, and closer-knit communities, 'myths' because they deny the history of social relations, politics, and hard work required of human agency to work towards these ideals. See also Winner's (1986) discussion of "mythinformation".

²³ See Traber & Nordenstreng (1992); Lee (1986); Galtung & Vincent (1992); and Tankha (1995).

²⁴ See Raboy & Bruck (1989).

²⁵ Also Videazimut (Quebec); Asian Media Alternatives (AMA) - see Senecal (1995).

²⁶ Traber & Nordenstreng (1992); Lee (1986); Galtung & Vincent (1992); and Tankha (1995).

Commission, how we have come to understand communication is a misconception because it has been based on practices common to commercial mass media. These practices are characterized by:

a single kind of information flow, which we have come to accept as normal and indeed the only possible kind: a vertical, one-way flow from the top downward of non-diversified anonymous messages, produced by few and addressed to all (Traber 1992:xi).²⁷

It follows then, that with this model of communication as primary, these practices are produced and reproduced in press, film, radio, television and when new forms of technology are used.²⁸ However, when communication is paired with democracy, a different understanding of communication is pressed to the fore:

Communication today is increasingly seen as a process through which the exchange and sharing of meaning is made possible, and by which social relationships and, as a result, social institutions are created and maintained. It is a two-way process, interactive by its very nature. This concept of communication demands participation (Traber 1992:xii).

This conceptualization of communication is similar to the conceptualizations of democracy highlighted previously as Giddens (1994) and Thompson (1995) have suggested. The understanding of communication as inherently linked with democracy underscores why the two-way interactive capacity of CMC is considered so crucial to democracy. An opportunity is present to develop a process of communication where

²⁷ Quoted from the MacBride Report, p. 149, n.1 (Traber 1992:xi).

²⁸ This hierarchical, one-way flow model of communication is not unique to the mass media, but can be exhibited in other forms of institutional and organizational communication. For example, in differences in kind and importance of information in defining who 'needs to know' and who is able to participate in decision-making.

the relation of participation and exchange is primary. This could be a basis for not only democratizing the mass media,²⁹ but for the democratization of the workplace, social institutions, economy, etc.; versus developing it as another kind of vertical information flow between “top to bottom, center to periphery, few to the many, from the information-rich to the information-poor” (Traber 1992:xii). An effect of this ‘vertical flow model’ or ‘mass media mentality’ is evident as these social status and hierarchical dichotomies remain (in principle) even as the variety of means of communication multiply. As the technological capacity to increase control over time and distance intensifies, these methods and communication practices become duplicated and more entrenched at all levels of the social totality. Duplication can occur in communication on an inter-group level such as the workplace, or on a global ‘mass media’ scale especially since CMC technology will continue to facilitate integration of previously separate mediums.

The question remains then, how can this vertical, top-down, few-to-many model, or this hegemonic (taken-for-granted ways of thinking/doing)³⁰ practice of communication be changed? More importantly, if, as recorded in one of the proposals of the NWICO, “communication unavoidably reflects the nature of social relationships”,³¹ then if we change how communication is practiced and understood, can we change the nature of social relationships?

²⁹ As summarized by Senecal (1995:21): “The MacBride Report proposes a form of participation which it calls *radical*, since it implies, *a priori*, that a number of individuals would play an active role at all levels of decision-making within this process. The principle of reciprocity and the two-way circulation of information and communications between the participants in the process is an essential rule of democratization”.

³⁰ (Mosco 1989:119; and Mosco 1996a:242-245).

³¹ NWICO Embu document No. 26, in (Uranga 1986:84-85).

1.6 Alternative Communication

A change in how communication is practiced and understood as a foundation for social change is the essence of **alternative communication**, (i.e. from the word “alteration”, change).³² There have always been different ways of thinking/doing, however, a focus on the practices of mass media by practitioners (such as journalists, public relations and media relation consultants etc.) and in both communication theory and criticism has been to the neglect of struggles to define communication in other terms.³³ Projects have just begun to be explored in works examining the history and practice of alternative communication, which has been studied as underground (e.g. Armstrong 1981; and Verzuh 1989), radical (Downing 1984), popular (Mattelart 1983), women’s (Steiner 1992), minority media (Riggins 1992), and labour communication (e.g. see Bekken 1990; McChesney 1992; and Ross 1991³⁴). The use of CMC to develop alternative forms of communication is advanced by Waterman (1990), whose focus is to promote a ‘labour internationalism’. He draws on the work of Mattelart (1983) as the “necessary starting point” in understanding what we mean by ‘alternative’. Mattelart (1983) argues that the democratization of existing forms of communication is not enough for social change, since what is required is the building of alternative

³² NWICO Embu document No. 26, in (Uranga 1986:92).

³³ As Mosco (1996a) contends, a history of alternative communication is parallel to a history of communication. The latter is usually told on the basis of changes in technology, e.g. press, radio, television, versus on the basis of social relationships, e.g. social class, gender, ethnicity, etc. (see Mosco’s concept of “structuration” Chapter Six).

³⁴ In Mosco (1996a:230).

communication - the very **purpose** of which is social change. As advanced by Mattelart, the active creation of these new forms of communication go beyond "simply democratizing existing forms" since this would only result in "a marginalized communication system" which would therefore lack the essential "transformatory capacity".³⁵ Waterman elaborates:

[Mattelart] refuses to see as sufficient alternative to the big/centralised/non-interactive/hierarchically managed media the small/localised/interactive/self-managed. And this is because he sees both the contradictions within traditional capitalist - or state - dominated TV and the way that the 'alternative media' can be and often already have been articulated into the overall project of capital and the state. Struggle must take place both within and against (Waterman 1990:87).

Thus both democracy in communication and democracy through communication are necessary components of, and for, social change. Relating this understanding of alternative communication to CMC networks, Waterman concludes:

It is, finally, essential for any argument for computerised communication to demonstrate its capacity for stimulating a variety of other communication forms, and for facilitating face-to-face relations between ordinary labouring people - internationally as well as nationally (Waterman 1990:90).

As a review of the above literature suggests, alternative communication has both political and cultural elements. It is political in that it is generated in resistance and opposition to all kinds of domination (e.g. economic, political, cultural and social). It is cultural in the broadest sense, in that it refers to active participation by people who

³⁵ Highlighted by Waterman (1990:90).

define themselves not in terms of audiences, viewers, readers, or consumers, but as people who take responsibility for the creation and production of their own forms of communication whether in print, film, video, radio, or CMC. SoliNet is connected to this history of the alternative if only by virtue of the fact that it is owned and operated by a labour union. The significance of this ownership becomes apparent when compared to ownership and control of other communication resources. Using North America as an example, there are no labour unions, or any other socially progressive organizations for that matter, who own their own telephone company, publishing company, radio or television station and/or communications satellite. Access to public facilities is limited, and even if public access was more widely available, as advanced by Mattelart - it isn't the same as owning and controlling your own communication resource.

1.7 Thesis Outline

To describe a history of SoliNet and to analyze it within a framework of democratic communication, the thesis will be divided into the following chapters:

Chapter Two consists of a brief overview of the struggles for democracy both in and through communication in North American labour history as examples from which SoliNet has followed. The second part of the chapter will provide an early history of the origins and development of SoliNet through to it being established as a national labour network. **Chapter Three** provides a comprehensive qualitative and some quantitative description of a number and variety of open computer conferences on SoliNet. This description is intended to answer the first question which leads the thesis on how

SoliNet is being used specifically by the members. **Chapter Four** analyzes and discusses the evidence gathered according to Tehranian's six conditions of democracy in communication. **Chapter Five** focuses on SoliNet's contribution to democracy through communication and discusses the prognosis for democratized communication and democratization through communication as asked by the second question leading the thesis. **Chapter Six** summarizes and concludes the thesis.

1.8 Conclusion to Chapter One

The development and use of new information and communication technologies that can either increase social dichotomies and/or increase democracy is at a central and critical stage. As Mosco (1989:69) observes:

analysts agree that a limited amount of time is available for us to shape computers for democratic purposes. Soon, the computer-society relationship will be so entrenched that it will be difficult to make the changes necessary to use the technology democratically.

This thesis is an inquiry into one small sample of this possibility. It relies on the everyday experiences of people working to develop their own communication practices through the use of CMC and their own computer network. It describes the tension between structures (both constraining rules and enabling resources), and agency (the purposive actions of social actors),³⁶ between common methods and practices of doing things, and of struggles to develop democratic alternatives.

³⁶ Mosco (1996a:Chp. 6).

Chapter Two: Developing Alternative Communication

Part I

A Brief History of Struggles for Democracy in and through Communication

2.0 Introduction to Part I

Arguably, communication media in this century are 'democratic', given that, for example, access to press, radio, and television in Canada is available to almost anyone.³⁷ However, the dominant corporate ownership and control of communications means that the extent of democratic communication is limited to reading, listening, or viewing, and is largely one-way communication. These limitations occlude the potentials of the media, and the struggles to develop alternatives. The pursuit of democracy through communication includes how the early press was overtly political such that it played an integral part in the development of the labour movement in Canada, and how labour and other collective organizations sought to develop democracy in communication by organizing radio as a two-way participatory medium. History, which precedes the development of CMC as an alternative communication is exemplified in North American labour history by the early labour press, union ownership of press and radio, and the Radio Farm Forums. A brief overview of each of these examples will be provided below.

³⁷ As Moses Znaimer, founder and executive producer of Canada's CITYtv, MuchMusic and Bravo! puts it: "...TV is democratic. Everybody gets it" (Raymaker 1997:13).

2.1 The Labour Press

Parallel with the history of the Canadian labour movement in its formative years is the history of the labour press. In the latter part of the 19th Century, public reaction to social changes experienced in Canada as a result of the Industrial Revolution was expressed in demonstrations, strikes, and protests. These were the sporadic and fitful beginnings of a working class movement forming in response and opposition to changes felt to be fundamentally against their interests and society's as a whole (Palmer 1983). Opposition and resistance were recorded in the printed word through publications which identified with the working class and focused on the rights and interests of the 'common man' - specifically labour. Verzuh (1988) draws on the recordings of the labour press and the work of numerous Canadian historians and scholars in his book *Radical Rag: The Pioneer Labour Press in Canada* to demonstrate that the working class press was crucial in the development of the labour movement in Canada and instrumental in mobilizing social reform:

As the capitalist economy became more sophisticated, workers and their families became increasingly aware of the injustice of their situation. Their best source of information for becoming aware was the labour press. It was there and through the rise of trade unions that they began to understand the nature of their oppression, of the class divisions in Victorian society and of the importance of uniting to change it (Verzuh 1988:33).

There was no question that the labour press was political, which was also the case with the commercial newspapers, as Walkom (1985:1254) recounts:

[Politics] was a serious matter in the [nineteenth] century in Canada; newspapers were expected to have views. Thus occurred the phenomenon of the 2-newspaper town (sic). By 1870 every town large enough to support one newspaper supported 2 -one Liberal and one Conservative (sic). ...[N]ewspapers remained closely tied into political factions well into the [twentieth] century.

The publication of alternative and oppositional views was the purpose of the labour press, and although content was varied and inclined towards the left of the political spectrum, articles ranged from “pure and simple” trade unionism, to advocacy of revolutionary change.³⁸ This diversity reflected the variety of established trade union strategies and goals, and was indicative of the turmoil and struggle between and amongst labour unions and regions as to the correct course of political action. As Verzuh (1988) concludes, it was in the labour press that:

...labour and social reform advocates tested their ideas for change and debated the social issues and sweeping solutions for society's problems. These working papers of an intellectual radicalism laid the groundwork in many cases for future social legislation and a lasting third-party political system [beginning with the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation - CCF (1932) which evolved into the New Democratic Party (NDP) (1961)] (pg. 130).

The labour press as forum for discussion, criticism, and advocacy of social and political change, some of which fostered political activism, illustrates the process of democracy through communication and defines the characteristics of an alternative communication. As scholars such as Langdon (1973) and Palmer (1986) attest, “working people have through their own responses to changing social conditions developed a class conscious

³⁸ As Verzuh (1988) notes, the views espoused in the labour press were not always socially progressive: e.g. during the late 19th century when labour leaders spoke out against Chinese labour and immigration.

movement for social change”(Langdon 1973:26/27). This movement was at its most radical when conditions were at their worst, i.e. in the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution and the Great Depression, when criticism in the press, and actions through demonstrations, protests and strikes were at their peak. According to Canadian historian Paul Rutherford: “the [labour] weeklies shaped the traditions of the working class in early industrial Canada and criticized, vociferously, the capitalist system ...”.³⁹ [examples include the *Ontario Workman* (est. 1872) and the *Trades Journal* (est. 1880), see Verzuh (1988)].

However, the emphasis on social reform diminished as working class newspapers and journals became more narrowly focused as the “official word” of specific labour unions and political parties (examples include the *Trade Union Advocate*, the *Canadian Socialist*, and the Communist Party's *Worker*) (Verzuh 1988). The explicit politics of the dominant press also diminished as its reliance on political parties and government support for funding shifted to commercial advertising as the source of revenue. As newspapers secured funding from advertisers they became commercial in ownership, form and content, and overt political bias was something that was fought against. As Lorimer and McNulty (1987) show, although “freedom of the press” was essentially an argument for the economic freedom to operate, newspapers owners claimed that the press upheld the interests of “the people” (pg. 152). The ‘interests of the people’ however, has since shown a remarkable resemblance to the ‘interests of business’. As Canadian Labour Congress president Shirley Carr told the annual (1987)

³⁹ (in Verzuh 1988:130).

convention of the Newspaper Guild: "the trade union movement learned long ago that freedom of the press is guaranteed only to those who own one" (Verzuh 1988:xi/ii).

2.2 The Mutual Press⁴⁰

During the early part of this century, unions that didn't have their own printing capability had difficulty trying to get anything published in commercial printing shops and publishing houses. In effect, a form of censorship was imposed by commercial shops and owners against printing union material or any views which could be construed as politically left wing. In response to this barrier, and in recognition of the importance of the printed word, the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Employees (CBRE) (est. 1908) bought its own printing plant in Ottawa in 1918 which it incorporated as Mutual Press Limited (Greening and Maclean 1961). The significance of union ownership of a communication resource was underscored by then CBRE President Mosher who marked the founding of the Mutual Press: "Never again will we not be able to print our own material".

From the start, the Mutual Press was treated as an integral part of the union. At base, it provided for the printing needs of CBRE and other unions, but as Dick Gingerich (past National Secretary Treasurer) contends:

⁴⁰ Unless otherwise indicated, this section has been condensed from a telephone interview with Dick Gingerich, past National Secretary-treasurer, CBRT (14/3/97).

It was much more than that. The Mutual Press played a tremendous role as a tool for social and political change both in the formation of the Canadian political left, and in the formation of an independent Canadian labour movement.

The Mutual Press published CBRE's own regular news magazine *The Monthly* through which labour issues were reviewed and discussed in the articles following a question-and-answer type format. As Greening and Maclean (1961) explain, this role was expanded as the editorials asked for political action from their members "to enter and support Labour candidates in municipal, provincial and federal elections" (pg. 89). When the CCF held its first convention, "its declaration of its principles, [and] aims of the new party" were published in *The Monthly*, and support for the party continued in subsequent years (pg. 89). In addition, the National Office of the Brotherhood in Ottawa co-operated with labour members of parliament in a variety of activities, including the printing and distribution of literature through the facilities of Mutual Press Ltd., and the Labour Publishing Company (the latter established on a self-sustaining basis expressly for that purpose) (pg. 163).⁴¹ In this way 'mutual' support was provided to the labour candidates, and CBRE members were informed of their political activities which provided a means of candidate accountability. As Gingerich (14/3/97) suggests:

The Mutual Press supported the CCF up until the late 1960s both politically and logistically. There were years in the CCF where there were no funds at all, and they got a lot of help from CBRE 'in-kind' assistance. The CCF wouldn't have survived without the support of CBRE and its Mutual Press.

⁴¹ Gingerich had not heard of the Labour Publishing Company, he suspects it was the legal name used for union publications owing to some rule of law/government regulation which may have prohibited publishing labour/union views without this designation.

The Press also provided the necessary support for CBRE's role in Canadian union independence. The American Federation of Labor (AFL) and other unions with large international backing were openly hostile to CBRE autonomy and their publications. Gingerich explains that the CBRE was "kicked out" of the Trades and Labor Congress of America (in 1921), and went on to play the leading role in the formation of the All Canadian Congress of Labour (ACCL) (precursor to the CLC). The Mutual Press continued publishing CBRE's newsletters, and providing the printing requirements of other unions that became affiliates of the CLC to the extent that "30 - 40% of the contracts were from unions". It continued supporting the NDP until the early 1990s, when the Press started to go through some difficult financial times. Equipment was getting more expensive, and as leadership changed at other unions, the historical importance of the Mutual Press was not always known or appreciated. Printing had become "less political", such that unions based their printing requirements on purely fiscal and logistical factors in their own business affairs. The CBRE [who had changed their name to the Canadian Brotherhood of Railway Transport and General Workers (CBRT)] merged with the CAW,⁴² and in 1994 the Mutual Press was sold to the employees. The Mutual Press then merged with a commercial firm, and now is known as Mutual Hadwen Imaging Technologies Inc., which is commercially operated but retains unionized employees.

⁴² CAW is the National Automobile, Aerospace and Agricultural Implement Workers Union of Canada, see Gindin (1995).

2.3 Canada's Radio Forums

Computer mediated communication may be our era's 'new technology' but, as emphasized by Marvin (1988) in her book *When Old Technologies Were New*, the term *new technology* is "historically relative". As she explains, we are not the first to marvel over a new invention, or to consider the social, political, cultural, or economic effects its employment may have.

Early history of electronic media is less the evolution of technical efficiencies in communication than a series of arenas for negotiating issues crucial to the conduct of social life; among them, who is inside and outside, who may speak, who may not, and who has authority and may be believed (Marvin 1988:4).

The early history of radio is one such "arena" where democracy in communication was a primary issue of negotiation. In Canada and the United States during the late 1920s and early 1930s, the use and development of radio was being negotiated/contested between social actors which included private/commercial corporations and business interest groups; politicians and state regulators; and voluntary associations, labour organizations, and other social groups.

In Canada, as described by Faris (1975), voluntary associations like the Canadian Association of Adult Educators (CAAE), the Canadian Federation of Agriculture (CFA), and the Workers Educational Association (WEA), as well as labour organizations such as the United Farmers, were active in the production and development of a series of radio programs which focused on developing two-way

participation towards effective political action. Radio series such as the "Labour Forum",⁴³ the "National Farm Radio Forum" (1941-1953), and the "Citizens' Forum" (1943-1952), were co-sponsored by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) and represented sustained attempts at developing radio for public involvement. For example, as Faris explains, the longest running series - the "National Farm Radio Forum" created its own "slogan of 'read, listen, discuss, act' [which] expressed the four aims of the program" (Faris 1975:99). This organization included a national planning committee made up of rural social movement activists, the production and distribution of study materials, and listening-group organizers and registrations. Initial programs were based on dramatized sketches drawn from various problems in a fictitious farming community and grew into discussions on "topics which were chosen by the listening groups" (pg. 98-101). As suggested by Faris, emphasis was placed on "the last two objectives of the slogan" - to "discuss" and "act" - since "participants were encouraged to take remedial action in their community" (pg. 99).

The CFA and the CAAE office also "edited and published the *Farm Forum Guide* [which was] ...a discussion bulletin that reported on the alleged success of the forum action groups.... Nation wide surveys of the number and types of projects were regularly printed, as were glowing reports of successful action projects" (pg. 110).

In this way, a 'motivational feedback loop' was demonstrated to encourage continued or increased participation, as well as to promote membership in the sponsoring CFA and CAAE.

⁴³ Faris does not specify how long the Labour Forum lasted, other than it was more short lived than the longer running Farm and Citizen's Forum (Faris 1975:86).

Following the Farm Forum's lead, a national "Citizens' Forum" was developed to enlarge the listener/participant base and to discuss broader topics such as 'democracy' and 'citizenship'. However, as Faris suggests, the Citizens' Forum was not able to "identify with and serve a particular audience". As well, it did not follow the Farm Forum's formulae of publishing activist success stories, and had other problems of which a decline in sponsorship funding was major. As Faris explains, the CAAE's "perennial lack of funds" was to the detriment of the Forum since "at no time was the Citizens' Forum financially able to mount an intensive campaign either to organize groups or otherwise promote the forum" (pg. 110). These and other internal and external factors eventually led to the demise of both Forums. As Faris explains, there was a constant internal tension between members who saw the CAAE more as a voluntary organization, with goals set on "limited special interests", and those who saw the CAAE more as a social movement. These internal tensions were manifest in other organizations with whom the CAAE "shared overlapping memberships", where specific interests were contested with larger social and political goals regarding the extent of activism and extent of change to work towards (pg. 112). External factors, such as the "working relationship" with the CBC and other broadcasting partners, were challenged by other political and economic dynamics operating within the broadcasting environment (pg. 112).

These dynamics culminated in power struggles over the ownership and control of Canadian broadcasting, which, as emphasized by Raboy (1990:8) are "unresolved" to this day. As Raboy intends by his book's title, *Missed Opportunities*, broadcasting was

not modeled on a democratic form. He argues that despite the attempts by the CAAE and a wide variety of other social groups and labour organizations that supported the public ownership and development of broadcasting, the two-way exchange of a diverse public was never developed. Instead politicians and government regulators defined the notion of the 'public' in nationalistic terms (e.g. cultural sovereignty). Raboy argues that this has limited access to the medium and stultifies any attempts at change; he proposes a different approach:

Reframing the fundamental issues in Canadian broadcasting in terms of democratization rather than national purpose would make it possible to deal with them from a public media perspective. The issue encompasses and goes beyond cultural sovereignty and allows us to distinguish between particular private interests from social, or public interests. Democratization is the necessary pathway from the present media system to a system that would be 'public' in the classical sense (Raboy 1990:341).

2.4 Labour Radio WCFL Chicago

Early radio experiments and struggles to define broadcasting as a public resource for democratic ends also occurred in the United States. As McChesney (1992) identifies, the period between 1928 and 1935 was the "only period in US history...in which the structure and control of a major mass medium were subject to anything close to legitimate public debate" (pg. 3). McChesney submits that a wide variety of social groups, "elements of education, labor, religion, the press, civic groups, and the intelligensia" including the prevailing public opinion at the time, were in "opposition" to the commercial development of broadcasting. He describes that these groups

more or less...coalesced into a broadcasting reform movement ...that generated a significant critique of the limitations of the network dominated advertiser-supported broadcasting for the communication requirements of a democratic society (pg. 3).

According to McChesney (1992), central to the reform movement were the attempts by organized labour to establish a labour broadcasting network, which was intended to "provide a 'working class perspective' on public affairs, and counteract what was regarded as the 'anti-union' bias of the commercial broadcasters".⁴⁴ He recounts how the Chicago Federation of Labor (CFL) established a radio station (the WCFL) "to serve precisely such a function" (McChesney 1992:2). However, neither the reform movement, nor the radio station was successful in changing the course of radio broadcasting. As McChesney explains, the Federal Radio Commission (FRC) chose to see labour and other social organizations such as "religious, educational, and civic organizations" as "propaganda" groups who should "work through the auspices of the commercial broadcasters" (pg. 14). McChesney suggests that since the FRC was responsible for controlling access to radio hours and broadcast power allotments to stations, non-profit broadcasters

found themselves in a 'vicious cycle' where the FRC, noting the non-profit broadcasters' lack of financial and technical prowess, lowered their hours and power to the advantage of the well-capitalized private broadcasters, and thus made it that much more difficult for the non-profit broadcasters to generate the funds to become successful (pg. 8).

⁴⁴ McChesney references Nathan Godfried's "The Origins of Labor Radio: WCFL, the 'Voice of Labor,' 1925-1928," *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 7 (1987):145.

Given the intense lobbying of government by private broadcasters for commercial development of the airwaves, and that the leaders of the American Federation of Labor (AFL) at the time did not support station ownership by labour unions (on the premise that unions could buy time from the commercial stations), WCFL was fighting an uphill battle. With reduced hours, decreased broadcasting power, and lack of political support, the WCFL became a marginalized operation. As McChesney concludes, these factors eventually led to its demise since it had to increase its reliance on advertising for funding, such that “according to one observer”⁴⁵ it eventually “became indistinguishable from its capitalist rivals for advertising dollars” (pg. 30). Live discussions and labour programming diminished on WCFL and was replaced by commercial recordings such that it emerged as “Chicago’s leading rock music station by the early 1970s”, and was eventually sold to a private broadcaster (pg. 31).

2.5 The Labour-Media Relation

With the overwhelming dominance of corporate broadcasters in radio, when television became the ‘new technology’ in communication, both American and Canadian broadcasting policy offered little resistance against the development of yet another medium towards corporate-business ends. As Raboy (1990) contends, in Canada the defense for public participation continues to be contained in nationalist and

⁴⁵ Jorgensen, Erling S. (1949) “Radio Station WCFL: A Study in Labour Union Broadcasting,” M.A. thesis, University of Wisconsin, pg. 117.

culturalist terms versus democratic ones. In the US, as McChesney (1992) also contends, there was never an organization like the broadcasting reform movement to provide a sustained resistance to such developments. Whether it was because of past negative experiences with attempts at broadcasting station ownership (e.g. expense and logistics), conflicts between social and political goals, or, as Rollings (1983) suggests, organized labour was complacent as to the uses of the medium; neither the preservation and expansion of public television, nor ownership of television production was high on the list of labour's priorities. Rollings submits that it is largely a result of this complacency that has cost (US) labour dearly in terms of public opinion and public understanding of organized labour in general. As he argues, business dominance in both ownership and control of media has meant labour is represented to the public through corporate business filters.

Media research that supports the claim of labour's negative public image became evident through a landmark study by the International Association of Machinists (IAM) (1979).⁴⁶ IAM members conducted a media content analysis (a systematic quantified recording) of representations of labour on television in the US over a two year period which found that labour had been either inaccurately, under, or negatively represented. The IAM study is not without support: earlier media research by Cirino (1971), and later research by Lipset (1986), Parenti (1986), and Puette (1992), all provide a thorough overview of the inadequate representations of working people, including how public opinion of trade unions and the labour movement in general has been negatively

⁴⁶ See Rollings (1983); Glass (1984); and Kalaski (1992).

influenced by them. Labour has not fared any better on public television stations. As Kalaski (1992:6) identifies, two studies on PBS⁴⁷ in the US (*PBS and the American Worker*,⁴⁸ and by FAIR⁴⁹), both conducted in 1990, found that

...programming devoted to the lives and concerns of the business and social elite is on average ten times more prevalent than programming devoted to workers which was found to make up less than one-half of 1% of the network's prime time schedule (Kalaski 1992:6).⁵⁰

2.6 Labour and the New Media

Unions and other socially progressive organizations have adopted a variety of alternatives to propagate a larger media presence and foster improved media relations [see Glass (1984); and Ryan (1991)]. As demonstrated in the past, these alternatives have been expressions of social and political resistance and opposition as in the case of the "pioneer labour press",⁵¹ and represent decisions to take control of and responsibility for communication as in CBRE/CBRT's ownership of the Mutual Press. These are examples of struggles for democracy through communication that were explicitly political. The Mutual Press also illustrates the importance of union ownership

⁴⁷ PBS - Public Broadcasting Stations.

⁴⁸ Published by the Committee for Cultural Studies graduate school, City University of New York.

⁴⁹ FAIR - Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting.

⁵⁰ This conclusion is from the *PBS and the American Worker Study*, the FAIR study also found that "regular corporate-orientated business programming is increasingly dramatically on PBS and cable news networks like CNN and CNBC. None of these outlets has a regular labor or worker show" (Kalaski 1992:7).

⁵¹(Verzuh 1988).

and control of communication as a political act. The early radio experiments indicate how radio could have been developed democratically, yet these were defeated because of a combination of internal factors and an emphasis on the larger political economy that was leaning towards dominant corporate development. The experience of the Chicago Federation of Labor's WCFL illustrates the influence of the government regulatory environment and the necessity of broad support for one union's labour media initiative.

In Canada today, there are a number of projects towards developing alternative communication, such as in labour funded video production and television programs for public broadcasting.⁵² However, as Drew (1995) observes, although the production equipment (e.g. videos for television and recordings for radio programming) is relatively inexpensive and accessible to both activists and the public, "they are severely hampered by the corporate stranglehold over the means of exhibition [i.e. broadcast] and distribution" (pg. 76). The majority of unions regularly publish their own internal newsletter (bulletin, newspaper or magazine), but there is not a concentrated effort, or co-operation amongst unions or other like-minded organizations to develop an effective alternative communication to provide a counter (both culturally and politically) to

⁵² e.g. "Working TV" is a relatively new project co-sponsored by a number of unions in British Columbia which has (since 1993) produced a series of half-hour programs on Canadian national and international labour. It is aired on cable "Vision TV" as part of a series called "Over the Fence". The 1996/7 series has included discussions with guests such as Noam Chomsky and Ralph Nader, and reports and recordings of activism (e.g. Toronto's Metro Days of Action, Women's March Against Poverty, and the On the Ottawa Trek) (www.vcn.bc.ca/vdlc).

mainstream corporate media.⁵³ This means that democracy both in and through communication is severely limited as the mass media remains a major, if not the major source of information on, or about labour and other social movements - both to their members and the wider public.⁵⁴

The potential of computer networking thus affords a new opportunity to enhance and expand current movement communications, as well as to create a new form of democratic communication that goes beyond the mass media model. As Raboy (1990) suggested, reframing communication in terms of democratization rather than trying to fit within the framework of a dominant corporate or state-controlled communication systems provides a new basis on which to begin. Kellner (1992) also suggests that:

Ultimately the struggle for a democratic communication system is therefore the struggle for a democratic society. The technologies and possibilities are there. It is a matter of imagination, will, and struggle to realize the democratic potential that still exists in a system organized for the hegemony of capital in an era of conservative political rule (Kellner 1992:111).

⁵³ Winter (1996) renews a call made by Verzuh (1988) for the need for a national labour daily press in Canada, [as do Pizzigati and Solowey (1992) in the US] to provide for a democratic press. All argue for the possibility of a renewed labour press if union leadership would commit themselves to the project and cooperate with other progressive organizations towards funding an independent press. However, as Verzuh (1988) suggests, the difficulty may be in differences between unions as to which goals the unions commit themselves to. These differences are largely political and echo the tensions between what are considered strictly union interests and what are larger social issues, such as was present in the early days of radio and the CAAE.

⁵⁴ As Ron Verzuh (1988;1989), Senior Officer in CUPE's Communication Branch puts it: "Our members learn more about what unions are doing from the mass media than they do from our own media" (Verzuh 25/10/96).

The combination of technology and possibility came together in the early 1980s, when an employee of the Canadian Union of Public Employees envisioned a use for computer technology that went beyond the usual financial and administrative applications. Following the legacy of the Mutual Press (in particular) as both inspiration and example, he set his sights on developing this 'new technology' to enhance communication for labour and social movements. How this vision was realized and developed into a computer network called the Solidarity Network, or SoliNet for short, is the focus of the next part of this chapter. It will provide a historical look at the adoption of computer technology in CUPE, and examines how SoliNet was organized and designed.

Part II: A History of SoliNet's Early Development

Our greatest hope to affect the design of the electronic Canada lies in the fact that the technological tools being wielded by elitist technocrats can also be used by socialist democrats (Belanger 1983:3).

2.7 Microcomputers and CUPE

In September 1983, then Assistant Director of CUPE Public Relations Department, Marc Belanger, "took advantage"⁵⁵ of being editor of CUPE's publication *The Facts*, and wrote to union members about what he envisioned was a necessity for the future. The necessity was defined as a proactive understanding and use of

⁵⁵ (Belanger 16/9/96).

computer technology by unionists and left-wing organizations. The issue was called "The New Electronic Canada" and was an 85-page introduction to new technologies written expressively for union members in non-technical and explanatory language. Belanger wanted unionists to understand the history of computers, what they were, and how they worked, including connected issues such as unemployment, health and safety, and their impacts on work. Most of all he wanted to convince them of the necessity for taking charge of and becoming directly involved in technological change. For 1983, this was a bold proposal as union members were just beginning to experience technological change at their workplace. For the most part, organizations that utilized computers were still in the *minicomputer* stage which were used strictly for accounting and data administration. *The Facts* issue established Belanger's credibility with union leadership such that he was able to successfully argue for the adoption of *microcomputers* in CUPE. Through research and apprenticeship with computer-literate peers - Derek Amyot then of the federal NDP, and Kirk Hamilton at Statistics Canada - Belanger became convinced that the microcomputer was the technology of the future. He recognized then that the ability for inter-connectivity could result in a computer network:

We should promote the growth of new movements based on the use of communicating-computers and tie coalitions together on common issues. We should exploit the ability of communicating networks to bring people together on particular issues and then convince people to join our organization or movements (Belanger 1983:86).

The Facts issue was the introduction to a series of written reports, briefs, and meetings in which Belanger and Hamilton submitted the case for the adoption and

implementation of microcomputers in CUPE. Many other factors were conducive to the proposal as both CUPE's financial situation and leadership were disposed to new initiatives. Membership in the union had been steadily on the rise such that it was a financially secure time for CUPE. This was coupled with an increasing need for administrative support given that during the previous ten years membership had risen from 182,000 to 300,000 members.⁵⁶ These numbers were comprised of over 2000 locals made up of members from a range of public employment, such as: school boards and universities (including custodians, bus drivers, cafeteria employees); utility workers (hydro); day care and social service employees; public transit, highways and airline employees; hospital staff, and workers in nursing homes and homes for the aged. This membership includes over 8000 volunteers - local stewards, area and regional representatives, office staff, bargaining and district councils, provincial divisions and staff at the national office in Ottawa.⁵⁷ In this period CUPE had over 350 permanent staff in 62 different offices located across six time zones.⁵⁸ Administrative and logistical coordination of members, time, and place was continually time-consuming and becoming more costly.

⁵⁶ From *Computerizing CUPE's National Office: Task Force Report on Computer Communications*, Internal CUPE Document (1984:1).

⁵⁷ CUPE *Our Story* (undated).

⁵⁸ CUPE *Convention Report 1985*.

2.8 Computerizing CUPE

To plan the implementation of computers in CUPE a National Office Task Force was made up of staff drawn from the various departments in CUPE's National Office in Ottawa. The report justified the computer acquisition and presented a phase-in to all the National Office departments, firstly to handle administrative, accounting, union databases and mailing lists; and secondly to provide word processing, graphics and communication capabilities.⁵⁹ The Task Force submitted a request to establish a "Technology Office" with budget requirements, which was approved by the President and National Secretary-treasurer. In 1984, Belanger became the 'Technology Officer' in the official Technology Office which consisted of himself and a part-time secretary. He began working with the Ottawa-based companies Systemhouse and Novell, to set up a system which CUPE could benefit from including computerization of the payroll systems, general ledger, accounts payable and dues collection.⁶⁰ The team set up the first Local Area Network (or LAN) in the country that operated with microcomputers. The LAN included the computer hardware that would allow a stand-alone network to operate within and for CUPE. The 1984 cost was "six million dollars" which Belanger calls a "tremendous leap of faith" by CUPE leadership to allot the funds (Belanger 16/9/96).

⁵⁹ It also recommended that each department would provide a 'user-group' to determine needs, implementation consultation and training, as well as stipulating that no jobs would be lost because of these changes. *Computerizing CUPE's National Office: Task Force Report on Computer Communications*, Internal CUPE Document (1984).

⁶⁰ Ibid.

2.9 An Introduction to Computer Conferencing

During the time of CUPE's computerization of the National Office, technological developments continued to be made in many other areas, one of which was focused on extending computer-networking capabilities for education.⁶¹ As Harasim et al. (1995) explain, postsecondary institutions in the US and Canada "began experiments with the use of computer conferencing" for undergraduate course delivery in the 1980s.

In 1985, the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education (the graduate school in education for the University of Toronto) and Connected Education (affiliated with the New School for Social Research, New York) began offering graduate-level courses online, using computer conferencing as the principal mode of delivery (Harasim 1987; Levinson 1989). Students log on to designated conferences to participate in class discussions, debates, seminars, individual and group assignments, and virtual 'cafes' (online spaces for socializing) and libraries (resources such as bibliographies, and articles available on computers on the network) [Harasim, et al. (1995:9-10)].

The New School for Social Research was where Belanger obtained a Master's in Media Studies by taking courses 'on-line'. It was here that he was introduced to one of the first computer conferencing system ever developed: the EIES.⁶² The system's inventor, Murray Turoff, had worked with a decision-making process called Delphi and developed its "descendent" the EMISARI⁶³ (see Hiltz & Turoff 1993:Chp. 1-2; and Rapaport

⁶¹See Harasim et al. (1995:3-34), for an introduction and a historic overview of computer learning networks.

⁶² EIES stands for Electronic Information Exchange System for Scientific Research Communities "designed to replicate existing forms of scientific communications" (Hiltz and Turoff 1993:21).

⁶³ EMISARI stands for the Emergency Management Information System and Reference Index (Hiltz and Turoff 1993:38, 46-63). Belanger points out the irony that this same system that was organized by Turoff "to support [US President] Nixon's wage and price control program" was now being organized by and for unions (Belanger 1990:3).

1991:Chp. 6). The general model of the EIES computer conferencing is based on group decision techniques⁶⁴ where input, discussion, and feedback are standard procedures in reaching decisions based on consensus. As Hiltz & Turoff (1993:18) explain:

What have evolved are techniques for structuring group communication processes so that it is more efficient for a group to pool and coevaluate their knowledge about a complex problem. ...These methods share the concept that any human group, as it grows in size, requires a structure in order to be able to communicate -- a strong chairman or a parliamentary process or other set of procedures -- and that this structure can be designed specifically around the nature of the problem. The first attempts at computerized conferencing were really an outgrowth of this activity and not of the computer field.

Also in Canada, an electronic mail (email) system called 'Envoy 100' that connected individuals to individuals via telephone companies was being developed by Telecom Canada (a consortium of telephone companies dominated by Bell Canada). The British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF) used this system to develop information and communication exchange between their offices throughout BC from 1981 to 1990. It was the first *union* electronic communication system in Canada and represents what Lee (1997:48) calls the first "Labournet".⁶⁵ While it facilitated private, individual to individual communication, it was not sufficient on its own to address the

⁶⁴ As Hiltz & Turoff elaborate: "Typical of these are the Delphi, using tailored paper questionnaires and feedback with anonymity for groups of 10-200 that are dispersed in time and space; and nominal group processes which structure face-to-face meetings of small groups for the same objective (1993:18). As a communications structure [the Delphi method] ...has two key characteristics. The first is *feedback*, which means that the opinions and arguments of the participants are presented to the group so as to facilitate the exchange of information and views, and their input into a subsequent round of discussion and voting. The second is that all responses are usually (though not necessarily) reported anonymously (Hiltz & Turoff 1993:46).

⁶⁵ As Lee (1997:48-53) reports, according to then (1981) BCTF president Larry Kuehn, the network 'strengthened the existing union'. BCTF issued terminals and training to every local branch which provided for information exchange on strike news, press releases, and newsletter production. Email increased communication between and amongst BCTF locals, union staff and senior officers. It was used to organize meetings, provide input for advisory committees and for discussions on policy proposals.

education and computer conferencing capabilities Belanger had experienced with the EIES. "Given that trade union work is based almost completely on group work, I wanted a real conferencing system that had email as an adjunct" versus the being the central function of the network (Belanger 1995:15). The first computer conferencing developed in Canada originated at the University of Guelph led by John Black (Guelph's chief librarian) who designed CoSy (COnferencing SYstem) (see Rapaport 1991:9, & 179-183). CoSy was unilingual however, and CUPE needed a bilingual system to reach all its members, including the 600 locals in Quebec. Belanger turned to Ross Button at Systemhouse to design a solution so that "two copies of the CoSy program could run - one in English and one in French". These programs would "share the same data files so that anglophones could communicate with francophones and vice versa".⁶⁶ In Belanger's words:

We [CUPE] bought a Digital MicroVax computer, licensed a copy of CoSy from the University of Guelph, and Ross went to work. By the time he was finished, in approximately three months, we had developed the first national, bilingual computer conferencing system in the country. We named it the Solidarity Network, or SoliNet for short (Belanger 16/9/96).

In the fall of 1985, Belanger formed an organizing committee made up of "people who were willing to experiment with new technology" at CUPE's National Office who he knew were interested in extending communication (Belanger 24/9/96). The organizing committee learned how to use SoliNet through an instructional conference. Here they experimented with the software (called Crosstalk), learned "the basics of computer

⁶⁶ (Belanger 1990:5).

conferencing”, and “taught each other how to apply the medium to [their] work”

(Belanger 1995:18). More importantly, as Belanger reflects:

The real lesson we learned as we worked with computers and SoliNet was how to work with the technology and deflect it a bit towards our needs and values. This technology organizing has influenced how we think about technologies and how we help organize them in the workplace. We learned through this experience, and others, that working people can participate in the creative design and implementation of new technologies (Belanger 1990:4).

2.10 Computer Training

By 1986, CUPE began computerizing its 62 field offices, and another union technology officer was hired for the Technology Office (which also included three programmers from Systemhouse).⁶⁷ To assist in the field office implementation, clerical support staff⁶⁸ were brought to Ottawa from each of the five regions (the Maritimes, Quebec, Ontario, Saskatchewan/ Manitoba, and BC/Alberta) for training on how to use microcomputers. They became the original group of ‘technology teachers’. Once SoliNet manuals and training disks were developed, the trainers decided on a user identification name (their email address) and their password. They were sent modems and manuals, and were trained ‘on-line’ on how to use SoliNet with a SoliNet Demo

⁶⁷ CUPE Internal letter “Staffing Requirements, Technology Office” (undated).

⁶⁸ According to Belanger, clerical support staff were chosen in a “deliberate attempt” by CUPE: “...First, [to] give more control to the employees by allowing them to design their own training program and schedule. And secondly, since most of the instructors were women, to place women in non-traditional jobs. The computer training program became part of CUPE’s affirmative action activities[,]...and proved very successful. The people who actually did the work decided how the computers would be used. And because the computer trainers were clerical staff themselves, they were able to help people in the detailed application of the tool” (Belanger 1990:19/20).

Disk.⁶⁹ This was new ground for the union, members did not have to physically come to a common site anymore, and they were trained and connected 'on-line'. More importantly, the union now had itself its own computer network with integral staff "who knew the union, [and] what its traditions and practices were". Thus they could act as permanent trainers versus having rely on outside contracted training (Belanger 24/9/96).

To counter any negativity against technological change, training on SoliNet was given on an "optional" basis. As Belanger recounts, the cardinal principle was "you do not have to use it' versus giving an order to use it" (Belanger 24/9/96). Given this soft approach, and that many people in 1986 hadn't even heard of microcomputers⁷⁰ (let alone computer conferencing), CUPE had a significant 'public relations' job on its hands: how to convince their members, other unions and organizations of the usefulness of the system.

⁶⁹ As Belanger recounts, CUPE made an initial purchase of 63 modems (1200 baud) for each of the offices, which cost about \$1200 each. In comparison to today (1996), CUPE bought 28 modems for \$250 each (Belanger 16/9/96).

⁷⁰ In 1985 CUPE had conducted its own survey on technology change in its locals. The survey indicated that members were being affected by technological change brought about by employers in their place of work, but was not able to conclude on just how many locals employed computer technology for their own purposes, it was estimated however, that only 5% of all CUPE locals had their own access to computers (Limberg 11/12/96), and of these locals most were in universities and libraries and school boards (*Report on Computers and CUPE Locals*, CUPE Internal Document 1985). Another 1985 survey on technology use by businesses and industries in Canada done by the Economic Council of Canada indicated that communication networks were also just being employed. From 224 respondents, 5.4% were using data/communication networks (linked computers for various uses) (McMullen, Leckie and Caron 1993). In comparison, Statistics Canada (1984) study of micro, or personal computer ownership indicated that 10% of Canadian households had a home computer which were mainly used to operate computer games (Frank 1995).

2.11 Promoting SoliNet

Belanger especially wanted to “spread the word” that SoliNet was a “public system, accessible by individuals, unions and other organizations”, and not just for CUPE’s use alone (Belanger 24/9/96). He thus became a ‘SoliNet promoter’, introducing the network through speeches at conferences⁷¹ and through a “campaign of leaflets, advertisements and introductory workshops” (Belanger 1995:18). This was sanctioned by CUPE’s internal philosophy which fostered the promotion of coalition building within and amongst other unions and “like-minded” organizations (Belanger 24/9/96). The publicity emphasized SoliNet’s use for organizing “activists who don’t have the time to attend meetings,” and highlighted the networks’ privacy and confidentiality amongst its members. Prerequisites for SoliNet membership included “anybody” with access to “a microcomputer, a communications program and a modem.”⁷² The message was specifically directed towards labour and socially progressive organizations:

If you represent an organization SoliNet can help you solve your communication problems and save you money. But best of all, SoliNet can put you in touch with people who think like you do. SoliNet members are activists in the labour movement, the NDP, social action groups, women’s groups and other organizations dedicated to building a better Canada (SoliNet Poster).

⁷¹ These invitations stemmed from the *Facts* 1983 issue on computers.

⁷² As the leaflet described “A modem is a device that allows the computer to make a phone call. A communications program tells the computer how and what to phone”. CUPE poster “SoliNet: The Solidarity Network” (not dated, date approximately 1988/9).

Belanger was 'on the road' promoting SoliNet and labour's use of computers one or two weeks per month. Once SoliNet was in disk form, Belanger approached the National Office of the United Steelworkers of America (USWA):

I gave them the modems and start-up disk, helped them install it, and taught their staff. By signing up one union, I could go to others and say 'look who else is on' to encourage to sign them up. This was mostly done on an individual basis, i.e. the union as an organization did not sign on, but various individuals within the union accepted a copy (Belanger 24/9/96).

These individuals faced a significant challenge, as union leadership had never heard of SoliNet or computer conferencing. As a consequence, it was difficult to find funding on an organizational level. As Belanger observed, "it took three years before the Steelworkers as an organization signed on" (24/9/96). The acceptance level rose as unions automated their administrative and accounting operations. Once computers demonstrated their efficiency, the potential of SoliNet became apparent. Belanger suggests that unions did not fully appreciate what was on offer: the knowledge of how to use and design computer technology. This meant that they were able to do experiments with "what worked/what didn't, what they needed and what they didn't need", which would provide "valuable lessons for the future" (Belanger 24/9/96). The significance of this experience was emphasized in a later promotional leaflet:

If the labour movement had participated in the building of radio in the 1920s or television in the 1950s it could have become a participant in the major media of today. If it begins to participate in computer communications today it will become a major player in the medium of tomorrow: computer communications. With SoliNet we can build an electronic house of labour.

2.12 SoliNet's Main Functions

A SoliNet membership provides the user with unlimited access to three major functions: email, file transfer, and computer conferencing.

Email is available on-site at the national office in Ottawa on computer workstations, or through a modem connection on a phone-in basis. It provides for person-to-person communication amongst SoliNet members, which is both private and confidential between sender and receiver.

File Transfer allows for the transfer of files both in to and out of SoliNet, such that the network can be used for storage and file transmission between members. A file (or files) can be 'up-loaded' from a microcomputer [also now known as a PC (personal computer) or desktop computer] and held in SoliNet's file storage. It can also be 'down-loaded' onto a computer disk, or back to another PC.

Computer Conferencing⁷³ provides for expanding communication and information exchange beyond person to person to intra- and inter-group communication.

⁷³ Belanger defines computer conferencing in the following way: "Unlike email, which emphasizes individual to individual messaging. Computer conferencing works with groups of people. Instead of sending messages to each other individually the group sends their messages to a common 'conference' - which is a messaging holding area on the computer. Members of the group can read all the messages that are put into the conference by the other conference participants. And then they can add their own messages to their collection. The computer keeps track of what messages have or have not been read, by each participant. In this way groups of people can have a computer conversation without having to be in the same place at the same time. Each participant can take part in the conference at their convenience from wherever they have their terminal, so, for example, a group of people who live in different cities could participate in a group discussion without having to meet face-to-face or even agree on a common meeting time. This 'non-real time' characteristic of computer conferencing allows groups scattered through different time zones to maintain on-going conversations" (Belanger 1988:4). "This ability to allow people to communicate without synchronized meeting times became known as asynchronous communications" (Belanger 1995:21).

Conferences on SoliNet operate in one of two ways: in *read-only* conferences, there is only one member who posts the information and other members can read the messages but not contribute; in *read/write* conferences, members can both read and post messages. Conferences can either be *open* (any SoliNet member can participate), or *closed* (permission from the conference moderator is required prior to joining). Closed conferences are restricted either because of sensitivity or confidentiality (e.g. grievance handling, contract negotiations, or collective bargaining), or group specificity (e.g. between members of a particular committee, department, branch, or union).

2.13 Early Experiments with SoliNet

The adoption of SoliNet got off to a slow start as there was a steep learning curve and members (including the technicians) were experimenting with something unique. These early experiments took a lot of time and patience as SoliNet was not essential for day-to-day tasks and thus demanded personal motivation and perseverance. 'Trial and error' was also costing money in trying to work through problems with the software. An electronic switching network called Datapac (a consortium of telephone companies across Canada) provided the on-line connections for SoliNet to the main computer at CUPE's national office. CUPE paid the Datapac rate of \$8.00 an hour for each user's time spent on the network, which was cheaper than long distance telephone rates. CUPE charged non-CUPE members an additional rate of \$5.00 per hour to use the system, and \$5.00 a month for every user who had a password in other unions and associations belonging to SoliNet. By charging other

users more than it cost for Datapac, CUPE was able to offer SoliNet free of charge to their own locals (Belanger 24/9/96). As Belanger recounts, as more people signed on to the network there were continual problems with requirements in excess of storage capacity.

Our hard disk filled up every day. We didn't have enough space on our computer for all the files. As we earned more money through more use, we were able to upgrade to a larger computer (Belanger 24/9/96).

Despite this problem and many others with both the hardware and the software, technical enhancements to SoliNet continued. The Technology Office expanded to include two union programmers who were hired to replace the Systemhouse programmers. The former clerical worker became the Technology Assistant responsible for trouble-shooting such that members could phone the Office for help with SoliNet and other computer operations. A clerical worker was also added to handle billing and administration. As Belanger recalls, during the first year, the system was down "twice a day", and in the early years the "phone rang off the hook" with problems and complaints regarding both the hardware and the software used to operate the network (Belanger 24/9/96). SoliNet required constant attention: just as the Technology Office was learning how to fix the problems or 'bugs' which were occurring in the system, users were finding more. For both the users and the technicians, it has always been a process of 'learning by doing' and of experiments with what works best for the users. As more people experimented with SoliNet, they came to understand how the system worked and how they could apply it to their work and their lives as union

members. Belanger began to set up computer conferences to try and get users to participate in a group dynamic environment (i.e. computer conferencing) versus just using the private email and file transfer functions of SoliNet.

2.14 Early Computer Conferencing on SoliNet

The first conferences on SoliNet were established to attract people to introductory workshops both for technical information and to provide practice with conference participation. These conferences were moderated by Ross Button (the Systemhouse programmer), and Marc Belanger (the Technology Coordinator). Conference moderation can be either technical or operational. A technical moderator creates the conference on SoliNet, provides a location by giving it a name, and if necessary, divides the conference into additional workshops only accessible from within that conference. These workshops can be subdivisions of the topic itself, or may provide separate file storage for references, articles, or longer comments for background to the main conference. The Technology Office always supplies technical moderation and thus indirectly controls conference activity.

One of the first conferences called "pc" was established by Button to provide information on using microcomputers and to discuss problems and new developments in computer technology. It was subdivided into two workshops - "hardware" and "software". Later conferences were added for users of MacIntosh-brand computers and for users of WordPerfect (the standard software adopted by CUPE in their offices). The

WordPerfect (WP) conference only has a technical moderator, as the conference participants keep the conference active. Beginners and more experienced WordPerfect users post questions, and share information and tips they have learned from working with the software. The conference began in May 1988 and is still active (January 1997) with an average of seven messages per month. Following this format, a later conference called "problems" was added for questions and suggestions regarding SoliNet use. Although Belanger is the official moderator, he encouraged the participants to answer each other's questions from the start. With 350 participants, the conference averages 22 messages per month which are input by members who continue to help each other with their questions and problems on using SoliNet. To provide information and references for these and other conferences, two 'read-only' conferences called "files" and "library" were added to the conference menu selection. In the general "files" conference, any SoliNet member can upload a file for storage; it is indexed by number and can be used as reference(s) for other conferences. A "library" conference was also created to hold articles regarding social, political, and economic issues,⁷⁴ however, it did not develop into a reference library. In hindsight, Belanger explains that "ideally", the library needed someone who could dedicate the time for research, file entry and maintenance, which was not possible given the small staff complement and regular duties of the Technology Office (Belanger 22/4/97).

⁷⁴ The 'library' index was by author, and held works such as the *Notes of the New Democrat Renewal Conference*, by Alan Blackeney; *The Alternative Budget 1995*, by CCPA and Choices; and *Economy and Globalization*, by Hugh MacKenzie.

Moderation in 'read-only' conferences requires information posting only, whereas in read/write conferences, the operational moderator can take an active or a passive role. A passive moderator is someone who introduces the conference in the first few messages and then leaves it to the participants to carry on the discussion (like the "WP" and "problems" conferences). An early example of this was a "humour" workshop which was added to the "pc" conference in attempt to attract people to conferencing so they would try and enter a message or two in a 'non-intimidating' environment (e.g. some members may have found that the "pc" conference was too technical). The purpose of the workshop was to invite a casual, light-hearted exchange in order to provide a relaxed atmosphere for a member's first experience(s) with SoliNet conferencing. The initiative backfired however, as not everyone agreed on what constituted humour. Moreover SoliNet itself came under attack from within CUPE as it was seen as 'useless' because the system was "just being used for chatting". Union leadership came "under fire" for spending money "just so people could tell jokes" (Belanger 24/9/96). Not wanting to risk further misunderstandings and tarnish the reputation of SoliNet, the Technology Office removed the conference.

The first real breakthrough for SoliNet came in December 1988, with the CCPA sponsored conference on technology change. The conference was actively moderated by Belanger who structured the conference in the following way:

...the two months [were divided] into eight week-long sessions with the first week devoted to introductions and agenda-setting. Subsequent weeks were devoted to the various discussion topics: the emerging technologies; women and

technological change; health and safety; effects on the workplace; computer conferencing; and conclusion-drawing. I began each week with a comment of about 100 lines to set the stage for that week's discussion. Since I had written a booklet for each topic I could point to them for background information. Then, people would react to my comment or the issues it raised by putting in comments of their own (Belanger 1990:21-22).

This procedure - of laying out a topic (or focus) for a fixed time period, and of dividing weekly issues into sections according to time schedules, became a standard method of special on-line conferences (also known as seminars) on SoliNet. Active moderation in this case means setting the conference parameters and agenda, researching and uploading related readings, and leading the weekly discussions. The conference set the tone for the future seminars held on SoliNet. The conference was also particularly significant because it was co-sponsored by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives (CCPA). Belanger had reasoned that participation with the CCPA was essential for publicity and the legitimization of SoliNet, as it was still virtually unknown (Belanger 24/9/96). Also significant was the range of people who became SoliNet members to participate in the conference. From 1 December 1988, to 31 January 1989, approximately 60 members from across Canada, which included unionists, as well as professors, politicians, government officials, computer consultants, researchers and others,⁷⁵ came together to discuss issues related to technological change. Belanger estimates that each participant spent approximately four to five hours each online, during which they taught themselves how to operate SoliNet, and how to participate in computer conferencing. Moreover, as Belanger explains, the experience provided the participants with a sense of community:

⁷⁵ (Belanger 1990:13).

The conference...taught us the difference between geographic space and computer space. The conference participants worked in cities scattered across the country. They were a community in the sense of interests and political orientation but they could never develop any real sense of community because they rarely met or talked to each other. The computer conference taught us that we could use the space provided by the computer to build a community - even though computer space was radically different than the real space around us (Belanger 1995:20).

The experiences of this first conference had a very positive effect on SoliNet membership. Other unions such as the BCTF, and other associations such as the Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM) registered as organization members. The addition of BCTF and its locals "legitimized our attempt to make SoliNet a public system and not just CUPE's in-house messaging system" (Belanger 24/9/96). Thus in 1989, after five years in the making, SoliNet had established itself as the first *national labour computer network in the world* (Lee 1997:61-62).

Chapter Three: Open Computer Conferencing on SoliNet

3.0 Introduction

The uniqueness of SoliNet is not due to its email or file transfer capabilities. The BCTF for example, had the technology for these applications initially. What made SoliNet original and attractive to everyone who was exposed to it was its computer conferencing capability. The flexibility of conferencing provided for communication and information exchange between groups from a range of six to ten people up to the whole SoliNet membership. In 1989 this membership consisted of approximately 700 to 800 members, made up of unions, associations and individual users, which grew to a peak of 2500 members in 1993/4 (Belanger 24/9/96).⁷⁶ This includes individual union members (e.g. CUPE, BCTF, CAW, and the USWA), political members (NDP provincial offices), non-profit organizations (Action Canada Network, the Council of Canadians, National Anti-Poverty Organization, and the CCPA); educational members (Athabasca University, CAAE, and Capilano College), and a number of individual activists and academics. This combination of users gave concurrent access to a wide range of people whose knowledge, experiences, opinions, and information could be shared and exchanged in any number of different discussion forums on SoliNet.

⁷⁶ These figures have been estimated from a count of the user names registered on SoliNet. They do not accurately indicate how many people actually used SoliNet, however, since the actual number could be higher (e.g. in the case of an office where one computer station with a modem is shared by three people who use the office user name to access SoliNet), or it could be lower. The latter is more likely the case (as observed from billing records) since people who had a user name may have never actually used it.

Belanger used the experiences gained from the courses he took with the New School of Social Research to design conferences to meet a number of progressive goals which could benefit individual users and labour and social movements as a whole. He focused on three primary applications for SoliNet computer conferencing: (1) journalism; (2) education; and (3) movement development. Towards the latter, conferences would have both social and political components. To encourage a sense of community, social conferences were established that were based on leisure interest activities, such as books and hobbies, including a general discussion conference called "the LOUNGE" which was open for input on any subject whatsoever. The intent here was that through the sharing of opinions, interests, problems, and experiences, a community could develop through the connection of workers in unions, political and social organizations. The political component of the community would evolve through their working together on particular issues or problems that adversely affect society as a whole. Towards this end, a number of conferences were developed to discuss specific issues of concern to the labour movement, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and 'total quality management' (TQM) for example, as well as broader social issues such as the environment.

This chapter will provide an overview of the conferences on SoliNet which were designed to meet primary goals. The conferences have thus been grouped under three main headings: (1) journalism; (2) education; and (3) movement development. The last heading is divided into two separate sections (a) social conferences, and (b) special issue or topic conferences. The central objective of the chapter is to provide a thorough

description of the design and use of SoliNet. Detailed analysis and evaluation will be provided in Chapter Four where the results of the questionnaires are reported and discussed.

3.1 Limitations to Chapter Three

The conferences examined here are not *all* the conferences that were held on SoliNet. They were selected for study as they represent the most potentially democratic since they were/are open to all SoliNet members without restriction. A discussion of the closed conference types will be provided in Chapter Five when the organizational use of SoliNet is discussed and evaluated. The following sections also provide some quantitative analysis of conference membership and participation. As was discussed in Chapter One, this distinction is important, as participation is the impetus for democracy both in and through communication.

3.2 Journalism

3.2.1 General

The example of the Mutual Press, which was owned and operated by the CBRT was not lost into history. Belanger saw the opportunity to improve on the 'press-centric' communication of the union newsletters. As he submits:

Computer conferencing allows organizations with relatively small audiences to establish affordable communication networks. A union such as CUPE would never have been able to afford a television or a radio station. But it has been able to establish SoliNet and use it journalistically (Belanger 1990:5).

Journalism on SoliNet has developed in a number of different ways. The various unions and associations which belong to SoliNet were invited to electronically publish their newsletters in the conference facility. To provide an open press service for all SoliNet members, Belanger initiated a news report called *SoliNotes* to encourage members to regularly check-in to the conference facility. He reasoned that once members entered into 'conferences' to read *SoliNotes*, they would be more likely to check-in to other conferences "to see what else was going on" (Belanger 24/9/96).

3.2.2 SoliNotes

This weekly on-line newsletter is a collection of information from mass media databases regarding various unions and labour issues across Canada. It was made up of articles which had been printed in a local paper, but had not been picked-up in other parts of the country. The conference is 'read-only' as Belanger compiles and organizes the material.⁷⁷ *SoliNotes* provided up-to-date reports on lay-offs, business or plant closures and strikes, as well as government, union and NDP positions (and decisions) regarding labour agreements, legislation and policies. The articles were also available in "files" for locals to download and print items for circulation or publication in

⁷⁷ As Belanger laments, he had hoped to collect news reports from the locals themselves. Despite repeated requests, union local reports were so sporadic that he relied almost entirely on the database service (Belanger 1/4/97).

hard-copy,⁷⁸ so that it functioned as a labour news service. However, the service was not without its dissenters, as Belanger received numerous complaints from unions who were at times unhappy, either with an article selected (i.e. that it was repeated), or that the content of the article was too critical of the union's actions (Belanger 22/4/97).

Despite these discussions over what constitutes union news, *SoliNotes* proved to be the most popular open conference on SoliNet, averaging 370 regular members throughout the seven years it was published on-line (1989 to 1996).

3.2.3 Newsletters on SoliNet

Other unions and organizations also added their newsletters, press releases and information bulletins to SoliNet. The following Table 3.0 is a summary of the publications that were available in open conferences. The table indicates the union or association source, the number of SoliNet members who joined the conference and the number of messages the conference generated; it also includes the dates the conference was active, and a brief description of the content and printed length (estimated) of the information posted.

⁷⁸This led to a letter from the CALM executive who also use SoliNet to distribute news items to their members in a closed, member's only conference. The letter requested that Belanger include a disclaimer on *SoliNotes* to indicate that the information was from already published sources versus directly from the local(s) concerned. A disclaimer was added in 1993 and read "SoliNotes are gleaned from major media sources. They do not necessarily reflect the views of SoliNet or its owner, the Canadian Union of Public Employees". Belanger, Marc (1993) *SoliNotes93*, Electronic Conference, SoliNet, CUPE, Ottawa, Canada.

Table 3.0
A List of Newsletters Published on SoliNet
1989 to 1997

Name	Members	Messages	Date	Content & (Length)
CUPE SoliNotes Technology Office	370	136	Sep 1989- Feb 1996	Weekly labour news across all unions throughout Canada (6 pgs weekly)
BCTFnews Cmn Dept	326	451	Apr 1990- Apr 1996	Short items on BCTF & locals (1-3 paras each)
CUPE Releases	223	655	Dec 1992- Apr 1997	Official news releases, specific CUPE actions across Canada, & convention bulletins (1-3 pgs) French and English
ACNdossieronline Action Canada Network	66	81	Mar 1992- Jan 1993	Publicity for campaigns, members to contact at ACN (2-3 pgs)
Worldlink CUPE	147	353	May 1993- Dec 1996	International labour news & solidarity issues (1 pg)
OFL Focus	68	13	Apr 1993- Aug 1993	Member union actions, plus OFL News (1-2 pgs)
CAW Health, Safety & Environment	29	32	May 1995- Jan 1996	Campaigns, CLC conferences, and HS&E issues (1-2 pgs)
CUPE Fastfacts NPO	42	22	Apr 1996- Dec 1996	CUPE activist actions (1 pg reports)

Abbreviations:

NPO = National President's Office
 Msgs = messages
 Cmn = communication
 Dept = department
 Paras = paragraphs

3.2.3(1) General Observations

The on-line newsletters primarily focused on reports of activities and requests for participation in political or social activism.⁷⁹ As can be seen in the table, there are a number of content similarities that are summarized below:

(a) action requests for individuals to sign petitions, or to send letters (or faxes) to national (or international) governments and politicians, to register protest or concern over proposed or enacted policy changes (e.g. write to the Minister of Health, Labour, and/or Prime Minister, etc.);

(b) notices and reports of lobbying campaigns initiated by the union or organization, or other union or affiliated organization, with names and addresses and phone numbers of contacts, (e.g. for posters, buttons, or more information);

(c) notices and reports of activism, i.e. events and invitations to join protests, rallies, marches, etc., notice of time/place of event and contacts; (e.g. CBC Rally, On to Ottawa Trek; Women's March Against Poverty, etc.);

(d) notices and reports of union or organization sponsored activities, conferences, and significant dates (e.g. International Women's Day, Earth Day, and Canary Day etc.); and,

(e) senior union leadership actions and appearances, speeches, and public positions on major issues; as well as government representatives and politicians, including the NDP, and elected governments at federal and provincial levels.

With the exception of "CUPE Releases" and "Worldlink", all journalism conferences were in English only. Also with the exception of "Worldlink", the

⁷⁹ A different form of 'read-only' journalism was a conference called "Life on the Job" which was written by a member of CUPE's Airline Division. Christine Mickelwright shared her work experiences by recording them in the form of a journal from March 1990 to May 1993. The conference attracted 100 people to sign-on and it continued to be read until 1996. Mickelwright's experiences included, for example, a co-worker who was dying of AIDS, workplace illiteracy, her views on poverty, and problems with shift work. Some of these experiences were discussed and shared by members in the LOUNGE conference.

conferences were 'read-only', and thus did not include a feedback or discussion option. "Worldlink" is a read/write conference and covers international political issues, and as such it has been grouped under special issues and topics in the proceeding Section 3.5.5.

Belanger considers the newsletters as contributors to education and movement development on SoliNet in three ways (Belanger 1992). In the first instance, they provide information that is direct from the source such that members have access to timely and relatively complete and accurate information that would likely not be available in the major mainstream media. Secondly, the newsletters aid in movement development, as shared information becomes available for all organizational members. Lastly, the focus on activism provides for an enhanced political component as there are notices and reports of what actions are planned, as well as how to get involved. This feature was complemented by the addition of the Action Canada Network, an activist coalition "representing more than 50 national organizations and regional coalitions"⁸⁰ which regularly published ongoing projects and persons to contact.

⁸⁰ The Action Canada Network was established as a coalition of labour and social organizations to fight against NAFTA. The network has continued and has added community groups to its original membership. ACN states its goal is now "...to ensure that Canada's future is shaped by and for people, not profits" (actcan@web.apc.org).

3.3 Education on SoliNet

3.3.1 General

The Solidarity Network functions to facilitate education on a number of different levels. In the general sense, SoliNet itself was meant as an education in technology use and design for the labour movement and other social organizations. Through participation in SoliNet, members are able to learn how to apply the technology and design the applications towards their own goals. It is their system to practice on, work with, and develop to meet their own needs. For Belanger, part of this development was designing SoliNet as a computer conferencing facility for *labour education*. On an informal level, this meant creating conferences such as the original "WordPerfect", "pc", and "problem" conferences which were participant-run such that they developed into self-help forums. It also meant creating conferences where people could learn-by-participating; for example, a conference was established so members could practice reading and writing French as a second language.⁸¹ A more formal seminar on using and searching computer databases⁸² for labour research, was facilitated by the CAW

⁸¹ A French teacher actively moderated this conference. From March 1991 to June 1994, she posted information on French grammar and gave practice exercises in verb conjugation, and translation. Primarily women signed-on and participated at a beginner and intermediate level. Of the 55 members who joined the conference, 16 actually participated, of which 10 were women (yielding a 29% participation rate).

⁸² Although the Technology Office developed databases for the various departments in CUPE, SoliNet does not function as a database itself. It has limited search capabilities - members can search for a keyword within a conference, but can not search all the conferences for the word. Also, the functional priority of SoliNet was based on communication versus information exchange. It was built on the basis of computer conferencing to enhance group discussion and communication exchange, versus information search and retrieval which would have required a more elaborate, complex and costly design (see for example Rapaport 1991:240/1).

librarian (Kathy Bennett). The seminar followed a similar format to the first CCPA conference and was conducted over four weeks with a new topic each week.⁸³ Other seminar-style conferences were developed to cover special issues and topics (that will be reviewed shortly in Section 3.5). Beyond these kinds of conferences, Belanger had planned to develop an on-line "labour university" which could offer credit courses towards a university degree.

3.3.2 Towards an On-line Labour University

In 1986, when Belanger was first promoting SoliNet, he visited a number of universities in Canada in an attempt to form a formal link with a university to offer courses on-line. After many rejections, the 'fit' was made with Athabasca University, an "open, distance university"⁸⁴ in Alberta. As explained by Spencer and Taylor (1994:217):

[The University's] ...mandate is to break down barriers that traditionally restrict access to university-level education. This mandate is interpreted broadly to include constraints of time, space, educational background, and social position.

The university offers a Certificate in Labour Studies and a Bachelor of Arts with a Major

⁸³ Bennett provided short explanatory instructions and information that was easy to understand and read, while acknowledging and discussing each participant's input. The seminar's membership for the month-long conference was 139 members. Although there was not a high participation rate (7%), Bennett provided a good example of active moderation which was complemented on by the Technology Office.

⁸⁴ As explained in an information brochure for the university: "'open' means that our courses are available to all resident adult Canadians regardless of their geographic location and prior academic credentials, 'distance education' describes our teaching methods: the central component of our courses is an independent study package". Athabasca University (not dated).

in Labour Studies. As described by Spencer and Taylor, this is “unique” in two ways: it is “available entirely through distance education”, and it is specifically focused on adult education dedicated to trade unionists in particular.⁸⁵ The on-line courses benefited the university and fulfilled one of the “ideals” of CUPE’s SoliNet.⁸⁶ Belanger worked with Spencer and Taylor, both professors at the university, to set up a basic “Introduction to Labour Studies” course which could be taken ‘for interest only’, or as a university credit towards a degree.

Establishing the university course was preceded by a conference on the topic of **“Labour Education in Canada”** held on SoliNet from October to December in 1992. The conference proceedings as well as some of the conference comments were included in an article by Spencer and Taylor and published in the journal *Labour/Le Travail* (Fall 1994). The conference participants were largely educators and researchers from CUPE and other unions (who were members of SoliNet), with some academics from Athabasca University (who became SoliNet members solely for the conference). The discussions centered around the issues and challenges of labour education, as a subject of study and as a process of adult learning. No formal conclusions were drawn from the conference, instead it evolved into a forum where both moderators and participants learned from each other’s viewpoints and opinions. The experience provided the basics towards understanding how the roles of moderator and participant were later to be exercised within the CMC environment. The experience was

⁸⁵ (Spencer and Taylor 1994:217).

⁸⁶ Ibid.

also incorporated into the formal course offered on SoliNet and given by Professor Taylor in September 1994.

The "**Labour Studies 200**" course was open to any SoliNet member and to students enrolled in the degree program at Athabasca University. The students were responsible for the readings (which were mailed to them) and writing assignments (according to a home study guide), similar to any university correspondence course. The advantage of using CMC was that there could now be 'class discussions' using the SoliNet conference as a "seminar room for discussions of the course material".⁸⁷ As in on-site classrooms, a grade was attached to participation (measured as "25 lines per week").⁸⁸ As Taylor describes in an article detailing the course proceedings:

...everyone was asked to take responsibility for leading the discussion on a section [of the course], which could involve summarizing the issues in the section, posing some questions, or taking a provocative position with respect to the issues at hand (Taylor 1996:25).

Taylor (1996) explains that seventeen SoliNet members expressed interest in the course, and thirteen formally registered. Participation in the conference beyond the introductory phase saw the group reduced to ten active participants (eight men and two women).⁸⁹ Of these, six students completed all the requirements. Taylor attributes the

⁸⁷ Taylor (1994) (Moderator) "lbst200" SoliNet Electronic Conference, Ottawa, Canada: CUPE.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Taylor (1996) calculated the number of active participants by identifying those who had made "substantial contributions" to the conference. He defined 'substantial' as "posing questions, providing some context, responding to comments [and] moving the discussion along" (pg. 27). Using these criteria, Taylor concluded that there 88.5% of the contributions were from the men, in contrast to 11.5% from the women participants (pg. 28).

difference in completion rates to differences in individual participant's goals. Those who wanted the course for the university credit and who had registered as individuals were "personally committed to complete the course", and were therefore more successful.

As the students suggested to Taylor in a questionnaire at the end of the course, there were both positive and negative factors which influenced their participation. In one way, CMC facilitated participation because it was flexible, allowing them to "submit their comments at their leisure" (pg. 29). However, this also meant that the discussion was disjointed at times: to correct this situation, Taylor recommends the need for regular participation, no matter how brief the input, to 'keep the flow' going. Another student noted that CMC was less intimidating than face-to-face communication, especially when it was their turn to lead the discussion. This experience also increased their appreciation of the necessity for participant input. A reason for the differences in participation rates was offered by an experienced SoliNet member, who suggested that computer literacy was a factor. He underscored how special skills were required for on-line courses, such as keyboard proficiency, comfort with the written word, as well as a basic familiarity with SoliNet commands. As Taylor noted in his role as both course instructor and conference moderator, he tried to address not only differences in participation, but also of imbalances between the quantity and quality of input. As he explains:

I, as conference moderator, tried to encourage all participants to contribute to the debate (by, for example, acknowledging the range of abilities and stressing that students should make comments regardless of the length or the perceived

quality), but the reality was that the more intellectually skilled in the group invariably made more and longer interventions (1996:30).

Designing conferences to encourage participation meant offering a whole range of options that would cover members' individual and collective interests. Towards this end, Belanger established both leisure interest conferences and political, or special issue conferences to increase participation: the following section briefly describes each type.

3.4 Social Conferences on SoliNet

3.4.1 General

The social conferences provided SoliNet members a place to share and discuss their personal interests and life experiences. They ranged from conferences which centered on specific interests, like books or movies, to the LOUNGE conference (in English) and Le Club (in French) which were open for more general discussions. The following subsections summarize these conferences, and include tables that indicate how many members joined the conference as well as participation rates. A discussion of the differences between membership numbers and participation rates will follow in greater detail in Chapter Four. Presently, the focus will be on describing how the conferences developed, that is, how the members used the conferencing capabilities to develop social spaces on SoliNet.

3.4.2 The LOUNGE

Participation in the LOUNGE on SoliNet means joining in a continuous (albeit at times disjointed) stream of written comments in which some topics carry on for days, and others get 'lost' within a solitary message. This 'conversation'⁹⁰ has been active since 1992 and draws in a variety of members as participants who represent a cross-section of the SoliNet membership. There are a limited number of secretaries and shop stewards, the occasional activist association member, and a good mix of union leaders and senior officers in research and education. Some of the participants are regulars - they can be relied on to add a comment or two to keep the discussion going, or to contribute the latest news article on a particular issue. Others join in sporadically depending on the season, or what happens to be the latest topic, and a few members add a comment only once. For the majority however, the LOUNGE is a place 'just to sit and read'.

The LOUNGE topics are more diverse than the daily news: there are debates on provincial NDP actions, an article against NAFTA, and a discussion on Native self-government. These debates are interspersed with notices and requests to join rallies or marches, as well as invitations to support a theater group, or to join in Labour Day picnics across the country. There are solicitations for help in solving workplace

⁹⁰ The vocabulary of face-to-face communication is applied here for lack of defined terms which describe or capture the specifics of CMC communication. Other expressions like "discussion" and "debate" will also be applied when appropriate. However, it should be noted that these terms are used to apply to written (or more accurately - typed) messages and do not reflect the differences which may be present in CMC (see Collot and Belmore 1996).

problems, for information or clarification on a particular issue, or for assistance in locating the right contact for help in a project. The majority of discussions are at (Canadian) national and provincial levels regarding political, social and economic issues with some international (US and Great Britain) examples. There are no 'flamings',⁹¹ and coarse language is rare. The majority of the topics are serious with the occasional message sent as entirely comic relief. The fact that some of these people have never met, or the fact that they may be thousands of miles apart from each other, is not an issue. The LOUNGE is a social space, but because of this, it has also been criticized from within CUPE as a 'waste of union time and money'. Responding to the criticism and also thinking that it would be prudent to divide the LOUNGE into specialized topics in issue conferences, the Technology Office announced that it was closing down the LOUNGE. An immediate protest ensued: Belanger's email was bombarded with messages and the Office was picketed by people with signs that said "Save Our LOUNGE!". As Belanger recalls:

That's when I discovered that SoliNet wasn't a computer program, it was a community of people who cared about how their community grew (1995:25).

In March 1992, Belanger conducted an informal survey from within the LOUNGE to solicit opinions and generate discussion on how the conference should be re-

⁹¹ As defined in Herring (1996c:10): "'flaming' ...refers to the practice of sending hostile or insulting electronic messages, usually in response to a message posted by someone else" (Herring 1994, 1996b; Kim and Raja 1991; Lea et al. 1992).

structured. He questioned the extent that subjects or issues should be defined and scheduled, and asked what kind of intervention or guidance (if any) should come from the moderator. The overwhelming response was "leave it the way it is" - in both form and content - open to anyone's input, and to any way the conversation might flow. Core participants described the LOUNGE in the following ways:

It's a place where new trade unionists can cut their teeth and old ones can expel their wisdom. I would not want the way the lounge (sic) is structured to be changed in any way. It is a central bulletin board, a discussion paper and a phone directory all rolled into one. It permits open discussion as well as flags important and interesting information in other conferences. It's easy to access and even lurkers can perform their perversion (tee hee).

Nine times out of ten, the debate leaves me feeling good about what I do for a living. It helps me realize that there are a lot of people out there with common goals, values and commitments. It's impossible to get together with like-minded friends on a daily basis. But IT IS possible to take a little peek into the Lounge (sic) everyday.

A regular contributor asked why there were so few women participating:

"Sometimes I feel like the LOUNGE is a boy's club". The question was not responded to save one female member who wrote that she preferred to read, and since she felt shy in face-to-face situations, CMC was no different. "Lurking" - reading but not writing any comments - is frequently admitted.⁹² People would add a message (which usually read like an apology or a confession) to indicate that they were there "just to read". From the message replies, other participants didn't mind that people just 'lurked', although they did encourage new members with welcoming messages. As one participant put it:

⁹² Herring (1996:10) defines 'lurking' as "observing the interaction on a discussion group without posting messages oneself (Broadhurst 1993)".

"lurking is ok, as somedays that's all I have the energy for". The difference between conference membership and participation can be seen in the following Table 3.1. The table also indicates the number of male and female participants in the LOUNGE which were identified on the basis of their user- names. A 'generic' column was added for unclassified, or gender neutral names (e.g. Pat, Terry, Leslie, etc.) and for office user- names which do not indicate the name of the user (unless the message was signed).

Table 3.1
Conference Membership, Participation, and Gender Participation
in a Sample of the LOUNGE Conferences on SoliNet
1992 to 1996

Conference	Members	Participants	Female	Male	Generic
Lounge (Apr 92)	210		87	86	37
		24	4	19	1
Lounge (Sep 92)	206	34	5	26	3
Lounge (Nov 92)	154	28	6	22	0
Lounge (May 93)	81	29	6	22	1
Lounge (Nov 93)	222	35	7	25	3
Lounge (Mar 93)	143	51	14	36	1
Lounge (Mar 94)	302		96	36	70
		33	5	27	1
Lounge (Aug 95)	323		86	180	57
		18	2	15	1
Lounge (Oct 96)	202		58	117	27
		17	6	11	0
Totals	1843	269	55	203	11
Totals in Percentages	100	14.6			
		100	20.45	75.46	4.09

3.4.3 General Observations (Table 3.1)

The months selected from 1992 to 1996 were selected at random, but reflect a general average in message input levels. As observable in the table, membership exceeds participation by more than 85%: for every 100 members who signed up for the LOUNGE, an average of less than 15 members participated. This suggests that 'lurking' - reading the messages, but not submitting any comment - is preferred in the LOUNGE. Of the people who participated, women only contributed slightly more than 20% of the messages, whereas men added more than three-quarters of all messages. The highest participation rate (of the sample) for females was in March 1993, when the discussion was on gender discrimination and when International Women's Day events were scheduled across Canada. These differences will be discussed further in Chapter Four.

The LOUNGE conference has remained active since the beginning in 1992 and has, on average, an activity rate of about two and a half messages per day.⁹³ From a general study of LOUNGE activity, it was possible to identify a core group of participants made up of about twenty men and five women who were frequent contributors throughout the years 1992 to 1994. The input from these regulars tended to be highly topical, such that current political, social and economic issues were reported and debated amongst the group. These members are experienced union activists and hold

⁹³ This was calculated by adding up the total number of messages input into the LOUNGE. From March 1992 to April 1997, there have been a total of 4,602 messages recorded in the conference. This yields a yearly average of 920.4 messages per year (4,602 divided by 5), or 2 1/2 messages per day.

senior positions in their union or organization/association. It was an aggressive, but not a hostile group. New participants in the LOUNGE discussions were usually recognized and welcomed. The high level of education and experience however, may have intimidated other members from participating. (These will be discussed further in Chapter Four, when the results of the SoliNet members' questionnaire will be used to discuss possible reasons for these and other differences in participation).

3.4.4 Le Club

The francophone equivalent to the LOUNGE is called "Le Club". In contrast to the largely issue-based discussions in the LOUNGE, the Le Club comments were brief, congenial, and light-hearted. There were also a few information postings on conferences held within Quebec, and some notes on political issues involving Meech Lake and Hydro Quebec, but these were rare. The tone for the conference was set early by the moderator who emphasized that this was not 'a serious conference'. She introduced a theme by setting a brief outline for a novel that she invited the participants to develop. Each week someone could add a character or plot line to the principal characters. This theme ran for just less than a year, someone would make a comment about what the characters should deal with, but it did not build into any coherent kind of story. A membership of 179 people was maintained while the conference was active from 1988 to 1994. Of these members a total of 37% participated on a sporadic basis (on average, the conference only generated a message a week). The participant base

was largely female (64%)⁹⁴ and included members mostly from SCFP and other CUPE members from across Canada. There were no in-depth explorations of issues, or lengthy opinions entered on a particular subject. The Le Club conference can be characterized as sort of a 'drop-in centre' for a quick exchange of greetings. Messages were brief and seemed to be made in passing during the workday (i.e. while using SoliNet for file transfer or sending an email).

3.4.5 Leisure Interest Conferences

English is the majority language in the balance of the social conferences on SoliNet which all focus on a particular leisure activity. Table 3.2 provides a sample of the various social conferences held on SoliNet from 1991 to 1997. The table indicates the name and time period the conference remained active, as well as the total number of messages generated, and total membership and participation rates.

⁹⁴ This was calculated from a total of 66 participants, of which 42 females, 10 males and 14 generic were identified.

Table 3.2
Conference Membership, Participation and Gender Participation
A Sample of the Leisure Interest Conferences on SoliNet
1991 to 1997

Name(Period Active)	Mem	Part	Females	Males	Gen
Bijoux [Movies, TV & Videos] (94-96)	45	24	10	11	3
Hobbies (91-97)	207	50	17	20	13
Books (91-92)	282	47	16	23	8
Recipes (91-96)	207	42	23	12	7
Totals	741	163	66	66	31
Participation in Percent	100	22			
Totals in Percentages		100	40.5	40.5	19.0

Abbreviations:

Mem = Members
Part = Participants
Gen = Generic

3.4.5(1) General Observations

The participation rate in the leisure interest conferences was 7% higher than in the open LOUNGE conferences. This may indicate that members prefer to participate in areas where the discussion is more defined, or it may imply that people are more comfortable participating in less controversial subjects. Especially notable is the average equal participation rate of both women and men. Participation by women in

the leisure interest conferences was twice that of the LOUNGE participation and was double that of men in the “recipes” conference where people asked for, discussed, and exchanged food recipes. This may indicate that women who participated did so because it was a leisure activity. That is, given the political discussions in the LOUNGE, the interest conferences were more recreational, and thus may have been preferred. This would apply to both the men and the women participants. It may also indicate that when people are experimenting with a new technology, that they prefer to apply it in areas where they are most comfortable.

The hobby conference had an almost equal participation rate of men and women, it being a collection of brief messages in which people introduced themselves by typing a paragraph or two on their favorite leisure activity. Comments were posted on a wide variety of hobbies, including crocheting, stained glass, angling, bird watching, drawing, sewing, travel, theater, and music. These non-controversial exchanges prompted one participant to comment on the value of hobbies and of being able to share them with others during strikes or lockouts, when stress becomes part of a regular day. A few of the comments became extended conversations between people who shared a common interest. The conference itself did not develop into continual conversation; it was used mostly as a place where people introduced themselves and wrote a brief message on what their interest was, and asked if anyone else shared in their hobby. Although the total of messages was not high, once a message was posted someone usually answered it, and there were still people checking-in and entering messages into it for six years. In comparison, the “books” conference ran for less time but generated over four

times more messages. It was moderated by Ron Verzuh, Senior Officer in the Communications Branch of CUPE. Verzuh recommended books, including a summer reading list, and stimulated discussion on certain books by asking members for their opinions. The range of titles included both fiction and non-fiction with an emphasis on the latter with reviews of labour and political books. Verzuh also actively moderated a smaller recreational conference - the "Bijoux" - on movies, TV and videos. Of the 45 people who signed up for the conference, more than half participated. This is in contrast to other social conference participation, where membership exceeds actual participation by 80%.

3.5 Special Topic or Issues Conferences

Following the seminar-style of conferencing first set in the CCPA conference on technology change, Belanger solicited assistance from people who were knowledgeable in one field or another to act as operational moderators in conferences which would focus on a particular issue or subject. The moderators could take either a formal or informal role in setting the conference parameters and agenda, selecting topics to be covered, and providing the recommended readings. A formal or active moderator would introduce each week's topic, lead and/or facilitate the discussion, and conclude each section. In contrast, an informal moderator would introduce the conference agenda, but would leave it to the participants to facilitate the discussion themselves. Included in this category were issue conferences that were established by the Technology Coordinator, but were not moderated by any one individual (i.e. the participants set the conference

parameters through their own input). Moderators for special issues on SoliNet included: university professors, activists, members of the NDP, and federal policy administrators.

There were formal seminar-styled conferences on labour issues such as: “diversity in the workplace”, “employment equity in the 1990s”, and “total quality management”. Other special conferences were established on issues of political economy and to solicit input and generate discussion of economic, social or labour government policies. These included international conferences, and conferences which focused on the Canadian political economy in particular, highlighting for example, the Canadian Constitution, the North America Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), and the relationship between labour and the NDP. There was also a special conference on the environment, and one on the “Information Highway”. These conferences were held on SoliNet from 1992 to 1996 and were open to all members. An example of the special topics and issue conferences held on SoliNet is provided in Table 3.3. It includes the name and dates the conference was active, as well as the number of members and participants, and the name of the moderator.

Table 3.3
Conference Membership, Participation, and Gender Participation
A Sample of the Special Topic and Issue Conferences on SoliNet
1992 to 1996

Conference	Msgs	Memb	Part	Fem	Male	Gen	Moderator
Diversity in the Workplace (June 1994)	17	40	3	2	1	0	Jill Stainsby Teaching Support Staff Coordinator Simon Fraser University
CLFDB (Jun - Sep 1994)	29	58	5	2	3	0	Liaison Officer CLFDB
Employment (Feb - Apr 94)	96	78	15	4	11	0	Prof. Sid Ingerman
Freetrade (Jan 92 - Jun 93)	525	107	32	4	22	6	Prof. Alex Micholas
Constitution (Oct 92)	197	77	46	18	25	3	Technical Moderator
NDP/Labour (Oct 92 - Jun 93)	274	186	32	13	19	0	Joy Langdon, MP Donna Sacuta NDP
NDP (July 93 - Aug 95)	420	186	63	13	47	3	Tech Moderator
Infoway (May 94 - Feb 96)	70	87	12	1	10	1	Marc Belanger CUPE
The Environment (Sep 92 - Oct 95)	87	83	26	6	19	1	Jay Cowan Environmental Activist
Totals		902	234	63	157	14	
Total Participation in %		26					
Gender Percentages				26.9	67.1	6.0	

3.5.1 Observations (Table 3.3)

Of all the conferences on SoliNet reviewed so far, the special topics and issue seminars/conferences had the highest total participation rate with 26% of all members entering at least one comment. Female participation is also higher (6.5%) than in the LOUNGE , but 13.6% lower than the leisure interest conferences. There are wide fluctuations in the number of participants who were active in the special conferences, from less than 10% in the moderated “Diversity” and “CLFDB” seminar, to 34% in the conference on labour and the NDP,⁹⁵ up to Constitution (which was not moderated) and had a participation rate of 60%. To consider possible reasons for these differences, the CLFDB and the Constitution conferences will be discussed as examples in the subsections following.

3.5.2 The Canadian Labour Force Development Board Conference

The CLFDB conference was created for gathering input for the CLFDB Task Force in July 1994. In extreme contrast to the activity of the Constitution conference, the CLFDB attracted only five participants. The purpose of the conference was to discuss the report of the Task Force on “Transitions to Employment: Putting the

⁹⁵ The activity in the NDP conference was a result of then Ontario NDP government actions which fueled a debate on the relationship of labour with the NDP. As Taylor (1996:279/280) describes: “Early in 1993, this government suspended collective bargaining rights for public sector workers and rolled back their wages. Debate raged as to whether or not the labor movement should withdraw its support for the NDP. This electronic conference provided a cross-section of the more general discussion. Participants from British Columbia (on the Pacific coast and with an NDP government) were able to debate participants from Ontario (a Great Lakes province) about the relative merits of the NDP administration, for example”.

Pieces Together". The CLFDB Labour Liaison Officer introduced the conference at the beginning of July, and uploaded Executive Summaries of the report into a separate "files" workshop for reading. Hard copies of the report were also available by regular mail. The Liaison Officer asked SoliNet members for their "recommendations and comments, suggestions, information, and to identify major gaps, oversights, etc." in the Report. The conference was scheduled to commence in September that allowed for time to read the material. The Executive Vice President of the CLC and co-chair of the Task Force opened the conference in September. Although 58 people had signed on to the conference, only three actually made any constructive entries and criticisms of the Report. The most active participant raised the question in the conference as to why there was so little involvement given that the topic was pertinent to labour and provided a chance for input into government policy. One of the other four participants, Larry Kuehn, current (1997) Research Director at BCTF and active SoliNet member, replied the following:

I have learned from this conference about what doesn't work in the use of computer mediated communication: depending on a long document with many facets to stimulate dialogue. Not only that, but a document that is tough reading even with a graphic friendly hard copy, let alone the electronic version that some must have had to make do with. In this situation comments are likely to come from folks who have already thought through the issues and have sources to draw on, rather than stimulating new dialogue (Kuehn, September 1994, Message No. 23).

3.5.3 Conference on the Charlottetown Accord

In 1992, Canadians were asked to vote on a referendum on the Charlottetown Accord, which would result in amendments to the Canadian Constitution. The topic was so popular in the LOUNGE conference that the Technology Coordinator established a separate conference on 21 September 1992, to discuss the Accord and the October 26 ratification referendum. Belanger copied comments on the Constitution from the LOUNGE by way of introduction for the conference. Participants entered what they thought of the Accord in general, how major union leaders had responded, and the official announcements of unions and labour associations like the OFL, the CLC, and the Canadian Federation of Labour, as well as the National Action Committee for the Status of Women. This was interspersed with messages containing personal opinions, and decisions (or indecision's) on how participants intended to vote. The conference lasted just over a month and averaged 5 messages a day. As it came down to the final days before the vote, the 'lurkers' admitted they had been 'listening in' and provided messages on how they were going to vote, with some having made up their minds based on comments in the conference. The conference participation rate of 60% was the highest participation rate of any of the conferences on SoliNet. The variety of input and discussion, prompted one participant to comment:

CONSTITUTION has been SoliNet at its finest. Less temporary than a conversation, more intense than a newspaper, public yet personal, informative and entertaining.

Although CUPE Ontario Division publicly indicated the vote they supported, the National President's Office did not officially take a stand. Local media interest in CUPE's position on the Referendum prompted Belanger to provide some of the comments to the media for reprinting. The article ("Viewpoints Shared on Network" *The Ottawa Citizen* 17 Oct 92, pg. C1) was written to emphasize the "division" of the "house of labour" on the Charlottetown Accord. This set off a small debate in the conference, not on the article's emphasis or quality of comments chosen, but as to the status of conference discussions and the confidentiality of the comments made there. Belanger responded with an apology and explanation, and asked that the issue be discussed and continued in the "LOUNGE92" conference, as it was tied to other propriety issues regarding SoliNet participation that had been raised. He used this experience to write the SoliNet "Usage Guidelines" which were discussed in the LOUNGE (see Annex B).⁹⁶

3.5.4 General Observations

As a comparison of these two conferences suggests, SoliNet members are more active when they become directly involved with decision-making. The Constitution conference developed from a topical issue in which all members would be taking an active part in by voting. In contrast, the CLFDB conference not only required

⁹⁶ The setting of guidelines is connected to the issue of censorship, which will be further discussed in Chapter Four, Section 4.5.2.

a lot of background knowledge and substantial reading, but input was solicited after the Task Force had completed the Report. The agenda set for the conference stated that it was open to any suggestions for how else the conference might proceed, but may have been seen as more task or work-related, as input was requested that went beyond a personal interest level. As this was a voluntary conference, and presumably attended to on the members' own time, there was not an explicit reason why people should spend the time to participate. Another less controversial explanation may have been as simple as the time period that the conference was scheduled. Belanger observes that of all the special topics conferences held on SoliNet, the ones with the least activity are those that are held during the Canadian summer months between June and September (which is exactly when the CLFDB was scheduled). The holiday season (during December and the first part of January) are also inactive periods (other than in the LOUNGE where season's greetings are exchanged). These and other factors such as differences in styles of moderation and participation will be discussed as part of Chapter Four, Section 4.1.

3.5.5 International Conferences

The expansion of the political and social community beyond the realm of the Canadian labour movement is an internal goal of CUPE. The development of "international solidarity" is defined by CUPE as:

...the alliance of unionists across borders in the global struggle for economic development, social justice and worker's rights.⁹⁷

This goal was formalized in 1988 when a National Working Committee on International Solidarity was established.⁹⁸ As part of the work of this Committee, the newsletter *Worldlink* was produced by CUPE Communications Branch and published both in print, and on-line on SoliNet. It is partly funded by the Public Participation Program of the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA). The editor of *Worldlink* and the conference moderator, Ron Verzuh, is also the International Solidarity Officer for CUPE. In addition to publishing the newsletter on-line, Verzuh outlined three objectives for the conference:

- 1) to provide an exchange of news and international solidarity issues;
- 2) [to] offer a forum for debate and discussion of those issues, and
- 3) [to] serve as an idea center for international solidarity work.⁹⁹

Of the 147 members that signed on to the conference, 29 (or 21%) participated. Most of the participation involved further reports of labour issues, and information on labour situations in Cuba, Chile, Haiti, South Africa, Mexico (Chiapas), and East Timor such that the first objective was more developed than the others.

⁹⁷ From the 1989 "Vancouver National Convention Report of the National Working Committee on International Solidarity" *CUPE Convention Report* (1989:28).

⁹⁸ The Committee grew out of the 1987 National Convention held in Quebec City.

⁹⁹ Included in the conference was a notice for CUPE locals of an information kit which could be obtained as "part of their union's international solidarity fund", called "Union Aid". The kit included a video on CUPE's work and explained how the locals could get involved in International Solidarity. Verzuh reported on who obtained the kit and how it was used, he also regularly posted labour news and issues from around the world.

Another international conference was developed with a focus on the United States. The “u.s.” conference was moderated by Elaine Bernard, the Executive Director of the Harvard Trade Union Program, who was able to ‘log-on’ from Boston through Datapac. The conference ran from 1991 to 1996 with 283 messages with almost half being posted by Bernard herself. Bernard led the discussion on major issues in American politics and labour, such as abortion, health care reform, national elections and primaries, as well as major union elections and reports on union conventions. Of 123 conference members, 20% or 25 members participated (20 males and 4 females and 1 generic). The discussions involved impacts of US policy on Canadian politics and labour as well as debate over the similarities and differences between the United States and Canada on issues of political economy.

SoliNet’s first “truly international conference” was established in April 1994 once the technical capability was developed to provide a gateway to SoliNet from the Internet (Belanger 1/4/97). The gateway allowed access to SoliNet through an email address on the Internet. The conference was jointly moderated by Vasily Balog, the Deputy Head of the International Department of the General Confederation of Trade Unions and Kirill Buketov, the Director of the Russian Labour Information Centre “KAS-KOR” and editor of the Russian Labour Review (see also Lee 1997:137-142). Belanger arranged for Balog and Buketov to hold the conference on the Russian labour movement for member education and to enhance international labour relations. The conference focused on four topic areas (one per week), including: (1) the history and (2) current position of the Russian labour movement, (3) recent economic and political changes in Russia, and

labour relations and living conditions. An additional workshop laid out the introductory explanations of each topic prior to each week's discussion. Although the conference attracted 37 members, it did not develop into a discussion forum. Only a handful of members actually participated by expressing appreciation to the moderators for being there, and by asking them questions regarding the readings. The lack of discussion did not damper the Russians' enthusiasm however, as they recognized that while the conference was a new experience, to them it represented a powerful and unique forum for labour communication:

The fact that we - you and us together - have made it, irrespective of the distance and the different time zones, despite the technical irregularities of the Internet-to-SoliNet gateway and the inevitable language barriers, all this shows, in our view, that unionists can and should communicate directly with the use of modern technologies, overpassing the official media. This also shows, as we can see it, that there is a need and a practical possibility for an international labour computer network. Would it be too pompous to say that all of us have laid a few small stones in the foundation of such a network during the last month? (Balog and Buketov, April 1994, Message #26).

The international conference marked both a new beginning and an ending for SoliNet as a national labour network. The SoliNet gateway that provided the initial connection towards the development of an exchange between unions internationally and other SoliNet members within Canada and the US, also exposed the inadequacies of the CoSy conferencing system in comparison to the more advanced technology used on the Internet. The Technology Office was presented with a choice: to continue SoliNet as its own entity and attempt to refine the email Internet connection, or to establish a presence on the Internet.

3.6 SoliNet in Transition

The dilemma faced by the Technology Office with respect to SoliNet was partly a bi-product of the way technology is advanced. Adhoc improvements or incremental changes are made which render other technology redundant, and/or unable to adapt to changes. The CoSy system could not be improved any further to provide enhancements such as increased processing speed or graphics; moreover, it could not make the technical transition required for the Internet. The pressure to transform SoliNet so that it would be part of the Internet was also mounting internally. People who had learned the basics of modem connections and network applications through SoliNet were now equipped technically and had the computer literacy to move onto the Internet as individuals. Attracted by lower prices for access and system use, expanded email connections, and optional graphics capabilities, SoliNet users began to transfer over to area and regional Internet service providers. A few members started to transfer over as early as 1992 and by 1995 SoliNet membership was in decline. More and more individuals, unions and associations had their own email systems and were developing their presence on the Web. Commenting on the much-publicized popularity of the Internet, Belanger recalls how just six to ten years ago, it was such a struggle to convince people of the value and potentials of computer networking. He observes how budgets were fought over for funding for SoliNet in comparison to now when the Internet is mentioned: "people will throw money at it" (Belanger 1/4/97).

The Technology Office continued to enhance the CoSy system as far as providing email both into and out of SoliNet through Soligate, which was realized in March 1996. The CoSy system had reached its final potential, and the decision was made to transfer SoliNet to the Internet to begin the next stage of technology organizing and design. A new minicomputer was purchased to handle the technological requirements of Internet protocols. The Office began working towards creating a new version of SoliNet on the World-Wide-Web which would have the same applications of what was beginning to be called the "old" SoliNet. Plans were made to start a phase-out of the 'old' SoliNet, and the Technology Office began linking members with commercial service providers for access to the Internet (more on the new SoliNet in Chapter Five). Meanwhile, the 'old' SoliNet is still active and used mainly by CUPE members. It will continue to function until the last members transfer to the Internet, estimated to be in the fall of 1997 (Belanger 1/4/97).

3.7 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter has presented an overview of the history, development and use of the Solidarity Network since its conception in 1983. A large part of this development was the design and realization of a number of different computer conferences on SoliNet. These conferences were developed towards journalism, educational and movement building goals. The overview has provided a description of a general sample of those conferences that included some quantitative analysis of the conference

membership and participation. It also briefly discussed some factors that may have influenced participation.

As Belanger contends in designing the new version of SoliNet, it is important to take the “lessons learned”¹⁰⁰ from the old version of SoliNet: but what are those “lessons”? What do participation rates tell us about how SoliNet was used, as well as the capacity for two-way communication on computer networks? What can SoliNet tell us about the effectiveness of using CMC to facilitate interaction and movement building? Moreover, how does the actual use of SoliNet compare to the democratic potentials of CMC as outlined in Chapter One of this thesis? These questions and others will lead the analysis and evaluation of SoliNet in the next Chapter. Fundamental to asking what “lessons” there are to be learned from SoliNet, is to remember that the kinds of questions we ask might be just as important as the answers.

¹⁰⁰ (Belanger 1/4/97).

Chapter Four: Democracy in Communication

4.0 Introduction

The overview of the open conferences on SoliNet provides a basis to analyze the actual practices of communication against the potential for democratic communication as outlined at the beginning of this thesis. In Chapter One, a set of conditions identified by Tehranian (1990) were offered as a possible schema to be used to evaluate the extent of democratic design and use of a computer network such as SoliNet. This schema was included as one approach to answering the thesis' leading question regarding the prognosis for democratized communication referring to assessing the degree or extent of democracy in communication in particular. Tehranian's six conditions will be applied to an analysis of the open conferences reviewed in the previous chapter. Each condition will be discussed in terms of identifying the extent of democracy in communication within SoliNet, as well as analyzing what the possible constraints or limitations might be.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ As was discussed in Chapter One, Tehranian's intention was to suggest conditions of a democratic communication system on a more macro-level (i.e. a nation's media system). As such some of the descriptions (or definitions) of the conditions reflect this viewpoint. While some of the wording may seem awkward applied to a smaller system like SoliNet, it does not detract from the usefulness of the schema to discuss why, or why not the conditions may have, (or have not) been met. Tehranian's definition of each condition will be included in a footnote corresponding to the section heading for reference.

4.1 Interactivity¹⁰²

Democracy in communication as afforded by CMC is discussed in terms of interactivity¹⁰³ when people are able to be both sender and receiver. This is related to Jakubowicz's definition of "direct communicative democracy" where using CMC affords "opportunities for everyone to be 'sendceivers' engaged in participatory horizontal communication, incorporating immediate response and feedback..."(Section 1.5.1). Email affords this opportunity, but the interaction is restricted to person-to-person or selected groups. Closed conferencing extends to inter-group communication, but it is also restricted; whereas open conferencing widens the 'sendceiver' base to the whole membership and thus provides for greater opportunities for 'everyone' (i.e. all members) to 'publicly' interact. The degree of interaction depends on what function the members use most: put simply, if members only use email, the opportunity to interact through conferencing is decreased or nil because there are no participants. Table 4.0 lays out the responses from both the individual and organizational users of SoliNet [from the thesis questionnaires (Annex A)] of their primary use, and purposes of that use for SoliNet. It compares the most frequently used function (as #1) and the second most frequently used function (#2) of individuals and of organizations, as well as indicating the #1 and #2 purposes of that use respectfully.

¹⁰² "Interactivity in the form of multiple feedback systems assumes autonomous centres of power engaged in a system of check and balances" (Tehrani 1990:52).

¹⁰³ For an operationalized definition of interactivity see Herring (1996b:84) who defines interactivity on the basis of differences in text structures (e.g. messages which include "link[s] to previous discourse" and "link[s] to following discourse").

Table 4.0
Frequently Used SoliNet Functions and Purpose of Use
Individual Users and Organization Use

Individual Users N = 50
Organizations (Orgs) N = 10

Function Used	Indiv #1	Indiv #2	Orgs #1	Orgs #2
Email	43.5	39	14.3	20
Closed Conferencing	26.1	23.5	14.3	20
Open Conferencing	17.4	23.5	57.1	60
File Transferring	13.0	14	14.3	0
Purpose of Use				
To Send/Receive Information	80	17	78	0
For Closed Conferencing	15.6	43	0	20
For Open Conf - Work Related	2.2	23	11	80
For Open Conf - Social	2.2	17	11	0

Abbreviations:

Indiv = individuals
Orgs = organizations

The table indicates that the most-used function by individuals is email. A comparison of gender usage suggests that women use all of the functions of SoliNet relatively equally [i.e. most used email and file transfer (30% each) and open and closed conferencing (20% each)], whereas men predominately use email and conferencing functions [most used email (54%), then closed conferencing (31%) and open conferencing (15%)]. Only women indicated that file transferring was their first or second use of SoliNet, which is directly related to women's employment in

administration and secretarial work.¹⁰⁴ In contrast, organizational use of SoliNet is primarily for open-conferencing. This is because most of the organizations (other than BCTF and CALM) use SoliNet in the main to extend work-related communications on an individual basis.

The specific use of SoliNet for both organizations and individuals is to send and receive information, which was also the case for past members (100% of respondents). This suggests that although SoliNet affords communication through participation and interaction between users, it is primarily being used as a tool for the singular transmission and reception of information. The coordination of work, participation in discussions, and the sharing of personal and work experiences are secondary, even within the conferencing facilities. This may then affect the members' perception of the purpose of the medium, which may in turn affect their use of the medium. Thus SoliNet is seen as a tool to pass information back and forth and interactive conferencing is the adjunct, which is in contrast to Belanger's original intentions for the network in establishing conferences to facilitate communication exchange. SoliNet can accommodate both information and communication exchange, but how it is used depends on what is prioritized by the individuals and organizations using the system as to which is developed further.

¹⁰⁴ OPIEU (the union which represents clerical workers in CUPE) statistics indicate that 98% of the workers are female (Cholette 1/4/97).

Interactivity even within the open (and closed) conferences is not automatic. How and how much the members interact depends on the type of conference (e.g. social, leisure interest, or political issues), the style of the moderator, and the different styles of participation by members in the conference. Feedback is afforded in a conference by the system in that anyone who is a SoliNet member can reply to another member's message, but this is voluntary. It is not directly built into the conferencing software. Hypothetically, a new participant's message would be identified with a symbol to alert the moderator who could send an email and/or conference message in recognition of their entry. The condition of autonomy is assumed on the basis of access to open conferencing (e.g. there are no explicit restrictions).¹⁰⁵ Thus a "system of checks and balances" on an individual level is created within each conference with the degree of interaction determined by the participants and the moderator.

4.1.1 Type of Conference

The level of interaction varies from conference to conference, but is somewhat influenced by the conference format. The highest level of interactivity was in the "problems" and "wp" (WordPerfect) conferences because they followed a question-and-answer type format. In contrast, the university-level seminar conferences had the lowest level of interactivity. In these seminars the moderator and time schedules

¹⁰⁵ As Held (1987:293) argues: "The principle of autonomy requires the rigorous pursuit of a concept of equality linked innately to the notion of 'equal conditions'." In the SoliNet case, the "equal condition" is open access to the conferences, however, this does not mean that all participants are therefore equal. Differences in participation and equal access will be explored further in following sections.

influenced the degree of interaction possible as new topics and more information were being posted to the conference on a regular basis. Participants in these seminars also tended to add even more information versus discussing or debating the given material.¹⁰⁶ This tendency to add more information, versus discussing the existing content of the conference can be generalized throughout the issue conferences and in some periods of the LOUNGE conferences. As Hiltz and Turoff (1993) suggested, the basis of computer conferencing is set on constructing a structure or a set of procedures to facilitate group communication (Section 2.9). This is the impetus behind the Delphi method which is a set of group communication procedures which 'builds-in' the necessity for feedback. Given that the open conferences are left as open structures, they do not include a built-in set of procedures to ensure each member participates, thus members are free to 'read-only' or 'lurk' if they chose. As the survey of the open conferences suggests, the majority (approximately 70 to 80%) of SoliNet members 'read' but do not participate. This increases the dependence on the role of the other participants, and the moderator especially, in influencing interactivity and feedback within the conference.

¹⁰⁶ For example: the CCPA conference on Economic and Social Policy Renewal held from February to April 1995, had 97 members and generated 104 messages, of which the moderator made 40% of the entries: of the 62 messages that were generated by the participants, 47% of the messages were information postings. The rest of the entries were comments on the given material which sustained brief discussions. Although the moderator changed the schedule twice to provide for further discussion, he kept close to the agenda such that the discussion did not lead the conference.

4.1.2 Style of the Moderator

On SoliNet, conference moderators operate on a formal basis, such as the seminar courses where the role of moderator is similar to instructor, and on a more informal basis in which they act as a facilitator to encourage and sustain conference proceedings. Schuler (1996:270) compares the role of the moderator to a "host at a party":

how strenuously this role is assumed varies widely from moderator to moderator just as it does among party hosts. A moderator can be seen as a discussion facilitator. If this role is assumed, it becomes a moderator's responsibility for ensuring that lively conversation occurs and that the conversation keeps on track if, indeed, keeping on track is important. While some types of forums-question and answer forums, for example - are less likely to be troubled, other may boil over with controversy and a moderator may need to wield some of the power of the role.¹⁰⁷

Feenberg (1989) identifies three "moderating functions" which can influence interactivity and feedback, these are:

(1) contextualizing functions: providing an opening discussion, setting norms, and setting the agenda; (2) monitoring functions: participant recognition and the prompting of further comments; and (3) meta-functions [which includes] (i) meta-commenting: to remedy problems in context, norms or agendas, clarity, irrelevance, and information overload and (ii) weaving: to summarize the state of the discussion and to find unifying threads in participants' comments; it

¹⁰⁷ From interviews with moderators on SoliNet, conflict is usually left to work itself out in the conference (Belanger 1/4/97; Cholette 27/11/97). However, there are occasions when the conflict becomes personal; in these cases the moderator will send a general message to the conference asking that comments be directed to the group and not to individuals. If this does not change the behaviour, the moderator sends the person(s) involved an email, or telephones them to discuss the problem. In the 10 years that SoliNet has been operating, no one has been asked to leave a conference. Belanger suggests that this is an advantage which has resulted from having a SoliNet community where people are identifiable to that community (Belanger 1/4/97).

encourages these participants and implicitly prompts them to pursue their ideas (Feenberg 1989:35).¹⁰⁸

An active moderator may do these things and more, yet this does not *guarantee* increased participation. It is noticeable however, that the participants are more interactive and respond directly to the moderator and each other, which suggests that they become more comfortable and contribute more frequently within a reciprocal atmosphere. The moderator's levels of education, computer literacy, and communication competence are all contributors that also influence conference participation. Generally, the more skilled the moderator, the better the conference is facilitated. However, participants can also be discouraged by the level of education of the moderator, i.e. when a university professor is running the conference, members tend to be intimidated (Belanger 1/4/97). Even when the moderator attempts to generate debate in an open atmosphere by asking open-ended questions on the material, there still may be no response. In these cases, it may be a result of differences in participants and factors other than moderation such as: topic chosen, time of conference, other conferences running at the same time, and/or time period in work or union activities (e.g. conventions, campaigns, strikes, etc.) which would influence people's ability to participate.

¹⁰⁸ Feenberg (1989) recommends that there be at least one person to "keep the group alive", but notes that the responsibility need not fall on just one person. "Discussions are the most absorbing when the members of the group share these functions with the moderator" (Feenberg 1989:35/36). Balka (1992) researched on-line discussion groups and also suggests "that the task of moderation should be explicitly addressed on an ongoing basis by participants in group discussions" (Balka 1992:282).

In structured seminar courses where the role of the moderator is formal, the participants do not lead the discussion. This means that unless there are participants with equal qualifications, the majority of input comes solely from the moderator. A balance between the discussion and seminar agenda is difficult to achieve given that participation is voluntary and members are likely to be communicating on their own time. From observations of conferences such as the LOUNGE, there may be gaps of weeks to a month between comments on the same issue. Without a moderator, someone's input may never be responded to, which may be a deterrent to further participation. As Taylor (1996) observed in the Labour Studies course, when people were required to lead the discussion for the week, they were able to develop an appreciation of how difficult it was to be a moderator and how essential regular participation is. From the survey of SoliNet users, 84% of members who answered the questionnaire had never been moderators (of the 16% who had moderator experience, 2% are women and 14% are men). A possible solution would be to suggest that people could rotate the duty of moderator, but this might scare people off from participating at all. Given that conferencing is still in its initial stages people are experimenting with types of conferences and participation styles.

4.1.3 Styles of Participation

From on-line observations of conference participation across both open and closed conferences, the following four styles of participation can be generalized across all conferences on SoliNet. These are:

(1) **Read-only:** Members sign on to the conference, but do not actively participate, and thus do not explicitly interact with others, although they may be learning by reading or observing interactions between others. How many 'read-only' members (or 'lurkers') a conference can sustain depends on the objectives of the conference: if it is an educational seminar, they may learn from reading the proceedings, but if the conference is to discuss a particular issue towards a social or political action, then their lack of interaction negatively impacts on the whole conference.¹⁰⁹

(2) **Information Posters:** The most dominant type of participation is the member who inputs additional information into the conference. These can be academic articles, published points of view from political, government, and/or union sources, or mass media stories published on a particular issue. There is an emphasis on the latter in using topical stories to connect with an issue on current discussion. In general, the additions did not stimulate increased discussion, that is, there may have been one comment on the media article, but it did not generate increased interactivity. The more information being added to the conference thus provides more content to read for the members and in the case of seminars especially, may deter further contributions because of the amount of reading that is required prior to participation. The information/discussion balance is difficult to maintain. For this reason, Belanger added a "50-line limit" in conferences so that longer comments could be uploaded into files, and not hinder conference flow. In general this was adhered to, but for the most part, more information seemed to be a deterrent versus a stimulant of interactivity.

(3) **Adding Comments or Opinions Only:** The third kind of participation style and also dominant was additional commentary. People would add their own point of view but would not ask nor invite further questions or comments. These comments may or

¹⁰⁹ In relating conferencing to the development of cooperative relationships Kollock and Smith (1996:17) characterize 'read-only' members in CMC discussion groups as 'free riders'. In their observations of newsgroups on the Usenet, they conclude, "the more people free-ride, the more difficult it is to produce useful information and interaction."

may not be acknowledged by others in the conference. In these cases, Belanger suggests that an active moderator is appropriate so that everyone's comments are recognized and acknowledged as legitimate input to encourage more contributions (1/4/97). Too much personal input is not a problem for any of the conferences, however. Even after 10 years of SoliNet existence, there are members who have never tried to participate in a conference.¹¹⁰

(4) Active Participation: In these cases, the participants acknowledge and respond to others' comments, if they add information they include a comment on it to solicit further response or questions, and they add their own opinions based on their work experience. They also ask other questions to solicit further discussion. A variation are those participants who add personal comments related to their personal life experiences; that is, they emphasize how the issue is related to their personal life first, (or instead of) their work-place experiences. These styles are the most interactive, but are still within the minority on SoliNet. They may be a carry-over of individual characteristics that are present in face-to-face situations, and may also be attributed to a greater depth of experience with CMC on SoliNet.

Variation in kinds of interaction have been researched in relation to "gender social interaction on computer networks" which, as Herring (1996b) argues, has stereotyped women as more interactive communicators in contrast to men who are considered to be more information-orientated (e.g. Tannen 1994, Yates 1993; and Kantrowitz 1994¹¹¹). Questioning the basis for this assumption, Herring (1996b) studied gender social interaction on two public "listserve discussion groups" and found that there was no empirical basis for this distinction. As she writes:

¹¹⁰ The questionnaire response of past members indicated that 47% had never participated in a conference.

¹¹¹ In Herring (1996b:81).

The results of my investigation reveals that both men and women structure their messages in interactive ways, and that for both, the pure exchange of information takes second place to the exchange of views. Significant gender differences are found in how electronic messages are oriented, but the differences are not those predicted by the stereotype. Although messages posted by women contain somewhat more interactional features, they are also more informative, in contrast with male messages which most often express (critical) views. The evidence further suggests that members of the minority gender on each list shift their style in the direction of majority gender norms (Herring 1996b:82).

Relating these findings to SoliNet indicates that interaction is first a factor of the kind of conference, (e.g. social, political issue or seminar), with more interaction in the case of a social conference or question-and-answer format, versus an educational seminar.

The seminars tend to be more information-based, but can be highly interactive depending on how much the participants are involved in the topic or subject of the conference, as the "Constitution", or the "NDP labour" conferences suggest. To balance out these differences in participation, skillful participants and a skillful moderator both need to be proactive in engaging everyone in the conference. It would seem then, that CMC conference techniques are skills that need to be learned to facilitate an atmosphere of interactivity much like face-to-face conferences and education in classrooms.¹¹² The degree of interactivity is also conditioned by the technology environment in that it is computer mediated, written or text-based, and asynchronous.

¹¹² However, as Thach and Murphy (1995) conclude from their research of CMC use in education, there are a number of required competencies for distant educators that are specific to on-line education. From their studies of 103 distant educators across the US and Canada, they list the following ten competencies as essential: (1) Interpersonal Communication Skills, (2) Planning Skills; (3) Collaboration/Teamwork Skills, (4) English Proficiency, (5) Writing Skills, (6) Organizational Skills, (7) Feedback Skills, (8) Knowledge of Distance Education Field, (9) Basic Technology Knowledge, and (10) Technology Access Knowledge. Knowledge of the conference topic and other similar skills are also required, to varying degrees, of the conference moderators.

Thus variables such as computer literacy, writing skill, and time available to communicate affect the participants' ability to interact.

4.2 Universality¹¹³

As has been reviewed in Chapter Three, SoliNet was intended as a system for use by unions, organizations and associations to facilitate further movement building. At its peak (1993/4), SoliNet membership was composed of approximately 2500 individual users. Penetration of the open conferencing facilities can be estimated to be at a *minimum* of 15% of the total membership.¹¹⁴ Limitations to use begin with barriers to access and penetration that can occur in varying degrees on both an organizational and individual level. As identified from the case study, these barriers range from the following: the willingness to purchase or try and use new technologies (also related to costs), access to computer/modem facilities; technical skills, literacy and computer literacy; communication competence; and time available to learn (or continue to learn) and use the medium. Some of these factors can be generalized to all new users of technology whether they are in a union or related social organization. However, given that the history and experience of new technologies as a negative factor in job displacement and deskilling for example (Zuboff 1988; Mosco 1989; and Oderkirk

¹¹³ Universality: "means both penetration and access to the means of communication" (Tehrani 1990:52).

¹¹⁴ The maximum amount of members in a conference was 370 in the *SoliNotes* conference which is 15% of all SoliNet users (if N=2500 at its peak).

1996), union members may be especially resistant to technology use (Johnson 1995; and Schenk & Anderson 1995).

Since access to SoliNet depends on having the equipment for operation, there were only a select number of people in the unions and organizations who were able to 'penetrate' SoliNet. Table 4.1 (following) provides a breakdown of the union and organizational positions of the members who responded to the individual member questionnaires (members were asked what their position was) and the organization questionnaire (members were asked who had access and used SoliNet within their organization).

Table 4.1
Individual SoliNet Members' Union Positions and
Organization Access and Use

Individual Members N = 50
Organizations N = 10

Union or Organization Position	Individuals	Organizations
Union Representatives*	39**	8
Administration and Secretarial Staff	33	32
Senior Staff Officers	13	24
President/Secretary Treasurers	7	16
Other Union Staff	6	0
Rank and File	0	4

*Includes area and regional representatives, as well as education, health and safety representatives. ** Expressed in percent.

It should be noted that this breakdown is only a sample, as it is a result of the questionnaire. Belanger estimates that within CUPE the most users (in order) are

senior staff officers, secretarial staff, and area and regional representatives who have access to computers as part of their daily work. This is followed by some rank and file members and members who hold union leadership positions, such as executive boards and local union presidents and secretary-treasurers (Belanger 1/4/97). This estimation is similar to the findings of the questionnaire such that it can be generalized that access is primarily work-related.¹¹⁵ Of all the members in the participating organizations who answered the SoliNet questionnaire, *less than 5% of their total membership* had access to SoliNet. Penetration remained dependent on individuals in CUPE (and other unions and organizations) who had computer/modem access *and* who made it a personal commitment to adopt, learn, and use SoliNet.

4.2.1 Barriers to Use

Individual commitment is subject to a variety of limiting factors or personal “barriers”. In reference to computer networks, Schuler (1996:398) defines a barrier as:

...anything that acts to prevent or discourage access [which] rarely occurs singly; in the most common case several barriers will stand in the way. Often these can occur as a string of barriers and any one of them – like a link in a chain – can cause a break in access.

Barriers can be one or a combination of any of the following: physical (e.g. “poor eyesight or other physical challenge”); time-related (e.g. work and/or leisure time available to learn and use CMC); psychological (e.g. personal needs, wants, fear

¹¹⁵ For example, senior staff officers provide support in terms of advice, research, education, etc. to union locals; representatives are the liaisons between local and national unions such that the advantage of email, file transfer, and conferencing have become necessary to their kind of work. Administrative and clerical staff also have access as a function of their work.

and/or distrust of technology); social (e.g. "friends and/or co-workers" don't use it, or has a preference for face-to-face or other forms of communication); and educational (e.g. literacy, computer literacy, and communication competence).¹¹⁶ The latter barrier is accentuated with CMC because it requires additional skills beyond those necessary for face-to-face telephone communication for example. As Garnham (1991) submits:

...the increased skills within education on the acquisition of a range of so-called communication skills attests to the fact that we do not come into the world innately equipped with the means to exploit the mediated communicative opportunities open to us. The acquisition of these competencies, as well as other social skills, is unequally distributed in our societies along lines of class, gender and ethnicity (Garnham 1991:28).

These differences can be generalized to the whole union membership and will need to be addressed beyond practical training for computer use (e.g. how to use WP or database entry). Research is only beginning to identify barriers towards developing ways to overcome them, some of which has focused on women's participation in particular (see Gaskell 1987; Brunet and Proulx 1989; Frissen 1992; Balka 1991; and Webster 1996).

Additional barriers can arise in computer conferencing whether open or closed. SoliNet users were asked to identify personal barriers that limit their participation in open conferences. The majority of male users (58%) left the question blank, as did 30% of the female users, which may indicate that barriers are minor, or are not

¹¹⁶ Examples in quotes are from Schuler (1996:399).

significant enough to impair participation.¹¹⁷ The remaining male respondents' (11) indicated that the major constraints for them were, in order:

- (1) I don't like using the keyboard to type everything out;
- (2) I find it difficult to communicate with people whom I don't know;
- (3) I don't like how others conduct themselves on SoliNet;
- (4) I feel there is a lack of privacy on SoliNet; and
- (5) Other: I don't have enough time in the day.

Using the keyboard or typing is a relatively new skill for men, given that traditionally, typing is a requirement of clerical work that is predominately occupied by women. The second barrier for men was the number one barrier for women. In order, the barriers for women included:

- (1) I don't like communicating with people whom I don't know;
- (2) I don't like how other people conduct themselves on SoliNet;
- (3) I don't feel comfortable expressing my opinions in the open;
- (4) I feel intimidated by other participants on SoliNet; and
- (5) Other: I don't have enough time in the day.

The relative anonymity¹¹⁸ which is considered an advantage of CMC, can also be a disadvantage for some members as they consider it a social barrier to participation. Social decontextualization or absence of signifiers of gender, age, or job position for example, can become a barrier, as people are accustomed to communicating on this basis (i.e. they like to know whom they are addressing their comments or opinions

¹¹⁷ In a related question, 50% of members also indicated that they thought open conferences were "very democratic".

¹¹⁸ Members can be identified by their user name and can choose to disclose personal information under their 'resume' file which can be a brief, on-line bibliography that any SoliNet member can access.

to).¹¹⁹ CMC may afford neutrality or relative equality because participants may be evaluated on the basis of what they write or contribute to the discussion,¹²⁰ but social barriers to open communication (prior to contributing) are still there. As the responses suggest, women especially are not comfortable with openly expressing their opinions and are intimidated by other participants (which could be gender-related or be a result of differences in educational levels for example). Intimidation was also cited by 15.2% of the non-users (also female) as a barrier to SoliNet participation. Research on gender relations using CMC suggests that existing asymmetries are 'carried over' from face-to-face situations (see Graddol and Swan 1989; Herring 1993; and Hall 1996). This emphasizes that CMC is a social space (or "process")¹²¹ that is subject to similar prejudices, biases, etc. which are present in other social relations.¹²²

Both male and female members are also discouraged by how others conduct themselves on SoliNet. As suggested by Bellman (1993), this is partially a result of the

¹¹⁹ Alternately some senior staff (e.g. directors) did not partake in their own departmental discussion conferences because they felt that they may be intruding or that the staff may have felt that they were 'checking up on them' (Stinson 5/12/96).

¹²⁰ Bellman (1993) notes how reliance on text alone increases the possibilities for misunderstanding. "The anonymity in computer communications results from the lack of physical, contextual and paralinguistic cues present in face-to-face communications. Their absence in part conceals a message's intention, as often it is difficult to locate an interpretive key for understanding whether a given comment was meant as serious, in fun or as a metaphoric expression" (pg. 59). This has given rise to "emoticons" composed of characters from the computer keyboard [e.g. the symbol for smile or happy face is :-)] [Metz 1992; Collot & Belmore (1996) and Yates (1996)]. These misunderstandings can increase as people return to read comments that were made weeks, or months ago. It also calls into question the permanence of conference records and access to them [see Herring (1996c:5) regarding CMC research ethical considerations]. See also Zuboff (1988, Chapter 5 "Mastering the Electronic Text").

¹²¹ (Balka 1992).

¹²² As Herring suggests "separating out the contributions of the medium from those of human users is an important prerequisite to further CMC analysis (Herring 1996c:4).

application of other social and communication norms to the conference scenario. As he explains:

When joining a computer conference [sic] participants have some definition of what it is they are signing onto; whether it is a virtual classroom, seminar, collaborative working or research group, an on-line therapy group, a place for casual conversation or joking and the like. Members have expectations and make assumptions about the normative rules for participating in each conference based on the definition of social reality they have for it. The definition provides the auspices for interaction and is a significant constitutive feature in the otherwise highly objectivated meaning context for the on-line discussions (Bellman 1993:61).

Facilitating CMC use and penetration of SoliNet is not only a matter of training on how to use computers and SoliNet facilities, but is moreover a matter of learning how to propagate an interactive environment and how to effectively communicate using CMC.

Time available to learn and further penetrate SoliNet is a minor barrier for users who apply SoliNet to their work and leisure activities. In contrast, "lack of time" was a cited as the number one barrier for half (52%) of the past-members (or non-users) of SoliNet. Time available for SoliNet use can be actual or perceived depending on whether the individual is/is not required to use SoliNet (e.g. some CUPE departments and branches hold their weekly staff meetings on SoliNet which means that the individual will schedule the time in their agenda). In contrast, someone who works in front of the computer all day (e.g. clerical data-entry clerk) may not be inclined to continue to use it on their own time.¹²³ In a related question, non-users indicated that

¹²³ As a (current user) questionnaire respondent put it: "I don't think that Solinet (sic) is designed for use by support staff (secretaries, clerk-typists) other than providing the facility of document transfers, and even so there is no formal or systematic orientation to the technology available at CUPE (National)".

they didn't use SoliNet because "they had no reason to use it" whether it was work-related (36%), or personal (32%). Voluntary penetration using SoliNet conferencing facilities requires time availability and depends on whether the person perceives SoliNet use as a necessary adjunct to their work and/or a part of their leisure activities. This marks a difference between members who are activists and use it to further their educational, political, and/or social goals as part of their work and leisure, those who just use it for work, and those who just use it for leisure to read or communicate socially. The time commitment required and the inequality in time availability points to necessity of 'allowing' time' (e.g. like paid educational leave)¹²⁴ so that people can communicate. Without time allowances, access will always be affected by inequities in time availability.¹²⁵

4.3 Channel Capacity¹²⁶

Technological abundance is related to questions of access. CUPE's National Union Development Department is just now (1997) beginning to give courses on computer technology for union locals who have access to computers (enough for group training). These courses are given by computer literate union members through

¹²⁴ See Gindin (1995).

¹²⁵ Research by Statistics Canada for indicates that women especially have less time to devote to leisure activities. For example, in the aged 45 - 64 age group married, a male, employed (full-time) spends 5.2 hours/day for leisure activities whereas the equivalent female spends 3.9 hours/day. Time available is even less for the age 25 - 44 age group, and less for married fathers at 4.4 hours/day and mothers 3.6 hours per day (Frederick 1995). See also Stinson and Richmond (1993) who argue that union activism is biased against women because union activities take place during times when primarily women are also engaged in domestic and care-giving responsibilities.

¹²⁶ Channel capacity: "depends on technological abundance as well as how equally it is shared" (Tehrani 1990:52).

CUPE's facilitator program on 'how to use WP software' and 'on how to use SoliNet'.

Ray Arsenault, CUPE's Managing Director of Union Development, observes that the call for computer training from the locals has been minimal. Those who have access to computers are those union members who work at a location that has access (in a school or university, for example), so that the local union can loan or rent the computers after regular hours. Arsenault notes how locals are still resistant to computers, such that unless there is a person at the local who is computer literate already, or who is willing to argue for the necessity, there is no motivation to use them (Arsenault 2/12/96). Union members who do not work with computers (e.g. cleaners, public works, and other labourers) are less likely to have access or be computer literate.¹²⁷ Unless the union procures the equipment, technological abundance is subject to work access and/or disposable incomes, which thus limits the likelihood of rank and file access and participation.¹²⁸

¹²⁷ Access and computer literacy are directly related. A recent survey by Statistics Canada, found that: "Employed professionals and high level managers were most likely to report using a computer (over 90%). This was followed by skilled clerical, sales and service providers, and technicians, at 85% each. Other occupations where a large proportion of individuals reported computer literacy included middle-level managers and self-employed professionals (80% each). Occupations where less than one half of individuals reported that they could use a computer included semi-skilled and unskilled manual workers, farmers and farm-labourers" (Oderkirk 1996:12).

¹²⁸ As Oderkirk (1996) also submits: "For those who have little or no access to computers at school, the workplace, or in the community, the only opportunity to develop computer skills and to benefit from the Information Highway is to buy a home computer. According to the Household Facilities and Equipment Survey the 20% of households in Canada with the highest incomes were four times as likely to as the 20% with the lowest incomes to have a computer at home. Thus, those people with low incomes who might benefit most from improving their computer skills...face the possibility of becoming further marginalized as other Canadians use computers to develop new skills (Oderkirk 1996:10). Dickinson and Sciadas (1996) (Statistics Canada) found an even stronger correlation between income and computer and modem ownership. In both the above studies there were also a positive correlation between education and computer literacy (Oderkirk) and education and computer ownership (Dickinson).

Even amongst those in the union who have access to computers at work, technological abundance is not spread out equally. For example, of the 50 respondents to the user questionnaire, 18 accessed SoliNet only from work (16 women and 2 men); whereas 8 members used a mobile laptop computer (4 women and 4 men); and 24 accessed it from home and from work (4 women and 20 men). Those members who have options on where and when to access SoliNet would therefore have increased options and possibilities for use. Although 50% of the non-users (all women) indicated that they have home computers, women's participation may be lower given that women generally access SoliNet from work,¹²⁹ whereas men use SoliNet at home as well as work.

4.4 Content Variety¹³⁰

The facilitation for content variety was established by (or in cooperation with) the Technology Office in four major areas: journalism, education, social, and political issue conferences. Each of these areas is open and accessible to all members of SoliNet. They afforded a variety of content possibilities that will be discussed under the different area headings as follows:

¹²⁹ Balka (1992:173/4) also found that women participants in a women's discussion group on-line also accessed it primarily from work.

¹³⁰ Content variety "is the outcome of true access and active participation in the production of messages" (Tehrani 1990:53).

4.4.1 Journalism

Each organization on SoliNet is able to publish its own newsletter on-line. This provided an alternative media forum that was not subject to censorship or editing by CUPE or anyone else. This means that member organizations are able to produce messages for and about themselves to the members that could be downloaded and circulated to members' family and friends, i.e. publicly. In most cases, the on-line newsletter was/is the electronic version of the printed newsletter or are official news releases tailored for mass media journalism. With the exception of *Worldlink*, all the newsletters are 'read-only'. As was noted earlier, this means that the on-line version does not take advantage of the two-way possibilities of CMC for general member input and further discussion and/or criticisms. Union newsletters in particular have been criticized for this lack of rank-and-file participation and for placing too much emphasis on a "leader to member" information flow without a corresponding "member to member" or "member to leader" exchange (Pizzigati and Solowey 1992:227/228). As the contributors to the *New Labor Press* [Pizzigati and Solowey (eds.) 1992] argue, democracy in union publications is lacking. They offer that the following elements are necessary to a democratic press, and are applicable to the newsletters on SoliNet:

- (1) Maximize the participation of rank and file in all aspects of production (Proston 1992);¹³¹

¹³¹Increasing rank and file participation entails a change of thinking of what role the editor/journalist plays in production as Raboy and Bruck (1989b:13) suggest: "A democratic media system means building a two-way communication structure. This entails a re-theorizing that moves away from the conception - dominant within the commercial liberal press - of the media as the *source* of information. Journalists should become 'facilitators' or social communication instead of the 'originators' of media messages".

(2) Open discussion and criticism of internal union actions/politics including recognition of constraints and limitations (Witt 1992);¹³² and,

(3) Include concrete plans for political action at all levels - not just the federal or provincial levels of government - but also in the home and in the workplace. [Political action at all levels means an expansion of the sites of activism, where political and social change can occur (i.e. not just toward major political campaigns).]¹³³

This is easier stated in theory than done in practice however. As a review of participation in SoliNet suggests, active participation is not the norm. It requires time, purpose and education. It also requires that these projects are facilitated and developed, as Deetz (1992:109) proposes:

The issue of participation is that of how different groups utilize the technologies and what they do to people's capacity to express different kinds of meaning.

Expanding content could include for example: member produced journalism (e.g. composed articles with time deadlines); creative writing (e.g. stories, poems, songs); as well as developing forums for constructive criticism and feedback . Given that unions are not disposed to internal criticism (as Belanger experienced with some of the articles from *SoliNotes*) the possibility for a critical development is slim unless the details (i.e. responsibility and accountability for critical forums) are worked out with union leadership.

¹³² Witt (1992:40) contends that what is at stake is credibility: "The right to express yourself and hear what others have to say is an essential prerequisite for democracy. By the same token, the capacity to acknowledge problems, unmet goals, and differing points of view is an essential prerequisite for credibility, without which a union publication is useless because it won't be read."

¹³³ For example, Jacobsen and Phillips (1992) suggest that in working towards gender equality, members can critically look at their own attitudes and behaviour in interpersonal relationships besides, and as well as the workplace, in unions and in government policies.

4.4.2 Education

With the exception of the French language course and the union database course, the educational seminars on SoliNet were held at a university level. With professors and other experienced members as moderators, the conferences allowed members to broaden and advance their knowledge in areas critical to social development. Membership was not as high as some of the other conferences, however, participation was (on average) higher in the seminar courses than any other conference category. This suggests that educational content provides for a more concentrated or focused basis for participation that could correspondingly facilitate increased participation (e.g. it is easier to contribute when the topic or area has been identified and defined). However, the implicit level of education required to participate may have excluded a larger number of members from joining.

There is a wide range of educational courses that could be added to the SoliNet seminars. For example, CUPE and other unions are committed to adult education for their members, and as Spencer (1994:45) suggests, "union controlled labour education remains a major provider of nonformal adult education for working people." He explains that there are three different kinds of courses that are provided by unions for their members:

- (1) *tool* courses which prepare members for active roles within the union (e.g. shop steward training, grievance handling, health and safety);

(2) *issue* courses which are targeted specifically at raising awareness of issues such as sexual harassment and racism; and

(3) *labour studies* courses which seek to examine the union context (e.g. labour history, economics and politics) (Spencer 1994:48-49).

CUPE for example, begins education with the tool courses and works up to the labour studies courses in a "Six-Level Program" (Spencer 1994). SoliNet seminars are at the labour studies level, as are the Athabasca University courses, but these are not a part of the Six-Level Program (although SoliNet is used for communications between educators and students for after-course support). This is because CUPE, like other unions, prioritizes face-to-face communication for education and union development. As Danny Mallett, who is the National Coordinator (Program) Development, at the CLC Organization/ Educational Service Department explains:

The culture of the movement is subversive. That is, people join in adversarialness. In the early days of unionism, for example - the printers - had a verbal agreement not to work more than nine-hour days. It was verbal, not in writing, so there could be no evidence of a conspiracy. This face-to-face communication is still important and will be for a couple more generations, until maybe there's a camera on top of the computer and people can look at each other when they communicate (Mallett 16/12/96).

This union "culture" is thus resistant to using CMC specifically for union development.

However, the educational courses do not reach as many people as they could, i.e.

Spencer (1994) estimates that only about 3 - 5 % of the total union membership have

access to union education. This is due to the necessary employer arrangements,

expense and the logistics of bringing people to one location for a course. Education on-

line continues to be developed [see Harasim, Harrison and Stephen (1996); Mason and Kaye (1989); Kahle (1997)] and could be applied to further adult education at a general level. This means that courses could be established which would complement the current program as well as developing courses to assist members in basic skill development and general citizenship knowledge. As was discussed earlier, the ability to write well and to actively participate are communication skills. Seminars on basic writing skills, grammar, and study skills could assist member education.¹³⁴ These could be complemented by courses on critical thinking; municipal, provincial and federal government structures; political processes; etc., towards the development of citizenship.

4.4.3 Social Conferences

The comments within the social conferences, particularly in the LOUNGE, indicate a wide variety of input and participation. 'True access' is difficult to assess however, given the negative reaction of some CUPE members and even SoliNet users who disagree with the conferences' existence. Some responses in the questionnaires demonstrated resistance and outright opposition to the social conferences because they are seen as a 'waste of time'. As one respondent put it:

I don't see, or cannot justify spending my employer's time and money to communicate with other CUPE employees. Personally I think SoliNet should

¹³⁴ Gindin (1995:223) identifies the importance of education in developing union culture. He includes that this education in the past consisted of "films, pamphlets, union newspapers, music and even writing classes that encouraged workers to resist the dominant culture and tell their own stories". This is what Waterman (1990) (Section 1.5.3) was referring to in demonstrating that CMC can be used to "stimulat[e] a variety of communication forms".

only be used from the workplace for work-related issues not to voice my personal opinions or gossip.

Research on CMC suggests that social or informal discussion groups are a positive influence on work groups, as provided by Wellman et al. (1996:227):

Such informal messaging may reduce work stress (Steinfeld 1985), integrate new or peripheral employees (Eveland & Bickson 1988; Rice & Steinfeld 1994, Steinfeld 1985), and increase organizational commitment (Hiuff et al. 1989, Kaye 1992, Sproull and Kiesler 1991).

As commented in the hobby conference, these types of conferences are particularly comforting in times of strike, (as they would be during unemployment or retirement). However, as long as there are negative perceptions (as illustrated by the previous comment), the conferences will continue to be a source of criticism which could increase and negatively effect future development of SoliNet (e.g. in terms of support for its existence, especially in terms of justifying financial support). This is why the availability of personal time to communicate on SoliNet is a necessity, and why the general educational conferences could help build participation and an awareness of SoliNet's value.

4.4.4 Political and Social Issue Conferences

Conferencing requires active participation to fuel content and sustain interest. As has been suggested earlier, this is entirely member dependent. Successful conferences like the Constitution (Section 3.5) are active because members are

regularly contributing, they acknowledge and respond to others' input, and address their comments, suggestions, and/or criticisms to the issues at hand, versus making personal attacks. Members who are the most experienced on SoliNet (judging from similar names across issue conference membership and input) also tend to be experienced union activists and hold leadership positions within their organizations. These members are arguably more accustomed to communicating effectively both in face-to-face and written communication, and thus are more confident in contributing. Even within this group of 'regulars' however, the participation of men in comparison to women was four to one. This is consistent with what little research that has been done on gender uses of computer networks as summarized by Balka (1992):

There is...little work that addresses gender issues around computer communication networks, even though gender differences seem to exist in this area. For example, where use is voluntary, women seem to use such systems much less than do men (Hiltz, Kerr & Johnson, 1985; Kerr & Hiltz, 1982; Smith & Balka, 1988). Hiltz, Kerr and Johnson report a five to one male/female ratio in their sample.

This gap is partially explained by research into technology and gender relations which centers on: (1) women's exclusion from technological design and development (e.g. Cockburn 1985; MacKenzie and Wajcman 1985; and Suchman and Jordan 1988); (2) effects on women's employment in terms of deskilling and job elimination (e.g. Drygulski Wright 1987; and Hartmann 1987); and (3) oppositions between the public and private (or domestic) sphere which affect women's use of technology (Frissen 1992). Research by Frissen (1992) in particular, begins to discuss differences in technological use, which suggests that men use computers as part of their leisure to

communicate with others, whereas women are more interested in functional uses (pg. 41). This would be consistent with the non-users' response in the SoliNet questionnaire which indicated that they didn't have any personal or work-related *reason* to use SoliNet.

Responding to women members' concerns of possible barriers to women's participation, a conference was established to provide a forum for discussion amongst women members of SoliNet. Belanger explains that when the conference was being organized, the women with whom he spoke referred to the conference (and the network in general) in terms of a "physical space". They preferred that the conference be designated 'closed' in order to provide a "safe place" so that the participants would be assured that it was only other women who they were interacting with (Belanger 1/4/97). The closed conference was established in January 1990, and 51 women joined as members. Over a year and a half, 212 messages were entered into the conference with 35 women participating. This yields a participation rate of 70%, which is higher than any open conference observed on SoliNet.¹³⁵ Also notable was that participation was relatively even, that is, fully 90% of the participants added comments on a regular basis so that participation was equally distributed, with no one person(s) dominating the input or discussion comments. This in contrast to other conferences such as the LOUNGE where there was a core group of people who were the majority commentators, and the

¹³⁵ There were a lot of personal introductions with a mix of sharing of past and present life experiences which was also notable in other open conferences when first established. The conference was actively moderated and issues were introduced such as violence against women, sisterhood in unions, and pay equity which were carried on in subsequent discussions.

seminar conferences in which the moderator takes a leading role. The conference continued from June 1991 to June 1996, but it only generated 212 messages, or less than a message a week. It would appear then, that the closed conference provided the space for women to communicate, but once established, the participants did not continue to fuel the discussion. Without active participation the conference activity decreased to a bare minimum almost exactly like other open conferences.

Judging from successful conferences, a core group of regulars is needed to keep the conference going, at the same time however, the level of discourse of the core group can be exclusionary. These conundrums are illustrated in the following response to the user questionnaire corresponding to open conferences:

[The] [s]ystem only works if people use it. In the last two years I decreased my participation due to lack of active participants. In open conferences I lack the intense labour background or intellectual insight to participate.

Lack of active participation is the crux of the problem for any number of conferences on SoliNet, and gets to the heart of the difference between democracy in communication and democracy through communication. This will be discussed further in Chapter Five, but suffice for now, is to recognize that democracy in communication can be afforded by the technology, the structure, the conference purpose, content variety etc.: but as has been suggested from observations of the open conferences, it can not continue without regular, active participation.

4.5 Low Noise¹³⁶

4.5.1 Conference Status

Ensuring that there is “low noise”, that is, that members are free (and feel free) to express themselves without censorship or harassment, repercussions etc. is an issue which is at the center of decisions on whether a conference should be open to all members, or closed to a particular group. As was illustrated in the women's conference, the closed status provided the space for women's communication but it was not sustained in terms of continual input. The decision on whether to have an open or closed conference so that both “true access” is available and “low noise” is affordable is a difficult one to make. Belanger has had numerous discussions with both moderators and participants on this issue. He has suggested that on the new SoliNet, the women's conference should be open for all members to read, but only to women members to ‘read-write’. However, the discussions continue with some women members who argue that a closed conference would better serve the women members. In observing public conferencing in open discussion groups, Balka (1992) suggests restricting access to ‘women only’ because of the harassment, violence, or flaming that occurs there. General observations of SoliNet did not yield any evidence of these occurrences. This

¹³⁶ Low noise “is a technical requirement as well as a political condition of rational and intelligible discourse” (Tehrani 1990:53).

could be because of the union culture,¹³⁷ however, this doesn't mean that fear of the possibility isn't a sufficient barrier to women's participation so that the conferences should be closed.¹³⁸ For example, the 'gay and lesbian' conference was established as open to all members, but it did not have a high participation rate. Belanger speculates that "straight" members were hesitant to join the conference on the speculation that they might be considered gay, and gay members may not have wanted to participate because they may not have wanted the general membership to know they were gay (Belanger 1/4/97). Thus "true access" and "active participation" are also subject to levels of self-censorship, which affect the communicative environment.

4.5.2 Censorship

As computer conferencing maintains a record of all input, new members are anxious about the privacy and confidentiality of comments made in both open and closed conferences (Belanger 1/4/97). In the early years of SoliNet, this was not an issue. The question of censorship arose only in the LOUNGE in 1995 (three years after the conference had been operating) after a one-line derogatory comment was entered in by an unknown participant.¹³⁹ The comment was initially taken as a joke, but was

¹³⁷For example, CUPE has an "Equality Statement" which (in part) reads:

"As unionists, mutual respect, cooperation and understanding are our goals. We should neither condone nor tolerate behaviour that undermines the dignity or self-esteem of any individual or creates an intimidating, hostile or offensive environment (Equality Statement President and National Secretary-Treasurer, CUPE, Ottawa, no date).

However, the existence of the many committees, task forces and campaigns against such behaviour attests to the difficulty of ensuring equality in practice.

¹³⁸For further discussions on women's participation on Internet-based networks see Balka (1992:73 & 298); Voisin (1994); and Mallon (1996).

¹³⁹(i.e. someone using an office user name, without providing his/her own name in the message).

responded to in further entries such that it grew into a debate, first on the status of the comment (whether it was seriousness or not), which then escalated into a discussion on the necessity of censorship on SoliNet. Most of the participants advocated minimal censorship, if any, and argued that the LOUNGE participants themselves should deal with the offending remark within the LOUNGE. In the end, strong arguments were made from the perspective that unions work to eradicate sexism, racism, and violence in the workplace and in the home, so why should it be any different on SoliNet? This became a conclusion that was generally accepted by the participants.

In response to the debate over censorship and to reassure new members of the privacy and confidentiality of SoliNet functions, Belanger posted a set of guidelines (Annex B) regarding the status and boundaries of discourse on the network. The guidelines were discussed in the LOUNGE and accepted by the participants with little controversy. As Belanger observes, the rules actually helped new members feel confident about using the system in that they served to allay some of their fears of using the different medium (Belanger 1/4/97). As some of the responses to the questionnaire suggest however, members are cautious of possible misinterpretations or distortions which can occur with the written text, and are sensitive to how others respond to their criticisms. As these two responses to the questionnaire demonstrate:

- 1) Comments are restricted by political correctness. People have been bashed for expressing unpopular views, thus open debate is limited; and

2) I find [that] an opinion different than what is being expressed will often create absolute silence!

This suggests that people will censor their own messages if they perceive that the response will be negative, or find that their views are not supported or shared.¹⁴⁰

4.6 Speedy Transmission¹⁴¹

4.6.1 Technical Requirement

In the early years of operation, the speed of SoliNet email and file transfer to send and receive information was heralded as far superior to any other medium of transmission. As computer technology was developed further such that progress was measured in terms of speed, the expectations of SoliNet members also increased. One of the problems identified from the questionnaire responses was the time it takes to file transfer, which (depending on the size of the file) can take up to ten minutes. This is considered slow because it ties up the computer (i.e. it can't be used for other operations during the same time). In contrast, the actual time used to find a file, place it in an envelope and mail it, etc., previous to computer transfer could have taken up to a week or longer. As computer technology is advanced towards increases in speed for example, so do the expectations of the users. This means that there is constant

¹⁴⁰ See also Balka (1992).

¹⁴¹ Speedy transmission "may be considered both a technical as well as a political requirement. The time it takes between the transmission of a message, its reception, and the response to it reflects the technological as well as institutional capabilities for speedy communication" (Tehrani 1990:53).

pressure on the Technology Office and therefore on CUPE to keep up with technological changes. Each change in technology, or each update, effects budgets, and other logistics including implementation, change-over time, training time, etc. It also means that not everyone gets the newest machines or software, and given that the more advanced equipment is usually also more expensive, it puts a drain on budgets to finance the new purchases. Thus there are continual periods of adjustment, and inequalities between computer access and use.

4.6.2 Political Requirement

Within a conference, speedy transmission depends upon the individual participants and the moderator. The time lag - the difference between when a comment was first entered into a conference and when it is acknowledged (and/or replied to) - varies from conference to conference. The greater the time lag between messages, the more likely the subject will drop, or worse, the participant may withdraw because of lack of recognition of her/his input. This increases the onus on the moderator and/or other participants to support a reciprocal conference structure (as was discussed previously in Section 4.1).

On a larger scale, this last condition calls into question the responsiveness of the institution, or in this case the unions, organizations and associations who use SoliNet as part of their communications. In the first place it should be remembered that SoliNet is not the only method of organizational communication. As was noted previously, unions

especially tend to place a high premium on the necessity for face-to-face communication. Secondly, membership in SoliNet is primarily voluntary, as Belanger explained, there was never a CUPE policy on use. The departments, branches, and committees, etc., utilizing it for inter-group communications do so on a branch-by-branch basis. Other than the BCTF and CALM (whose usage will be reviewed in Chapter Five), the organizational use of SoliNet was also optional such that only a select number of individuals in each organization actually utilized the network. CUPE as an organization supported SoliNet use by providing a capital budget, and like other departments, the Technology Office must submit a yearly request for their operating budget. Most of the money has gone on upgrading equipment, but the Technology Office has remained the same size over the existence of SoliNet, whether the users were 300 (as they were in the beginning), or 2500. This means that the users' problems, questions and further training could not be fully supported.¹⁴² Moreover, SoliNet has not been developed to its full potential because there is only a very small department which is managing the technical requirements of *all* the computer operations in CUPE, as well as trying to manage and further develop SoliNet.

¹⁴² From the questionnaire responses, other problems affecting access for *non-users* are lack of, or inadequate SoliNet training (20%) and lack of, or inadequate computer training (16%) [12% left the question blank]. Training on SoliNet was also somewhat of a problem for *organizational users* (15.6%), however 50% left the question regarding problems blank which may indicate that the problems were minor or insignificant. Of *current users* of SoliNet, 12.25% cited SoliNet training as a factor. For both the users and the organizations, problems affecting SoliNet penetration were of a technical nature, and had to do with software, accessing SoliNet (modem connections), and technical support (37.63% for users, and 15.65% for organizations). Cost of SoliNet access was cited by 12.5% of organizations. [The remaining figures for problems encountered with SoliNet use are: lack of computer training [organizations (6.25%) and users (7.87%)], and for users remaining problems: lack of input into SoliNet design (5.25%); 'other' (file transfer is too time consuming) (3.5%) and costs of SoliNet access (3.5%)].

Expanding the use of SoliNet for other union functions such as reports on convention resolutions, task forces, or committees, and providing a space for input and debate on these reports, has not been developed. This means that speedy transmission, for the most part, has been a technical requirement and has not developed into a political one in CUPE or in most of the other organizational members. These and other issues will be reviewed in the next chapter when SoliNet is discussed within the context of democracy through communication.

4.7 Summary

This chapter has provided an evaluation of SoliNet against the six conditions proposed by Tehranian (1990) supporting democracy in communication. The application of these conditions to SoliNet suggests the following:

(1) The **interactivity** that is implicit in SoliNet's use by both current and past members, as well as by organizational usage centers on the exchange of information. It was argued that further development of interaction in terms of communication (dialogue and discussion) is dependent on the type of conference, the style of moderation and participation. The most interactivity is within the social or leisure interest conferences and in those with question-and-answer type formats. In seminars and issue conferences however, there is a tendency to post more information versus building discussion and stimulating debate. The moderator can influence, but

not determine interaction by acknowledging participants' input and stimulating further dialogue. The majority of SoliNet members do not use the conferences to develop interactivity, preferring to participate through exercising their 'read-only' option. This severely impairs the development and extent of interactivity possible on SoliNet. Also dominant are members who tend to post more information, and those who add one-time comments without soliciting further response. The active participant is in the minority and relies on a number of communication skills. It was suggested that factors such as computer literacy, effective writing skills, and time available to participate, all affect the participant's ability to interact.

(2) **Universality:** Penetration and access to SoliNet is limited because of a number of organizational and individual barriers. At the organizational level, access to SoliNet is dependent on access to computer equipment and work requirements. With less than 5% of all organizations with access to SoliNet, universality is negligible. Individual barriers which include any of the physical, psychological, social, and/or educational barriers, may limit access in varying degrees. The new environment of CMC affords social decontextualization, but it was suggested that members bring their social experiences from other forms of communication such that previously held biases, or constraints to communication may affect the environment. Another barrier to access was identified as an actual or perceived lack of time to participate, depending on the individual's intention for SoliNet's use which could be political, social, and/or educational.

(3) **Channel Capacity:** Technological abundance has only been met at a minimal level. Resistance to exploiting computer technology has meant that only a fraction of the union and other organizational membership has basic access to computer equipment. Home ownership of computers and portable laptop computers provide for increased opportunities to access SoliNet, but these are unevenly distributed and are still affected by time availability.

(4) **Content Variety:** The conferences on SoliNet have been organized by the Technology Office for fulfilling specific purposes, such as journalism, education and movement building. Journalism on SoliNet provides a forum for organizational media messages that can be posted directly from the source versus being filtered through mass media agenda's which provides for increased control over content. The 'read-only' status of this journalism means however that the interactive properties of CMC were not exploited, in that the content and formats of the newsletters are the same as they are in print. It was suggested that member input be actively solicited through the inclusion of creative writing forums, and through the development of a critical and a member feedback venue. The formal courses on SoliNet provided an opportunity for member education at a university level without explicit entry restrictions. It was also suggested that other courses be offered at a general adult education level for the development of communication skills, as well as citizenship skills, which may further enhance content and encourage wider participation in SoliNet.

The variety of the social conferences provide for a range of leisure interests which, on the whole, are appreciated by the membership and enjoy the highest equal participation rate of both men and women. It was suggested however, that criticisms of these types of conferences might limit further participation unless there is an increasing awareness or promotion of the importance of their existence. The number and variety of political and social issue conferences stimulated the most participation of all the conferences on SoliNet. The issue conferences provided a forum for information exchange, debate and discussion of topical issues directly related to current problems facing labour and society in general. However, the huge gap between women and men's participation rates affect the extent of balance and representation possible in the debate.

(5) **Low Noise:** is both a result of the status of the conference and censorship on SoliNet. To assure low noise, some conferences may have to be closed to secure participation within a particular group. However, this presents a dilemma, because closing a conference does not satisfy a condition of "true access". As well, conference status may not impact on the discourse anyway because participants will censor their own messages based on how they perceive the message will be received by the conference membership. The SoliNet guidelines were added to provide for members' security. It was noted that this alleviated members' concerns regarding privacy and confidentiality.

(6) **Speedy Transmission:** It was suggested that the technical advantage of speedy transmission on SoliNet has had a corresponding increase in members' expectations of the requirements of the system. It was argued that the support of SoliNet from CUPE and other member organizations has prioritized the technical development of the system, but has not equally developed the political capacity for communication such that there has not been a full adoption of the system for inter-organizational communication.

4.8 Conclusion

These above six conditions provided a set of guidelines which have facilitated an analysis of the usage of SoliNet as laid out in Chapter Three within the context of democracy in communication. They highlight a number of positive attributes to SoliNet's design and use, which indicate substantial trends towards democracy in communication. Foremost is the open access to a wide variety and number of conferences that are not explicitly restrictive to participation in any way. This design means that SoliNet members have access to applicable information, opportunities for educational development, a common place to meet for community building, and a number of forums for two-way discussion on topical political and social issues. Despite numerous barriers to participation, the SoliNet membership has been actively engaged in the conferences on a regular basis for over 10 years, and continues to maintain open conference activity completely on a voluntary basis. However, as a close analysis reveals, there are a number of challenges to the prospect of democracy in

communication. These include the following: (1) a focus on the use of SoliNet for information versus communication exchange such that there is a under-development of interactive dialogue both on an individual and organizational level; (2) a lack of access at the union local and general organizational membership level; and (3) minimal participation rates, which includes a number of barriers to participation, and large differences between male and female participation rates. These challenges and others discussed in this chapter indicate the complexities of CMC use, which mediate democracy in communication and provide a number of areas for further development both in research and in practice. These areas will be reviewed in the following chapter when the prognosis for democratized communication and democratization through communication is discussed. Following the questions that lead the thesis, the next chapter will first provide an overview and then evaluate SoliNet according to how its use contributes to democracy through communication or social change.

Chapter Five: Democracy through Communication

5.0 Introduction

Unions exist as collective organizations, made up of “working people who join together”¹⁴³ to “seek as best they can to obtain outcomes beneficial to their members and, in their view, to society as a whole”.¹⁴⁴ Thus their interests lie in both the “wages and conditions of work”,¹⁴⁵ as well as with “social issues which affect all citizens”.¹⁴⁶ As identified by the CLC (of which CUPE is a member) these issues include “universal health care and pensions, human rights, equal access to education, improved housing, and equitable taxation”.¹⁴⁷ The union structure is based on a representative democracy which begins with electing leadership at the local level who also “debate and vote on policies that are carried out” by their own national union, and “in the CLC, its provincial federations of labour and labour councils”.¹⁴⁸ The aggregate of labour unions that combine these objectives form part of what Wasko (1992:6) refers to as “democratic progressive movements devoted to social change”.

Unions work towards social change at the workplace and local, provincial, and national levels of government to affect workplace, labour, and government legislation. Acting on resolutions made at the biennial conventions, CUPE committees and task

¹⁴³ “Why Unions?” *Notes on Unions* 1. Canadian Labour Congress (not dated).

¹⁴⁴ Freeman and Medoff (1984:191). The caveat “in their view” recognizes that not all unions hold socially progressive views, e.g. see Brecher and Costello (1996).

¹⁴⁵ “Why Unions?” *Notes on Unions* 1. Canadian Labour Congress (not dated).

¹⁴⁶ “Labour’s Social Objectives.” *Notes on Unions* 5. Canadian Labour Congress (not dated).

¹⁴⁷ “Labour’s Social Objectives.” *Notes on Unions* 5. CLC (not dated).

¹⁴⁸ “Labour’s Structure.” *Notes On Unions* 4. CLC (not dated).

forces for example, research and plan strategies for change. These committees are made up of a combination of elected representatives, permanent staff, and volunteers from the general membership. An example of the committees which have been in existence since SoliNet came on-line include committees on: National Day Care; Health and Safety; Contracting-Out and Privatization;¹⁴⁹ Racism; Discrimination; Employment Equity; International Solidarity;¹⁵⁰ and the Pink Triangle Committee (addresses gay and lesbian issues).¹⁵¹ In addition to these committees is a National Task Force on Women and various convention resolutions which identify areas for social and political action, (such as Economic Policy, Free Trade, Tax Reform, Unemployment, Technological Change, and the Environment), including specific federal government policies regarding the CBC, and union relations with the New Democratic Party. This is the work of the union that is performed in addition to the regular collective bargaining action, arbitration and grievance handling, etc., which are part of the employer-employee relationship.

To answer the questions which lead the thesis, the following (Part I) will provide an overview of how SoliNet was (or is) used in assisting the union to work for social change on an organizational level. SoliNet's use will be discussed in terms of how it particularly helped CUPE's work, as well as other unions and associations which also used SoliNet. Following this overview will be an identification of the hindrances to SoliNet's use (Part II) which will be discussed in terms of answering the

¹⁴⁹ *CUPE Convention Report Quebec City 1987.*

¹⁵⁰ *CUPE Convention Report Vancouver 1989.*

¹⁵¹ *CUPE Convention Report Vancouver 1993.*

second question of the thesis regarding the prognosis for democracy in and through communication.

Part I: Facilitating Democracy through Communication

5.1 Organizational Uses of SoliNet (CUPE)

The initial advantages of SoliNet for CUPE were demonstrated financially in reductions of communications' costs. Within one year of operation, and even with a limited amount of people using SoliNet, CUPE's long distance charges decreased by 10% (Belanger 12/9/96). Other organizational advantages brought on by using SoliNet include(d):

- (1) a decentralization of CUPE's organizational structure;
- (2) increased efficiency and effectiveness of daily union operations;
- (3) improved internal communications; and
- (4) enhanced lobbying campaigns.

Each of these areas will be elaborated in the subsections following.

5.1.1 Decentralization

Work-related communication between the locals and the staff at the national office is communicated both *politically* [through the elected members of the National Executive (e.g. decision-making, policy actions, resolutions, etc.)] and *administratively* (e.g. through the various branches and departments for support which includes legal, communications, and research, etc.). The use of SoliNet enhanced both these channels and facilitated a decentralization of union services. For example, in the early 1980s there were no specialized staff representatives in the field.¹⁵² All planning and coordination of work projects were done exclusively in Ottawa. To communicate with the locals, staff representatives had to either go there in person (which meant expensive and frequent travel), or communicate by mail or long-distance telephone (the latter requiring records and accountability). With the communication options afforded by SoliNet (and other political factors) staff representatives were established in the province (or area) to be physically closer to local operations while remaining linked to the National Office through SoliNet. This was seen as beneficial for CUPE given the continuing emphasis on both face-to-face communication and local autonomy.¹⁵³ Service representatives are now located closer to the locals across Canada without a corresponding decrease in contact with National Office.

¹⁵² E.g. Research, Education, Lawyers, etc.

¹⁵³ (CUPE *Our Story*, Belanger 1/4/97; Limberg 11/12/96).

5.1.2 Union Operations

With email and file transfer, the daily workings of the union have been improved. For example, to assist in the bargaining of collective agreements, an electronic summary settlement form was designed for service representatives to record the details of the agreement reached in their area or jurisdiction. As Larry Katz, Director of the Research Branch explains, there are ongoing negotiations for over 3000 agreements: using SoliNet, the information (supplied in the form) can be shared quickly and used to assist other representatives in similar and ongoing negotiations.

In addition, the research branch collects, codes and does surveys of collective agreements of its own every two years. These surveys cover wage and non-wage provisions and are circulated to locals and staff. The reports provide quantitative information which is used to compare agreements and to develop bargaining proposals [to support the employees' positions] (Katz 13/2/97).

Katz also contends that this information and further use of SoliNet will help facilitate the development of "coordinated bargaining" structures in the union. These structures will be based on consensus decision-making to build inter-local union cooperation, and to strengthen the union's overall position in negotiations (Katz 13/2/97).¹⁵⁴ The collection and subsequent sharing of collective agreement information regarding bargaining contracts, as well as the identification of problems and strategies, methods of success, etc., all increase the efficiency and effectiveness of research. Building information databases based on member's knowledge allows the union to consolidate and share

¹⁵⁴ See also CUPE (1990) *The Facts: Coordinated Bargaining Issue*, Vol. 12. No. 2, and Finn & Katz (1991) "Coordinated Bargaining" *Briarpatch*, July/August 1991, Vol. 20, No. 6 (pg. 9/10).

information. This will become increasingly important as employers also consolidate their information holdings and efforts towards strengthening their own positions.

5.1.3 Internal Communication

Within CUPE National, the committees, branches and departments who use SoliNet do so on an intra- and inter-group basis. That is, the members of a particular department for example, elect to use SoliNet in addition to their regular written, telephone, and face-to-face communications. Closed conferencing is used to discuss, plan and organize their work, including issue identification, problem solving and meeting scheduling. For example, the closed conferencing facility was used by the Women's Task Force and the Pink Triangle Committee to facilitate communication amongst geographically displaced members in between their face-to-face meetings. SoliNet is also particularly suited to national departments whose members travel and regularly communicate with the locals.¹⁵⁵ For example, as Ken Hopper, Senior Officer with Regional Services explains, with the members of the department in one conference, everyone can be involved in the construction of draft documents. "We can exchange documents, and send them to one location which makes a hard copy to fax, mail or deliver to locations which do not have computer access" (Hopper 13/12/96). Ray Arsenault, Director of Union Development describes his departmental use "mostly by senior officers - to develop and collect input into a specific course or project:

¹⁵⁵ For example, Health Services, Legal, and Research, as well as Union Development (the education department and educational representatives), including the National Representatives, and the Regional Services Department.

Initially there are phone calls to discuss the project, and who needs to be on. Once the project and project members have been identified, it is transferred to SoliNet so that the group can share information, write it out, and improve on the quality. Projects can involve six to seven people across Canada, who all work on it during the week, such that by the end of the week it is finished (Arsenault 2/12/96).

In the Research Branch, Katz notes that conference activity is particularly high when there is a direct need for staff to share information, to solve immediate problems, or address specific issues (Katz 13/2/97). During the event of a strike or protest, the speed of information transfer provides immediate 'from the source' news and reports on the locals effecting the action. Exchange with the National Office provides support in terms of research, communication, political advice, etc., as well as moral support for local actions. Using SoliNet brings immediate and tangible results, in that the response can be downloaded and printed for distribution to the members and the general public (Verzuh 25/10/96).

SoliNet closed conferencing facility is also used by the three unions that represent the CUPE employees themselves. These are the Canadian Staff Union (CSU), the Administrative and Technical Staff Union (ATSU), and the Office and Professional Employees International Union (OPIEU). For example, in the conference for OPIEU members, union leaders and administrators use the conference to inform their members of elections, contract proposals, and other internal union business. Interspersed between these messages is the exchange of personal and seasonal notes much like the open social conferences on SoliNet. The conference members are all women, and since it has been in existence (December 1989) it has averaged 140

members with a 29% participation rate,¹⁵⁶ which is slightly higher (3% more) than SoliNet's special issues and open seminar conferences.¹⁵⁷

5.1.4 Lobbying Campaigns

As a union of members working in the public sector, CUPE and its locals are under constant pressure as governments at all levels (federal, provincial and municipal) cut resource spending, restructure services, and privatize operations. The main method of combating these changes to the workplace and the effects on their membership is through organized lobbying campaigns. A campaign is made up of strategies and plans towards the mobilization of public and political support against changes which adversely affect CUPE's members, and the general public as a whole.¹⁵⁸ Campaigns can be local, regional or national in scope. For example, the "**100 Days Campaign**" was initiated by CUPE as part of its ongoing policy to "Save the CBC" which was developed in reaction to the 1984 Federal Government's 85 million dollar cut to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's budget.¹⁵⁹

¹⁵⁶ As Louise Cholette, OPIEU moderator notes, total OPIEU membership is 219, but there are also regional OPIEU conferences which would explain the difference in conference membership (Cholette 27/11/96).

¹⁵⁷ From the individual questionnaire responses, individuals used SoliNet primarily to communicate between and amongst CUPE offices (53%) (specifically, 22% National Office; 17% Regional, and 14% Area Offices), this is followed by communication with the members' own union (e.g. ATSU, CSU or OPIEU, CBEU, etc.) (28%), with other SoliNet members (11%) and other unions and organizations on SoliNet (8%). This suggests that exchange is primarily work-related tasks between CUPE offices, followed by their own union, and lastly with other unions and organizations.

¹⁵⁸ It is part of CUPE's policy to advocate for their membership as well as the general public, as the booklet on organizing campaigns states: "The union must advocate for public good as well as for the advancement of its members' interests" *Communicating CUPE: How to Reach Members and the Public*. CUPE publication (no date).

¹⁵⁹ "The cuts resulted in massive layoffs, the brunt of which was borne by CUPE members" (CUPE 1985 Winnipeg Convention Policy Report, pg. 11).

As Hopper (13/12/96) recalls, CUPE supported the campaign by providing office space, staff, facilities, and phone banks, etc., for CBC and non-CBC employees. CUPE/SCFP organized petition drives, lobbied on Parliament Hill, and sent representatives to the House of Commons and Senate Committees. The National President's Office (NPO), Research and Communication departments (now branches) worked together to develop this campaign in cooperation with other labour unions (such as PSAC, ACTRA, and the CBEU¹⁶⁰), as well as with other organizations and associations (like the Canadian Federation of Students, the Council of Canadians, The Friends of the CBC, and the 'coalition pour la defense des service francais de Radio-Canada'). These organizations had (or were given) access to SoliNet so that the lobbying committee members could use the conference as an active information centre to keep members informed on the activities, events and plans for what was called the "100 Days of Action Coalition". The minutes of the committee meetings and plans for subsequent meetings were also posted to the conference, as were reports on actions by the various groups.

Another campaign-related conference called "**privatecon**" was established as part of an ongoing struggle against the privatization and contracting out of government services. It is a permanent conference, which has averaged two to three messages a week since its inception in 1992. Members generally submit reports of local, regional, or provincial changes occurring in their jurisdictions across Canada (e.g. either in

¹⁶⁰ These stand for the Public Service Alliance of Canada (PSAC); the Association of Canadian Television and Radio Actors (ACTRA); and the Canadian Broadcast Employees Union (CBEU).

government policies, bills, or examples of cutbacks). The conference operates as part of CUPE's National Contracting-Out and Privatization Coordination Committee and is moderated by a member of the Committee. In addition to reports on where and how privatization plans are occurring, members indicate what kind of offensive and defensive initiatives have been launched in their areas and what the current success and failure rates are across the country. The conference is also used to post information regarding committee meetings, agendas, and information reports. There was a suggestion to open the conference to the larger SoliNet membership, but the Committee members decided against it to maintain content control and to ensure confidentiality of the material as it refers to political actions ("privatecon" Electronic Conference, SoliNet, CUPE, Ottawa).¹⁶¹

5.2 Organizational Members of SoliNet

5.2.1 British Columbia Teachers' Federation (BCTF)

The BCTF is "the union of professionals representing 40,000 public school teachers in the province of British Columbia"(BC).¹⁶² The Federation signed onto SoliNet in 1990 by opening accounts for their locals throughout BC.¹⁶³ Building on their

¹⁶¹ From the user questionnaire response, members (N=50) indicated the following opinions of the closed conferences on SoliNet: 57% found closed conferences more efficient (task-oriented) than open conferences; 23% preferred closed conferences because they are "more private" than open conferences; and 15% found them "more comfortable and easier to participate" in than open conferences.

¹⁶² Available at: www.bctf.bc.ca.

¹⁶³ See also Lee (1997).

experience with Envoy 100, the leadership decided to make the transition to SoliNet a full organizational commitment. As Larry Kuehn, then Director responsible for communication recalls:

Because the BCTF used electronic communications as a key part of its connections with locals, particularly in coordinated bargaining and political action, it was essential to have everyone on it so it was a complete network, not hit and miss (Kuehn 24/3/97).

The BCTF designated access to SoliNet for their members "based on their position in the union and need for direct access to information", and provided in-house training for the users.¹⁶⁴ Approximately 200 users were registered which included: local presidents and bargaining chairs, members of the provincial bargaining and professional development committees, BCTF executive and administrative staff, and some support staff. The Federation set up a number of open and closed conferences to facilitate union operations including: the BCTF news (Section 3.2.3); BCTF bargaining update (reports from the provincial coordinator on clauses signed off in locals);¹⁶⁵ a similar conference for local bargainers, and a conference called "BCTFpres" - which was used to post "messages for or from local presidents". As Kuehn explains, the latter conference:

¹⁶⁴ As Kuehn explains: "Training on the use of telecommunications has been an integral part of our annual training program for local officers from the beginning of our use of the medium. Training sessions were also conducted at regional meetings, and for a couple of years when we were implementing SoliNet, we had a staff member who traveled to locals that were having difficulty, to provide training and to be a consultant on the development of other uses of the computer" (Kuehn 24/3/97).

¹⁶⁵ This is similar to the electronic settlement form reports used by CUPE. As Kuehn emphasizes, these reports are essential in developing a "rolling pattern-bargaining" type of system, [which] allowed local bargainers to be able to make the case at their table based on what had been negotiated in other districts" (Kuehn 24/3/97).

...would include BCTF press releases as they were issued, so local presidents would know what was being said to respond to members or to local press. [There were also] [u]pdates on ministry policy announcements, [and] requests from local presidents for experience from other locals on a particular topic (Kuehn 24/3/97).

BCTF members also took part in the open conferences on SoliNet, but the actual penetration is unknown. Kuehn himself was a regular member in the LOUNGE and seminar conferences. He suggests that the biggest benefit for the BCTF on SoliNet was "the immediacy of communications and the opportunity for local leaders to participate in the strategic directions of the organization". He submits that this combination was the "key to success in fighting off a hostile government and in making big gains through local bargaining" (Kuehn 24/3/97). The organization ended its membership in SoliNet in 1995/6 and switched to Internet-based CMC. Kuehn explains that their decision was a largely due to user-preferences:

As activists discovered easy tools on the Internet - Eudora for example, for email, they started to refuse to use the SoliNet software because it was relatively difficult to learn to use and was less flexible than Internet email.

He also notes that over the years the costs of CMC networking has gone down:

In 1987 we spent more than \$150,000 on communication charges for the Envoy 100 system. Our SoliNet charges--for more communications and more users was about \$80,000 a year. Our current communications charges budget for greatly expanded communication using the Internet is about \$55,000.

Despite no longer being part of the SoliNet system, Kuehn believes that it won't make any difference now that they have changed to the Internet. He argues that as long as

the former members “work at finding related web sites and placing a link on their site” it will all “look virtually the same to the user” (Kuehn 24/3/97).

5.2.2 The Canadian Association of Labour Media (CALM)

Like the BCTF, CALM was one of the first associations to sign onto SoliNet in the early 1990s.

CALM is a national co-operative of union newsletters, magazines, and TV programs. CALM provides its member editors with monthly news and graphics service, computer graphics, and a quarterly how-to newsletter (Kilgour 1996:32).

The Association uses SoliNet to facilitate communications in and amongst their members, and to provide an on-line newservice that is available to their members in a closed conference. CALM's editor, Art Kilgour estimates that of their approximately 500 members,¹⁶⁶ less than 100 use SoliNet on a regular basis. He speculates that this is due to individual preferences in using CMC for the CALM service because the same news reports that are posted to the conference on SoliNet are also sent out by hard copy to the members by CALM. In describing who amongst CALM use(d) SoliNet on a regular basis, Kilgour offers the following:

My sense is that it is used solely by editors who are very computer literate and keyboard literate, who have some other reason to belong to SoliNet (they're CUPE members, or like the discussion conferences), and who like getting their news right after it's published (for instance, editors in B.C. probably get it 5 - 7 days sooner on SoliNet than they do in the mail) (Kilgour 5/12/96).

¹⁶⁶ Of this membership “20% ...are national/international/provincial or regional union publications [and] the rest are local union or labour council publications” (Kilgour 5/12/96).

Kilgour suggests that the main benefit of SoliNet use for the members is the speed of information transfer so that "we can reach editors who want the news very quickly". The association has also recently developed a Web-page (www.calm.ca) and members are switching from SoliNet over to Internet service providers. He suggests that the change is occurring due to SoliNet's text-only interface ("it's simply too long and cumbersome and difficult for most people"), and the lower costs of access (Kilgour 5/12/96).

5.3 Other Unions, Organizations, and Association Members

Other than the two major users described above, the rest of the other unions and associations on SoliNet used it for specific purposes on a more or less individual basis. For example, the Canadian Association of Adult Educators used SoliNet to keep their executive together in a closed conference (Belanger 1/4/97). Estimations of organizational use is derived from the responses from the organizational questionnaire (N=10) which indicates that the primary task-oriented use of SoliNet was (in order): for research, issue orientation, and external activism (defined as action for/against a government policy, coalitions or assistance to other organizations or associations on SoliNet).¹⁶⁷ From the same questionnaires, respondents indicated that SoliNet was used to communicate: firstly with other unions on SoliNet, then members of other

¹⁶⁷ In comparison, the individual users' questionnaire indicates that they used SoliNet for work-related tasks for problem solving (22%), issue orientation (20%), internal activism (17%), coordinated bargaining and specific research (12% each). Other answers include: collective bargaining (9%); external activism (6%), and labour education (2%).

organizations, and thirdly with members of their own union. The kind of information that was most likely posted on and/or retrieved from SoliNet included (also in order) national, and international labour information, and information on social issues. This use reflects the participation of organizations in open conferences that were work-related specifically. Primary benefits derived from SoliNet use were only reported on by half the respondents who indicated that SoliNet had contributed most to inter-union cooperation, as well as to group cohesion and solidarity benefits. Other associations who were given access to SoliNet but did not use it on an organizational basis include: provincial and federal federations of labour (e.g. BCFL, OFL, CLC); the National Anti-Poverty Organization; Council of Canadians; Canadian Health Coalition, provincial offices of the NDP (i.e. BC, Alberta, Ontario and PEI), as well as a variety of individuals in academic and government positions (elected NDP) who did not participate on a regular basis.

5.4 Open Conferencing

As was presented in Chapter Three, the design of SoliNet open conferencing facilities was to facilitate increased communication and information exchange by focusing on journalism, education and movement building. Using SoliNet, these areas contributed to progressive social change in the following ways:

(1) *By combining information sharing with practical actions:* To advance democracy through communication, the newsletters combined information sharing

between the organizations on SoliNet that was direct from the source and included concrete suggestions and plans for action that could be acted on by either (or both) the individual or organizational members of SoliNet. This moves beyond discourse towards actions directly connected to political and social change.

(2) *By facilitating member education:* Access to the university course provided an opportunity for members' labour education that was not explicitly restricted by time, distance, location, or previous credentials. Education is considered one of the stepping stones to democratic participation, as a booklet on education from the CLC puts it:

Like collective bargaining or any other union activity, labour education empowers workers. It gives us the skills, self confidence and leadership needed to co-operate and to challenge the arbitrary power of the employer. It's a crucial element to the democracy we stand for, part of the power we need for joint participation in the decisions which affect our lives (*Agitate, Educate, Organize*, CLC, Ottawa, not dated).

(3) *By including social spaces:* The social and leisure-interest conferences support democracy through communication, first by affording free social spaces open to any member's input and any topic for discussion, and secondly by contributing to group identity. Fisher and Kling (1990) emphasize the importance of such "free social spaces", as they are without any imposed hierarchy or status differentials. This term was originally applied by Evans and Boyte (1986) to define spaces such as community halls or church meetings, where people come together "to discuss and mutter and talk things over":

In free social spaces, the ideas that lead to organization, resistance, and, finally fundamental change, are able to percolate precisely because there are no controlling elites present, and because the constantly felt pressure of authoritative social institutions toward approved behaviour is blocked out (Fisher and Kling 1990:74).

The social spaces on SoliNet also facilitated an increase in group identity, as some of the participants emphasized the importance of knowing there were others who shared their views, job experiences and/or interests, whether they be political or social. As Belanger observed, when the LOUNGE was scheduled to close, members acted as they would in defense of a community.¹⁶⁸ According to the responses in the individual questionnaire (N = 48), members rated social and political benefits derived from SoliNet use more frequently than gains in time or financial costs.¹⁶⁹

(4) *By expanding the dialogue on political and social issues.* Major issues which were highlighted at National Conventions, such as Free Trade, Employment, and labour's relation with the NDP for example, were all established as open conferences on SoliNet to further discuss the issues amongst the CUPE membership and with other activists on the network. For union members especially, the conferences offer a place to further discuss and debate issues *beyond the convention floor*. This exchange is expanded as it includes other members of SoliNet from other unions and organizations who are

¹⁶⁸ The conceptualization of community as applied to computer networks is reviewed and explored in Foster (1996).

¹⁶⁹ The specific breakdown is as follows: tangible benefits (30%), i.e. time efficiency (23%) and financial benefits (17%); versus a combined total (70%) indicating the following: increased internal coordination and cooperation (14%), group cohesion and solidarity (13%), increased inter-union and inter-organizational coordination and cooperation (9%); increased activism (8%) and, decreased social barriers to participation (6%).

increasingly involved in the same issues. The addition of international conferences such as "Worldlink", the US and Russia conferences, also increases the scope for learning and debate. The engagement of academics in seminars, and of people from policy development organizations like the CCPA, are specifically geared toward developing courses of action towards change. As Taylor (1996) advances:

At its best, SoliNet is contributing to the building of a social movement when it facilitates these discussions and the actions that grow from them. [In] ...conferences concerned with free trade for example, resources and information that facilitate the struggle against free trade, and the corporate agenda that labor and others feel is being promoted by free trade, are shared. Furthermore, popular alternatives to this agenda are formulated, debated, and refined. In the process, links are made between individuals in various unions and, more importantly, relationships between the labor movement and kindred movements are nourished (Taylor 1996:280).

The above summary has given an indication of how SoliNet was used on an organizational level to advance union and association work, and on an individual and collective level towards movement development. As was identified in the previous chapter, there are a number of challenges ahead which mediate the potential for democracy in communication. These and other challenges to democracy through communication will be discussed in the following section.

Part II: Prognosis for Democracy in and through Communication

5.5 Participation in Interactive Dialogue

As was identified in the previous chapter, the main use of SoliNet is for information exchange. It was observed that even in the open conferences, exchange was still primarily information-based. The difference between information and communication exchange is discussed by Menzies (1996), who submits that computer technology is 'biased towards a transmission view of communication'. As she writes: "This model sees communication as a modified form of transportation, the purpose of which is to move information around over large distances as fast as possible" (Menzies 1996:145). She argues that this model is prioritized in the corporate economy to the detriment of a communitarian, or ritual view of communication,¹⁷⁰ which:

emphasizes communication as a process: a social and cultural practice. ...While the transmission model is biased toward fast, light, distance-spanning communication, the communitarian-communications model is geared toward intimate, face to face dialogue and local participation (Menzies 1996:148).¹⁷¹

¹⁷⁰ (following American cultural-communication theorist James Carey).

¹⁷¹ The communitarian perspective is reviewed by Dervin (1994) who compares a number of "underlying assumptions" of the "information <-> democracy" relationship of a variety of perspectives, including empiricism, constructivism, and postmodernism. She asserts that in understanding the various communitarian approaches "It is important to emphasize that [they]... cannot be rejected as 'touchy-feely' - if only everyone would communicate, everything would be fine. In fact, these approaches deliberately contest any view of communication as an idealized remedy for human ills. [e.g.] see Dahlgren and Sparks 1991; Fishkin 1993; and Peters 1989" (Dervin 1994:377).

The similarities of face-to-face dialogue and CMC are made because the communication can be two-way. However, as a review of the case study suggests, dialogue and participation are not automatic. Just as face-to-face communication is mediated by social relations (e.g. social class, gender,¹⁷² and/or ethnicity) and communication competence,¹⁷³ so too is communication on SoliNet. As Mantovani submits in his review of research on social behaviour using CMC:

There is no asocial situation [using CMC]...[p]eople are always connected by their social and individual identities as well as by their groups and organizations, and they use technology tools to communicate within the framework of highly social symbolic structures (Mantovani 1994:57).

Social differences may be reduced somewhat by using CMC, but as the case study suggests, additional barriers exist (e.g. differences in gender participation, literacy, education, and self-censorship, etc.) which directly affect the degree of participation possible, and thus the extent or depth of the dialogue. This relates to what can be called the 'mechanics' of democracy in communication which were discussed in the previous chapter, and centers on the 'how-to' of participation and interactive dialogue.

To effectively engage in dialogue is a communication skill, as are practical skills of computer literacy and writing competency for example. Recognizing the inequities in, and barriers to participation, participation theorists Bachrach and Botwinick (1992:29)

¹⁷² See for example: Borisoff and Merrill (1992) *The Power to Communicate: Gender Differences as Barriers*.

¹⁷³ Bostrom (1984).

suggest that: "The best antidote to the shortcomings of participation is still more participation". However, the additional skills required to participate using CMC means that the focus - both on an individual and organizational level - has to be on developing practical skills such as computer literacy and writing proficiency, as well as on interpersonal communication skills to facilitate a communicative environment.¹⁷⁴ This includes developing guidelines for critical discourse. For example, CUPE includes courses on face-to-face communication in education for their members on how to meet the employee and the employer in grievance handling,¹⁷⁵ as well as in training their adult education instructors on how to facilitate equal participation in classroom settings.¹⁷⁶ These approaches could be more broadly developed in relation to CMC and to complement general membership education as was discussed in Chapter Three. Without developing these skills, members may continue to favour 'read-only' participation, and enter conferences only to add more information, which means that the potential of the medium is, or will be reduced substantially. In other words, if participation isn't developed within networks like SoliNet, it will continue to be defined on the basis of corporate or government definitions of participation (i.e. limited to choosing between pre-determined or reduced options).

¹⁷⁴ See also Walther (1996) for an overview and discussion of interpersonal communication research which indicate varying degrees of impersonal, interpersonal and hyperpersonal interaction using CMC. In particular, the discussion on whether methods such as the Group Decision Support System effects an "intentional depersonalization" of participants using CMC.

¹⁷⁵ (Arsenault 2/12/96).

¹⁷⁶ *Principles & Techniques of Adult Education: Facilitator's Manual*, CUPE, Ottawa Canada (not dated).

5.6 Participation in Decision-Making

On an organizational level, SoliNet enhanced communication amongst *existing* work groups, task forces and coalitions. This indicates that participation in decision-making and coalition building is not based on the organization's use of computer networks but on the basis of effecting action on a particular problem(s) or issue(s). The coalitions on SoliNet were formed *before* it was decided to use SoliNet, not as a *result* of SoliNet use, which is sometimes implied in reports of CMC advantages (e.g. see Myers 1994). For the most part, participation in work-related decision-making also followed existing organizational structures.¹⁷⁷ This means that, for example, senior officers communicated with other senior officers, whereas the secretaries or clerical workers were not equally engaged. At CUPE National Office, this is illustrated in the division of labour which is entrenched in divisions between the three distinct unions representing workers at the national office (ATSU, CSU and OPIEU). The latter union (OPIEU) representing clerical workers is 98% female, and is the only union within CUPE that has a technology-change clause in their contract. This is because with the increased use of email and file transfer now done by senior staff on their own computers, the clerical workers' jobs are in danger of being eliminated. SoliNet use is indeed caught up with existing structures which mediate and present contradictions within the participatory environment (e.g. secretaries may participate in decisions regarding their union, but do not participate in decision-making at their workplace). As

¹⁷⁷ This is consistent with Mantovani's review of organizational use of CMC, that "In its everyday use CMC connects pre-existing groups with their goals and structures and pre-socialized persons with their social and individual identities" (Mantovani 1994:57).

Briskin and McDermott (1993) identify, this is because of existing union bureaucracies and hierarchies, which they argue, are primarily gender-biased. These structures mitigate against democracy in the workplace, and are the basis of arguments for *union democracy* (e.g. see Lipset, Trow and Coleman 1956; Bickerton 1995; Waterman 1993:260/1); (see also Martin 1993).¹⁷⁸ This is part of what Thompson (1995) (Section 1.5.3) refers to as the *institutionalization of deliberative democracy* which requires that decision-making is enacted at a number of different sites and levels. It also emphasizes Cockburn and Omrod's (1993) observation that new technology changes tasks and work processes but does not necessarily change social relations:

...technological change is quite capable of transforming detailed tasks and activities without changing the fundamental asymmetry and inequality of the relation between women and men (Cockburn and Omrod 1993:13).

An emphasis on decision-making also draws attention to the conferences on various social and political issues on SoliNet. The concept of deliberative democracy emphasizes both process and outcome, i.e. a decision that affects a policy or action. As Street (1997) advances:

The point of the deliberative process is to allow people to form opinions, rather than just to express them (Miller 1992:67). If this is the purpose allotted to democracy, then the forms of communication must accord with it. ...At the same time, it is not just a matter of increasing access to information and allowing for discussion. There also needs to be the opportunity for *deliberation*. There need to be networks which enable both for discussion *and* deliberation. People have to make decisions, not just exchange thoughts (Street 1997:38).

¹⁷⁸ As well as being critical of employers' organizations, unions and related organizations and associations need to be critical of their own operations, as Kallick (1994:4) contends: "Our own organizations need to *demonstrate*, not just articulate, our larger vision of society."

The connection of dialogue with a decision or action was arguably why the conference on the Canadian Constitution was so successful. Each participant was involved in the end decision which suggests that their involvement increased their participation in the conference. As Dahlgren (1992:3) underscores, this doesn't mean that everybody *must* participate in all decisions (which would be an impossibility); however it does mean that there be a number of different opportunities to participate which combines both deliberation and decision.¹⁷⁹ As Barney (1996) suggests:

Realistically, we cannot expect (or require) every participant in a democratic decision-making process to have a well-articulated, clear, thorough, and coherent set of previously formed political preferences on every issue to which they may wish to contribute (Manin, 1987). We can, however, construct participatory exercises that enable and encourage citizens to reach conscientious conclusions on a wide range of issues through the process of deliberation itself (Barney 1996:403).

Participatory exercises that focus on deliberation and decision-making could also help in the planning of strategies for action on specific issues at a number of different levels or sites. This means relating larger issues to personal experiences and actions (and vice versa) by planning solutions that could be acted on in the home, in the community, and the workplace, as well as in levels of government. These conferences could follow the Radio Farm Forum's formulae of "read, listen, discuss, act" including feedback and reports of successes and further challenges (like in the SoliNet Privatization and Contracting Out conference).

¹⁷⁹ See also Held (1987).

5.7 The Missing Participants

SoliNet was generally planned as a network for activists. However, since union activism (for example)¹⁸⁰ is estimated to be 10 - 15% of the union membership¹⁸¹, and of this membership still another fraction use SoliNet (e.g. those who have access and are computer literate), the network was not used to its capacity or its potential. The other unions, organizations and individuals that were given access to SoliNet did not use it anywhere near to the extent that they could have. As Buddy Doll of the United Steelworkers observes:

We introduced it [SoliNet] jointly in various branches. It was easy enough to use and the product was there to bring us closer. Only a few people used it - in research, communication and some of the organizers. Although the willingness was there, participation wasn't. We didn't spend the time to utilize and explore it as an organization to see what it could do. I think we just didn't appreciate what was on offer, so it fell between the cracks (Doll 18/3/97).

And as offered by Danny Mallett of the CLC:

It was before its time, before email and computer conferencing were understood. I saw it as CUPE's system, CUPE owned it, so CUPE controlled it. We developed our own email system so we could communicate with the regions, and we had to have enough capacity to develop our databases and storage banks. A big issue was privacy and security which we didn't know we would have using SoliNet. SoliNet also couldn't handle or didn't have the capacity to handle what we needed (Mallett 16/12/96).

¹⁸⁰ Union activism is defined by Cornfield and Hodson (1993:591), as "voluntary participation in the operations and governance of a labor union. Examples of activism include holding elective office, attending union meetings, fund raising, and recruiting members". However, both Arsenault (2/12/96) and Mallett (16/12/96) define activism as more than attending union meetings. Their definition emphasizes those members who work for the union and/or other social organizations as volunteers in union positions or on committees, task forces, on campaigns, etc. as participating activists.

¹⁸¹ Arsenault (2/12/96) and Mallett (16/12/96).

The use of SoliNet was not widespread within the majority of other unions (save BCTF), organizations and associations who had access. As exemplified by the BCTF, the use of SoliNet by an organization required a concentrated effort to adopt the technology and design specific conferences to meet their needs, such that it was one of their priorities. Choosing between priorities is a continual challenge for unions as they face numerous pressures as a result of: economic and corporate restructuring (Jenson and Mahon 1993); a decline in union membership worldwide [e.g. in the U.S. (Brecher and Costello 1996); and in Canada (private sector) (Ziendenberg 1996)]; neo-conservative government policies (Adler and Suarez 1993b; Jenson and Mahon 1993; and Ziendenberg 1996); and technology change and work reorganization (Schenk and Anderson 1995; and Louli & Bickerton 1995), among others. As part of a survey administered by the now defunct OFL Technology Adjustment Research Programme (TARP) at their (1995) conference on "Unions and the Information Superhighway" reports, only a small percentage of unions¹⁸² have ever used SoliNet. Eaton (1995) partly summarizes the survey as follows:

While the survey results illustrate that the information highway has hit workers in the majority of workplaces, most unions do not appear to be driving this new technology. Sixty-four delegates stated that they used computers on their union work, but just 38 [or 32%] said that their unions used computers to communicate internally and only 15 [or 12.5%] had ever used *Solinet* (sic). All of the respondents agreed that "unions should invest more in computer technology as a means of communicating with members," yet a large majority (57) [or 47.5%] said that their unions did *not* provide regular training or updating on computer skills. ...The survey results appear to illustrate once again that the enormous potential of computer technology continues to be shaped almost exclusively by business interests (Eaton 1995:18).

¹⁸² (N = 120 conference delegates).

This could be rectified as more unions and other progressive organizations transfer onto the Internet. However, in the work towards social change, the focus needs to be not only on the technology but on the process of cooperation and collaboration between or amongst unions and other organizations. As evident in other areas, such as adult education for example, cooperation and information sharing between unions and other organizations and associations involved in adult education (e.g. colleges and universities), is still in its infancy stage.¹⁸³ As Ray Arsenault, CUPE's Director of Union Development observes, even though most unions include member education, there is still an adherence to "ownership of ideas and techniques" so that they are not shared between the unions and other organizations (Arsenault 1/12/96). This illustrates a need to extend cooperation and collaboration beyond the coalitions that come together for lobbying campaigns on certain issues, to include a sharing of technical knowledge, practical work processes, database construction, etc. which is just beginning to be addressed within certain unions who have used and developed CMC technology (e.g. see Lee 1997). As observed by Katz (Section 5.1.3), the collection and consolidation of information and sharing of successful (and unsuccessful) strategies helps to strengthen the union's position in terms of bargaining with the employer. As employers continue to be able to take advantage of computer technology in terms of increasing control over information and other resources, union and other progressive organizations will also have to pool their strengths and resources, whether it be for workplace or for

¹⁸³ As Arsenault explains, there are new initiatives like the CLC's sponsored "National Advisory Education Committee" which was developed to increase union "togetherness". Arsenault notes that "Before [this initiative] everyone was giving their own courses on the same subjects and not sharing their techniques and information" (Arsenault 2/12/96).

social change. This was the general idea behind SoliNet's existence: to build an "electronic house of labour". However, given that a large number of unions and organizations did not join in the construction, the task is far from complete.

Other 'missing participants' include the absence of the majority of the local union and other organizational membership. This may be somewhat alleviated by the transfer over to the Internet but it will still be dependent upon access which, in the present situation, still leaves out a majority, especially the labourers, janitors, and other workers who do not have regular access or who are not computer literate. As was discussed in the previous chapter, without union or work-place access and training, computer literacy and access are positively correlated with high income and advanced education. This difference means a further division of people within progressive movements on the basis of computer literacy and access.

Markus (1987) has argued that universal access is required for the diffusion of an interactive medium within a community. Without such access, the medium threatens to split a ...community into 'haves' and 'have-nots' (Harrison and Stephen 1996:13).¹⁸⁴

5.8 Access to the New SoliNet

Currently, the major difference between the old network and the Web-based system is a condition of access. With the old SoliNet, the software was distributed by

¹⁸⁴ Although Harrison and Stephen (1996) discuss this in terms of a "research community" for education, it is as applicable here.

CUPE, and Datapac access was available wherever there was a CUPE office. Access to SoliNet on the Web requires an Internet service provider which must be obtained on an individual basis - whether from the CUPE office, or from a member's home. This is at once both an advantage and a disadvantage for SoliNet. The advantage is that CUPE no longer has to handle the billing and administration of user accounts which frees up the Technology Office to concentrate on SoliNet design and content. However, as Belanger has discovered, there is not one service provider who is able to connect CUPE as a single entity across Canada; moreover, reliable service providers (i.e. enough phone lines, speed of access, etc.) currently operate in major urban centers.¹⁸⁵ Presenting another barrier to access means that it will be some time before all locations have equal access and all of CUPE can be linked.

5.9 Public Access on the New SoliNet

As of October 1996, any person who has access to the Internet can now have access to SoliNet providing they register with their name, address, affiliation, and email address, and accept a "SoliNet Usage and Research Policy" which stipulates that any offensive language¹⁸⁶ "will result in the cancellation of the member's SoliNet privileges".

¹⁸⁵ Belanger suggests that this is partly a result of the deregulation of the telephone industry, and is historically related to when telephone lines were first established in Canada in that they too only served the major centres. Regulation at that time was implemented in order that telephone service be universal. Since the major provider's currently only serve major centers, smaller towns, remote locations are dependent on local services, or "FreeNets" if they exist at all (Belanger 19/6/97).

¹⁸⁶ Specifically: "SoliNet members are prohibited from using racist, sexist, homophobic or violent language. They may not use language which may offend people with disabilities, people of colour, aboriginal people or women. Persistent use of this sort of language will result in the cancellation of the member's SoliNet privileges" [Policy #5. *SoliNet Usage Policy* (<http://www.solinet.org/policies.html>)].

These privileges include the right to participate in any open conference on SoliNet. Since opening on the Web, Belanger has scheduled seven educational seminars and a university course ("Labour Studies 202" given by Athabasca University), which have attracted approximately 1000 people (in total) to sign up for SoliNet membership. From the registration, Belanger observes that the vast majority of these members are people from trade unions, or are people who are interested in trade unions specifically. Of these, he approximates that 80% are male and 20% are female, with 100 to 200 being former SoliNet members (Belanger 19/6/97). Also, from his general observations of conference activity, the rate of participation (i.e. entering a comment into a conference) in comparison to membership is roughly 20%, which is similar to participation in the seminars of the 'old' SoliNet. Standing (or permanent) conferences such as the LOUNGE and "SoliNotes" were also established on the network, but the latter was removed for lack of participation (possibly due to a change in content), and the activity in the LOUNGE is so far negligible.

A major difference in the Web-based SoliNet that Belanger notices is that the 'sense of community' of the old SoliNet has not developed:

People are no longer part of a defined community. They are now individuals - part of the Internet which is relatively infinite - they can go 'anywhere'. In the old SoliNet, anyone using file transfer for example had to go into the conferencing facility and had to actually enter a conference to transfer a file. Because they had to go into a conference, it increased the likelihood that they would check into the conference they were in, to see what was going on, and maybe add a comment or two. They also 'knew' that everyone there was from CUPE, or another union or like-minded organization (19/6/97).

From the additional comments made on the individual members' questionnaire, there are a number of people who lament the change (for example: "SoliNet has been eclipsed by the Internet, before the union could have everyone all on SoliNet, now they are very fragmented"). Given that the Web-based SoliNet is still in its initial stages, and that the old SoliNet is still running, there will be a transition period towards building a new SoliNet 'community'. The question is how this community will define itself given that it is no longer limited on the basis of union or organizational affiliation. As Kollock and Smith (1996) argue, limits, or "boundaries" are important in the building of CMC communities:

Boundaries are ...important in that they encourage frequent, ongoing interaction among group members, if only by limiting interaction with others. This is critical because repeated interaction is perhaps the single most important factor in encouraging cooperation (Axelrod 1984) (Kollock and Smith 1996:125).

Public access also means that the potential for participation in SoliNet has grown exponentially, which creates greater opportunities for wider participation and interaction on both a national and international level (e.g. see Lee 1997). However, it also means that 'competition' for union members' attention and participation (and of the 'universe' of Internet 'members') has also increased at the same rate. As Lee (1997) points out, the differences between Web-sites will be affected by resources invested, i.e. in technical equipment, design, and graphics, etc. Commercial interests will be particularly focused on increasing attraction to corporate sites with spectacular graphics, or choices of interactive entertainment:

As the number of people accessing the Web grows from year to year, sites which are based on small budgets and small computers will increasingly answer incoming calls with busy signals - while giant corporate sites will always be open for business. The idea that all Web sites are somehow equal is an illusion and labour Web sites are going to have to fight for survival just as the labour press today fights for survival in a corporate-dominated culture (Lee 1997:171).

This is in addition to challenges which will continue to present barriers to labour communication both nationally and internationally, such as: (1) increasing attempts to control content by corporate service providers and by governments; (2) challenges of universal access, and the associated costs of telecommunication, equipment, and technological change; and (3) the currently small number of trade unionists using CMC, including the lack of internal support and computer training, and a general resistance to technological change within the labour movement (Lee 1997:166-175).

5.10 Conclusion

Unions have the potential to affect social and political change at the individual level (i.e. a change in attitudes or behaviour), at an organizational level (at the workplace or within the union), or at the various tiers of government. The use of SoliNet has contributed to change at all these levels in varying degrees, whether it be through discussions on a particular political issue, a seminar on labour education, planning an active lobbying campaign, or developing alternative economic policies. As this case study illustrates, the range of conferences and participation in them suggests that social and political change is made up of a number of different components: social (or

cultural), educational, and political, on both an individual and collective (or organizational) level.

Ultimately, political change means changes in legislation at the government level. Thus conferences need to be connected to effective action in contributing to the development of policy alternatives, or in participation in lobbying campaigns, as they were in some of the conferences on SoliNet (e.g. the CCPA Economic Renewal and the conference on Privatization and Contracting Out). However, participation and dialogue at this level has been mainly within the reach of activists who are already aware of, or who are working on these issues (or at these levels) within the union or other organizations. The lack of general involvement is likely to continue on the Web-based SoliNet unless the issues can be directly related to people's everyday lives so that the wider political economy is connected with the everyday experiences of the individual SoliNet member. This is directly related to conditions of access for the local rank and file members, including a focus on computer literacy training, general educational courses, and communication and critical skills development, which all increase the possibilities for active participation and interaction. The extent of change possible will also rely on the degree of real-time cooperation and collaboration between and amongst unions and other social activist organizations beyond their presence on the Internet.

Chapter Six: Summary and Conclusion

6.0 Summary

This case study has provided an overview of the design, development and use of the Solidarity Network from its origins in 1983, through to its transition to the World-Wide-Web in 1996/7. The two questions which led the thesis, guided the case study to describe and analyze the computer network. Answering the first question of "how communication resources are enhancing (or inhibiting) democratic progressive movements devoted to social change", a descriptive overview and a quantitative analysis of the open conferences on SoliNet illustrated both network design and individual use to meet journalism (information), education, and movement building goals. A focus on the organizational use of SoliNet (i.e. of CUPE and BCTF in particular) and some examples of the closed conferences indicated how the network was employed to further enhance both the daily work and activism of unions. To address possible inhibitors, and the second question regarding the 'prognosis for democratized communication and democratization through information systems' in particular, an analysis of the network was done in comparison to a largely normative theoretical framework which centers on the role and function of communication in social change. This framework emphasizes two-way participatory communication towards the democratization of communication and a more democratic society. In comparing normative theory with practice, the case study identified a number of challenges to both

democratized communication and to democratization through communication. These include the following:

(1) **Access:** Since less than 5% of the membership of all unions (including CUPE and BCTF), labour and activist organizations and associations had access to SoliNet, both access to computer technology and computer literacy are unequally distributed within progressive movements. For unions in particular, without union assisted computer access and training, member access will be divided along lines of employment, education and income, with the members who have the lowest levels of the latter two especially, being excluded from participation. This exacerbates current divisions between workers and works to further separate rather than unite them.

(2) **Barriers to Use:** Even when people have access to SoliNet, there are barriers which have limited use and participation. As identified in the case study, these are psychological, social, educational, and time-availability, which could be either real or perceived. The type of barrier depends on whether SoliNet was/is perceived as, or used, for administrative work, activism, and/or leisure activities. It was suggested that to counter these barriers, a general member education program in using CMC, which includes time allowances for study and participation be implemented on an organizational basis.

(3) **Participation:** From the survey of both the open and closed conferences on SoliNet, opportunity alone does not result in participation. In open conferences

members are on average 79% more likely to read conference messages, rather than participate. This presents a significant problem, since a central tenet of democracy is participation, and is particularly acute in the four-to-one disparity between men and women's participation. Closed conferencing does not seem to improve on participation rates in the long term, which suggests that barriers to use may also be barriers to participation, and/or that there are further design or moderation variables which influence participation (which have yet to be researched). It was suggested that in combination with a general education program that there be more conferences to facilitate creative writing, and journalism, as well as developing critical and feedback forums.

(4) **Dialogue and Interaction:** The primary use of SoliNet, and style of participation in a number of both open and closed conferences on SoliNet centers on information exchange. Although information is a form of exchange or interaction, it does not necessarily result in effective communication, i.e. dialogue and discussion or debate. As in interpersonal or organizational communication, effective communication is a skill that includes feedback and critique. Using CMC, particular skills emphasize written language and group communication. As illustrated in the case study, interaction is somewhat improved by active moderation to validate participant input and encourage discussion. However, since (or if) the majority of members are not used to participating in CMC, or in engaging in critical discourse, member education must include courses on interpersonal (group) communication and not be limited to hardware set-up and software operations.

(5) **Participation in Decision-Making:** As is proposed in definitions of deliberative democracy (Thompson 1995) and dialogic democracy (Giddens 1994), discussion and dialogue are the means to make or reach decisions. Conferencing on SoliNet as a whole was generally a process of individual deliberation which facilitated decision-making and social actions on a limited or group-specific basis. How this process works and what decisions it is applied to have yet to be worked out on an institutional (or organizational) basis. As suggested in the thesis, if democratization is the intended goal, it would entail a wider analysis and adjustment or change of organizational structures and work processes towards this end.

(6) **Activism:** The findings of the case study are consistent with the study by Bonchek (1995) (Section 1.5.2), who found that social movement use of computer networks enhanced possibilities for political participation by reducing costs of communication resources and organizational operations. In CUPE's case, increased operational efficiency allows more resources to be directed toward activism. Communication between activists from a number of different unions, organizations and associations on SoliNet also leads to an understanding of issues and sharing of strategies and planned actions on a national and international level. However, given that SoliNet was not used to a great extent by a large number of eligible organizations that had access, activism is limited to a few participating members. It was suggested that there must be an ever increasing cooperation and collaboration between unions and other socially progressive organizations that has to extend beyond specific projects to a sustained development and concentrated cross-fertilization of information and

techniques. On the individual level, fostering seminars which relate larger political and social issues to the everyday experiences of the general members (i.e. the non-activists), should be considered. This could follow a similar format to the early Radio Farm Forum's formulae of "read-listen-discuss-act" to address global and national problems with both personal and collective solutions.

6.1 Conclusion

As an indication of the speed of technological change, the 'old' SoliNet is already passing into history. Just a little over a decade ago, a CUPE employee - Marc Belanger - was knocking on doors and trying to convince union leaders and other activists of the importance of computer technology and of its potential to enhance their organizations. SoliNet became a vision of a few people who saw a potential for CMC that was not simply based on sending and receiving information, or increasing the speed of private messaging systems, but as a way of increasing communication between a number of people - large numbers of people - in progressive organizations from across Canada, and around the world. The case study has provided a history and analysis of how this potential has so far been realized.

SoliNet is unique, not only because it was the first national, bilingual computer conferencing system in Canada but, because it was the first national *labour* network in the world. The Solidarity Network joins the cumulative history of the struggle for democratized communication and for democratization through communication. Like the

early labour press, it continues to emphasize and illustrate the relationship between communication and social and political activism. Recognizing the political significance and necessity of the Mutual Press, it too is owned and operated by a labour union, not only for the benefit of their own members, but to facilitate and increase the communication and cooperation between unions and other progressive organizations towards social change. Building on the example of the early Radio Forums, open computer conferencing is designed to be both inclusive and participatory. Conferencing on SoliNet provides for a range of both individual and collective interests including leisure, education, and, social and political movement development.

SoliNet is however, still in its developmental stages. As CMC is a relatively new means and method of communication, it is in its introductory stage where people are learning and teaching themselves how to use and design the technology (including conferencing techniques) to meet their own needs. SoliNet's existence has been validated if only (or at the very least) by facilitating membership computer literacy and conferencing experiences which will increasingly be of value in developing Web-based connections and conferencing.

The "lessons learned" from the first ten years of SoliNet provide both a positive outlook for the future in labour and social movement development as well as indicating challenges to address. As these challenges are identified, they can be integrated into open discussions and debate towards developing working solutions. Communication research is only beginning to study and analyze computer networking from a number of

different approaches, including linguistics, interpersonal, and organizational communication. Communication on SoliNet involves all these levels, but which aspects of CMC are studied, and moreover which aspects are identified as issues or problems, depends on the underlying goals of the research. This thesis has been guided by a critical communication approach which challenges claims that computer networking will solve the problems of democracy even as it explores the potential with real-life experiences. This assessment fundamentally links this form of communication with democracy towards the development of an alternative to mass communication as it has been developed in the dominant political economy. The Solidarity Network is but one example in the struggle for alternative communication. Its history indicates the choices to be made, and provides the lessons to build on for democratic social change.

SoliNet Questionnaires

A.1 Introduction

As provided in Section 1.4 of this thesis, three questionnaires were distributed to: (1) Current Users of SoliNet; (2) Past Members or Non-users; and (3) Organizational Members. The questions and responses are included below. Note that there are questions of overlap that were asked of both Current Users and Past Members such that similar questions and their responses have been combined in the report that follows.

A.2 List of Questions and Responses to User and Non-User Questionnaires

(1) What is your gender?

Users/N =50

Non-Users/N=17

[24] female
[26] male

[14] female
[3] male

(2) What is your age group?

Users/N=50

Non-Users/N=17

[0] under 30
[12] 30 to 39
[27] 40 to 49
[11] over 49

[2] under 30
[3] 30 to 39
[8] 40 to 49
[4] over 49

(3) Which union are you a member of, or what is the name of your organization, or association?

Users/N=50

Non-Users/N=17

[4] ATSU	[8] ATSU
[18] CSU	[0] CSU
[15] OPIEU	[8] OPIEU
[11] CUPE Local	[0] CUPE Local
[2] Other (Organization)	[1] Other

(4) What is your occupation, job title, and/or union position?

Users/N=50 [26 M (Males) and 24 F (Females)]

Chief Steward; Office Manager, and Secretary-Treasurer (3M)
Research Director (1M); Researcher (1F)
Senior Staff Officers (4M)
Health and Safety, or Educational Representatives (6M) (1F)
Staff and National Representatives (7M) (4F)
Regional Directors (1M); Assistant Director (1F)
President Local Union, or President of CUPE division (2M)
Clerk Typists administrative and executive secretaries (14F)
Senior Staff Assistant (1F)
Not-provided (2M) and (2F)

Non-Users/N=17 [3 (Males); 14 (Females)]

Executive Secretaries, Administrative Assistants, Assistant Accountant, Accountant, Director, Senior Officer, Solicitor, Bookkeeper, Clerk-Typists, Graphic Designer, and Collective Agreement Analyst.

(5) How long have you been using (or how long did you use) SoliNet?

Users/N=50

Non-Users/N=11

[0] less than six months	[1] less than six months
[0] for a year or less	[3] for a year or less
[0] for two years or less	[2] for two years or less
[7] for three years or less	[2] for three years or less
[11] between four and five years	[0] between four and five years
[32] for six years and over	[0] for six years and over
	[3] (use it "off and on")

(6) (a) How often do you use SoliNet? (Use a typical working week as an example). Users/N=50

- [34%] once every few days (25% of all females and 42% of all males)
- [22%] once a day (29%F; 16%M)
- [18%] on an "as needed" basis (17%F; 20%M)
- [14%] more than once a day (12%F; 16%M)
- [12%] once a week (17%F; 8%M)

(b) Have you ever tried to use SoliNet in the past?
(Non-Users/N=17);

- [65%] Yes (9F and 2M)
- [35%] No (5F and 1M)

(7) Where do you access SoliNet from? (Choose one statement only):
Users/N=50

- [18] only at work from a personal computer station (16F; 2M)
- [0] from a shared computer station
- [8] by laptop (4F; 4M)
- [24] from work and from home (4F;20M)

(8) Which SoliNet function(s) do you use? [Rank in ascending order, from the most frequently used (#1), to the least frequently used (#4)]. and

(9) What specifically do you use SoliNet for? [Rank in ascending order, from the most often used (#1) to the least (#4)].

Users/N=50

Response: see Thesis Section 4.1, Table 4.0.

(10) With whom do you communicate with on SoliNet? (Rank in ascending order, using (#1) to identify people who you communicate and exchange information with the most, up to the (#4) as less frequent, and mark any others that apply).

Users/N=49

Non-Users or Past Members/N=8

[28%] with my own union	[52%]
[22%] with CUPE National Office	[22%]
[17%] with CUPE Regional Offices	[18%]
[14%] with CUPE Area Offices	[0%]
[11%] with whomever else is on SoliNet	[8%]
[8%] with other unions or organizations	[0%]

(11) Please rate the following methods in terms of effectiveness of group communication (effectiveness is defined here in terms of: equality of access and participation, and development of mutual understanding) using (#1) as the most effective, to (#3) as less effective.

Users/N=45

#1 (most effective):

[83%] face-to-face communication

[8%] telephone

[9%] closed conferencing

#2 (second most effective):

[47%] face-to-face communication

[27%] telephone

[26%] closed conferencing

#3 (third most effective):

[0] face to face communication

[46%] telephone

[54%] closed conferencing

(12) Over the last year (1996), what is the estimated total amount of OPEN conferences that you were a member of? and

(13) Over the last year (1996), what is the estimated total amount of CLOSED conferences that you were a member of?

OPEN/N=50

CLOSED/N=50

[15] more than 15

[1] more than 15

[6] more than 10

[1] more than 10

[14] more than 5

[11] more than 5

[4] more than 3

[12] more than 3

[10] less than 3

[19] less than 3

[1] none

[6] none

(14) What was the average number of participants in the CLOSED conferences that you were a member of?

Users/N=50

[15] more than 20

[15] more than 15

[7] 10, or more than 10

[2] less than 10

[0] more, or less than 5

[5] none

(15) Have you ever been, or are you currently a conference moderator?

Users/N=50

Response: See Thesis Section 4.1.2

(16) Please choose from the statements below those which best illustrate your opinions of the discussions during the OPEN conferences on SoliNet (you may choose more than one).

Users/N=48

Response: See Thesis Section 4.2.1, specific breakdown is as follows:

[50%] I find them very democratic

[38%] I don't have the time to participate in them

[36%] I find that they help build a sense of community

[32%] They are interesting to read, but I don't like to participate

[32%] They are very useful/interesting, and I participate whenever I can

[11%] People are just using them to grandstand their own ideas

[6%] I find that they are a waste of time because they don't have any focus

[0%] Expressing my opinion doesn't make any difference anyway.

(17) Please choose from the statement below those which best illustrate your opinions of the CLOSED conferences (you may choose more than one).

Users/N=46

Response: see Thesis Section 5.1 (footnote).

(18) What kind of task-oriented work have you used SoliNet for? (Please rank the top four, in ascending order, from the most to the least).

Users/N=44

Response: see Thesis Section 5.3 (footnote).

(19) Indicate what kind of information you are posting on and/or retrieving from SoliNet from the list below. [Rate them in ascending order, from the most (#1) to the least (#4) and mark any others that apply].

Users/N=45

Response: see Thesis Section 5.1.3

(20) What problems have you encountered in your use of SoliNet? [Please rate the following in order of (#1) as being the most problems with, up to (#4) as less problems with, and mark any others that apply].

Users/N=50; Non-Users/N=5

Response: see Thesis Section 4.6.2

Non-User Breakdown:

[28%] lack of time to learn how to use SoliNet

[24%] lack of time to use SoliNet regularly

[20%] lack of, or inadequate training on using SoliNet

[16%] lack of, or inadequate computer training

[12%] no answer

(21) Do any of the following personal constraints/barriers inhibit and/or limit your participation in the conferences on SoliNet? [Rate them from the biggest limitation (#1) to the least (#4), and mark any others that apply].

Users/N=50; Non-Users/N=11

Response: see Thesis Section 4.2.1

Non-User Breakdown:

[36%] I had no work-related reason to use SoliNet

[32%] I had no personal reason to use SoliNet

[18%] I am intimidated by other participants on SoliNet

[12%] I feel that SoliNet is only for communications within CUPE

(22) In your opinion, which of the following benefits from using SoliNet has contributed to your union/organization/association?

Users/N=50; Non-Users/N=8

Response: see Thesis Section 5.4

(23) Please add any other comments, suggestions, or opinions that you may have below. Thank you very much for your time.

Users/N=13; Non-Users/N=5

Response: reported in various sections of the Thesis as applicable.

A. 2.1 Additional Non-User Questions (not already reported above).

(1) Why did you stop using SoliNet?

Non-Users/N=7

[6] I had no reason to use it regularly

[3] I didn't get enough work-related mail on SoliNet

[2] Because it didn't have Internet access

(2) Home Computer Ownership

N=16

(8) own their own computer at home;

(8) do not own their own computer.

(3) (a) Does it make any difference to you now that SoliNet has Internet access?, and (b) why or why not?

N=13

(a) [10] No

(b) [3] No time for it

[1] Not now, but maybe in the future

[1] I haven't got access

[5] no answer

(a) [3] Yes

(b) [1] it has become necessary

[2] no answer

(4) Will you use SoliNet in the future?

N=14

[8] Yes;

[6] No.

A.3 Organizational Questionnaire

(1) Length of Time of SoliNet Use:

N = 10

- (3) six years or longer
- (2) 2 years
- (4) one year;
- (5) (1) six months.

(2) Total Organizational Membership:

N = 10

- (1) under 25 members
- (1) 500 to 1000
- (2) 2,000 to 5,000
- (1) 7,000
- (1) 19,000
- (1) 20,000
- (1) 40,000
- (1) 205,000
- (1) unknown

(3) Percentage of Membership who had access to SoliNet:

N = 10

All 10 answered "less than 5%".

(4) Positions of People who had Access:

N = 10

Response: See Thesis Section 4.2, Table 4.1

(5) SoliNet Functions Used; and (6) Specific Uses of SoliNet

N = 10

Response: see Thesis Section 4.1, Table 4.0

(7) Communication on SoliNet with:

N = 10

Response: see Thesis Section 5.3

(8) Task-Oriented Work:

N = 10

Response: see Thesis Section 5.3

(9) Kind of Information Posted/Retrieved:

N = 7

Response: see Thesis Section 5.3

(10) Problems Encountered with SoliNet Use:

N = 5 who marked the list

Response: See Thesis Section 4.6.2

(11) Benefits of SoliNet Use:

N = 5

(5) no answer

(3) Increased inter-union/organization cooperation; has increased group cohesion and solidarity benefits; and decreased social barriers to participation in discussions;

(2) Time efficiency;

(1) Financial; Increased collective decision making; increased internal branch coordination/cooperation; facilitated increased activism;

(1) other (Access to SoliNotes);

(12) Why SoliNet use was Discontinued:

N = 10

(6) Other - see below comments;

(5) No one in our organization was using it;

(4) We had no reason to use it regularly;

(4) We switched for Internet access.

(3) We switched to another email/service provider;

(2) Our union/organization developed our own email system;

(1) SoliNet is/was really only for CUPE.

Other:

- Marc closed the system (or announced that he was);

- We will access it through the Internet instead of datapac.

- Others were not participating in active conferences, only chat groups were really happening;

- No one used it because the office staff was so frustrated with it - it was too much hassle, it wasn't user-friendly, couldn't get it to print, SoliNet demo disk wasn't provided;
- Conference software was difficult for some to use and was passed by with other more user-friendly software and open Internet access;
- Software wasn't friendly enough;
- We canceled our phone line, and didn't reorganize to set up a new one.

(13) Does it make a difference to your organization now that SoliNet has Internet access?

N = 10

- (3) Yes;
- (6) No;
- (1) No answer.

No reasons:- We are now well established on the Web Network;

Yes Reasons:

- Will be available to more rank and file at remote locations (rural Western Canada).
- Easier access for members without having each to pay for the SoliNet fee.

SoliNet Usage Guidelines

The following rules apply to the administrators and members of SoliNet:

1. SoliNet guarantees that email messages will remain private between the sender(s) and recipient(s).
2. Comments entered into Closed SoliNet conferences will be read only by the members of the particular conference.
3. Comments entered into Open conferences should be considered as comments made in public.
4. Passwords will be changed by the system administrators only by permission of the member whose password must be changed. This permission can only be given by phone or mail. Third parties may be given passwords for new members. However, it is the responsibility of the new member to immediately adopt a new password.
5. Journalists are asked to seek permission from the SoliNet member if they plan to use a conference comment.
6. SoliNet members are prohibited from using racist, sexist, homophobic or violent language. They may not use language which may offend people with disabilities, visible minorities, aboriginal people or women. Persistent use of this sort of language will result in the cancellation of the member's SoliNet privileges.
7. If a conference moderator must remove a message for technical reasons, he or she will post a comment explaining why the message had to be removed.
8. If a member persists in activity deemed by the membership to be disruptive the member will be removed from SoliNet.

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