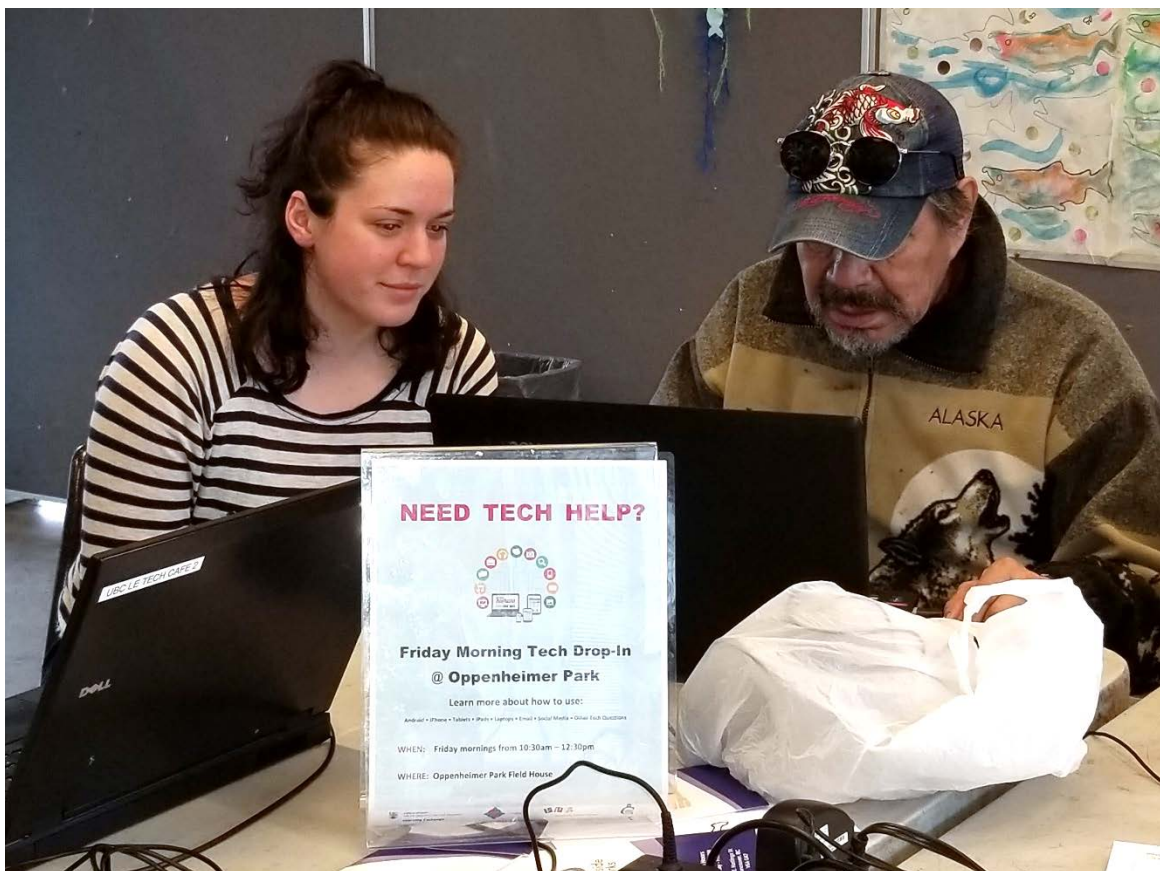


NAVIGATING DIGITAL ACCESS and LEARNING IN THE DTES

A REPORT ON COMMUNITY RESEARCH AND DISCUSSIONS AT THE DTES TECHNOLOGY AND DIGITAL LITERACY FORUM



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Introduction

About this Report

This report presents recent research and community conversations about digital equity and access learning in the Downtown Eastside (DTES). It summarizes presentations by speakers, discussions and ideas for action generated at a Community Technology Forum at the UBC Learning Exchange on March 21, 2018, on the unceded territory of the Coast Salish Peoples. Every effort was made to remain as true to the content of the original discussion as possible. This report is focused on sharing the views, priorities, and concerns of the presenters, organization staff, and community members present.

Purpose

The technology and digital literacy forum was created as a follow-up to the DTES Literacy Roundtable's Digital Access forum of 2015, as well as a new opportunity for educators, community members, and organizations to share their thoughts and ideas about digital literacy and equity, especially in response to Dr. Suzanne Smythe's (Simon Fraser University's) newest findings in Digital Equity Study. The forum arose from a desire to engage community groups, members, and participants' discussion over issues of digital equity and access to digital learning in the DTES, and to collate potential solutions and actions.

This forum was made possible by a SSHRC Small Grant sponsored by Suzanne Smythe at SFU Faculty of Education, and from a partnership of DTES Literacy Roundtable and the UBC Learning Exchange. The three-hour event contained three short presentations to further discussion. The presenters included; **Richard Marquez**, a longstanding community member and former employee of the Lookout Society, **Dr. Suzanne Smythe**, **Sherry Breshears**, and **Matthias Sturm**, from Simon Fraser University, **Marie Urdiga** from the University of British Columbia and Linkvan, and **William Booth**, coordinator of the DTES Literacy Roundtable and of Linkvan.

This report presents data emerging in recent research into issues of digital literacy and equity in this city, a compilation of the notes taken during discussions, and key points in the presentations. It is intended to document innovations and ideas related to digital inequalities, in an effort to find ways to reduce barriers to digital access and learning, not only in the DTES, but also among other low-income citizens in other Metro Vancouver neighborhoods.

Downtown Eastside Context

The Downtown Eastside (DTES) is located on unceded traditional territory of the Musqueam, Squamish and Tsleil-Waututh Nations. It is a dynamic, vibrant, low-income Vancouver neighborhood. Also known as the 'heart of the city,' the DTES has historically been a hub of rich cultural life. In the eyes and words of the people living here this is a community of enormous strength, cohesion and activity. In spite of its difficulties, the DTES is also known as a resilient and tight-knit community with many collective actions underway to resist processes of gentrification and that advocate for the rights of its most vulnerable.

The neighborhood is extremely culturally diverse, with 48 percent of its population representing visible minority groups, including residents of Chinatown, many First Nations people from across the Americas, and new immigrants to Canada. There is a higher proportion of seniors and men living in the community

than in other parts of Vancouver. There are also a significant number of low-income families living in the area, as well as single people who are unemployed or underemployed. The community is well-known for its political activism, and many community members are volunteer with organizations in the neighborhood. ⁱ

The DTES struggles with a high concentration of social problems that are perpetuated by the lack of affordable housing, income inequality, and the prevalence of untreated mental health and addiction issues. These same inequalities also contribute to the ongoing digital divide particularly as more and more essential services, e-governance and resources are converted to online only formats.

Although the research and presentations were done in the context of the DTES, other marginalized communities in the lower mainland struggle with many of the same challenges and issues.

Participants and Organizers

This forum brought together participants and speakers across many sectors including those from the following organizations:

A Better Life Foundation	Faculty of Education, SFU
Burnaby Public Library	Faculty of Education, UBC
CEDS Family Services of Greater Vancouver	ISSofBC/LINC
Douglas College	New Westminster Literacy Roundtable
DTES Literacy Roundtable	UBC Learning Exchange
DTES Kitchen Tables Project	Union Gospel Mission
DTES Women's Centre	Vancouver Public Library
EMBERS Eastside Works	Vancouver Community College

Why Digital Literacy & Equity?

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance has defined Digital Equity and Inclusion as:

Digital Equity - is a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services.

Digital Inclusion - refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This includes 5 elements: 1) affordable, robust broadband internet service; 2) internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; 3) access to digital literacy training; 4) quality technical support; and 5) applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration. Digital Inclusion must evolve as technology advances. Digital Inclusion requires intentional strategies and investments to reduce and eliminate historical, institutional and structural barriers to access and use technology.

<https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/>

According to Statistics Canada, “Being connected [online] is reshaping how we work, interact, spend our free time and consume and produce goods; in short, how we live.”ⁱⁱ This can prove even more important to those who are low-income or homeless, as many of the social assistance programs and health services now exist purely online. In addition, technology also plays an integral role in employability. According to a 2016 employer survey into all sectors of the job market, 84 percent of Canadian companies consider basic technological competency with a computer as essential for operations.ⁱⁱⁱ

With this in mind, it is no surprise that digital literacy skills are essential to everyday life. So too is equitable access to digital devices, such as laptops, tablets, and/or smartphones. The numerous issues and barriers that low-income and homeless community members already face are also compounded by internet affordability - only 58 percent of low-income households in Canada have a home internet connection.^{iv} A recent study by ACORN Canada found that low-income households will forego other necessities to secure an internet connection, suggesting the precarity of internet access for many.^v Thus, digital literacy and equity go hand in hand; digital literacy and fluency is related to people’s consistent access to usable technologies and resources. This forum was created as a space for people to speak, from the frontlines, about experiences addressing the limited access to devices, usable computers, Wi-Fi and digital learning opportunities in the DTES community. Statistics and figures can certainly do much in giving a snapshot of an issue, yet it remains vital to hear personal vignettes and insider knowledge of those who work, educate, and live in these communities. This public forum aimed to address digital inequalities in meaningful ways, and perhaps also to make a shift in how everyone approaches and views digital access.

If you are interested in retrieving more information on the issues of digital literacy and equity, you are welcome to read the Brookfield Institute’s recent discussion paper, [Digital Literacy in a Digital Age](#), which goes deeper into the many intersections of race, age, sex, and geography into digital literacy in Canada.^{vi}

Forum Presentations

Community Partnerships

The forum was opened with a presentation by Richard Marquez, who spoke, among other things, about the importance of community spaces and partnerships. Richard made many parallels to the issues facing other communities in North America the increasing gentrification of Los Angeles, compounded by the tech companies of 'Silicon Valley' pushing out marginalized (and ethnic) communities. He spoke passionately about the need for change in social planning and policies in Vancouver, as we too push out vital community members and spaces due to gentrification. Overall, he drew connections between digital equity and housing, and made the case for organizations to work together to demand positive change in our cities, especially with respect to equitable access to technologies that are now such vital conduits to resources, and to democratic participation.

LinkVan Project/Digital Outreach

This presentation, by Marie Urdiga and William Booth, outlined the Linkvan project and the associated 'tech café' outreach.

Linkvan is a collaborative project between the DTES Literacy Roundtable, the UBC Learning Exchange, and volunteers in the tech sector. It is an online service directory, created through participatory feedback from community members and UBC students who volunteer with the project. Credit for the initial concept and application design belong to the incredible folks at link-sf.com who created the original source code.^{vii} The open source code for the application can be accessed at the following link:

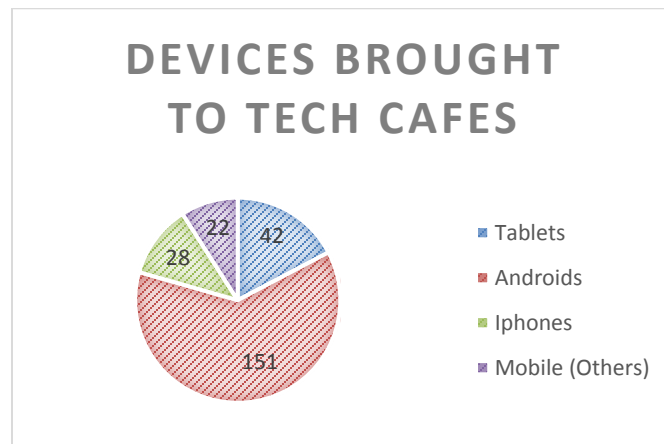
https://github.com/Rorshach/project_linkvan.

In recent years, the demand for learning opportunities has expanded to include access to digital literacies and resources for low-income residents, recognizing that digital literacy is becoming central to people's everyday life. Indeed, governments and other institutions are increasingly pushing people online to offer more 'efficient' services, while also 'cutting costs' to service delivery.^{viii} The consequence is that people are losing their basic rights to government services because they do not have the resources needed for access.^{ix} Under-funded community service providers are increasingly drawn into filling this gap. The Linkvan team felt that it was not enough to build an online service for community members, community members must also have opportunities to learn about technology and how they can use their devices in their day to day lives.

Thus the 'tech café' approach was born. Peer supported pop-up tech cafés are offered and located in parks, local shelters and other places where people gather. The project forges new relationships with adult learners through technology to help address a significant barrier to digital equity.^x The collaborative tech teams that host pop-up tech cafés are made up of educators, community ambassadors (peers), staff from community organizations, and university students.

The cafés started in 2016 in Oppenheimer Field House, and have since expanded to include W.I.S.H., Yukon Shelter, 2nd Mile Society, Carnegie Community Centre, The Binnars Group, Eastside Works, and others. The cafés have had over 800 interactions with community members, some who come every week to learn and others who come with a specific issue. Topics covered at the cafés range from google email password

problems to broken voice recorders and everything in-between. Some of the results team members observed so far include: seniors helping seniors using their devices in three languages, community members contacting relatives on First Nation reserves, and community volunteers using their phones so they can apply for part-time work. For community ambassadors and volunteer tutors, there is an increase in self-confidence, an increase in knowledge and skills, as well as a heightened sense of belonging and community.



Digital Equity Study

Dr. Suzanne Smythe (Assistant Professor, Faculty of Education, SFU) and SFU doctoral students Sherry Breshears and Matthias Sturm, presented recent results of their research on digital equity in Vancouver. The study is a collaboration between Suzanne Smythe and the Linkvan project. This research, now in its second year, involved interviewing 58 members of the Downtown Eastside and Downtown South communities to learn about their experiences of the current digital landscape. The following is a brief summary of the research themes.ⁱ

52% of interview respondents were male and 48% female. 52% were homeless, living in a shelter, or in transitional housing and 48% lived in subsidized housing, co-ops or rooming houses in or near the DTES. 37% had post-secondary education, 30% between grade 9-11, and the another 33% had completed high school. 65%, or 38 of the 58 interview respondents, said they relied on the public library or public wifi in community centres or coffee shops for their internet access.

The two public libraries serving the community are full to brimming each day with people needing access to the internet and support to send emails, connect with family and friends, complete online forms and so on. Indeed, 40 respondents said they use computers and the internet at a public library at least 3 times a week.

The younger participants in this study (aged 18 – 30) were more confident users of technology and most reported having college education; yet this group was also more likely to be homeless or reliant upon shelters, and least likely to have reliable access to the internet. This suggests that housing status affects

ⁱ For more information about this project, please contact Suzanne Smythe at sksmythe@sfu.ca.

internet access, usable public computing centers are vital to digital equity and that digital literacy is necessary for access, but it is not a reason to explain homelessness or experiences of poverty in the community. In addition, the study found:

- Almost all (45) of the respondents said they use a computer or cell phone every day.
- Almost half the respondents said that the internet was not affordable for them. 8 people who said they thought the internet was affordable had access to the internet in the lobby of their housing and many others were adept at finding access to the internet in public and private spaces in the community.
- 30 respondents said they thought access to devices like computers and cell phones was affordable and 22 said they could not own one because they were too expensive. Many among those who believed devices to be affordable said devices were given to them, or that they use devices in public settings.
- Security of devices was an issue; 8 respondents reported their laptop or cell phone recently stolen.
- Many reported barriers to accessing the internet or free Wi-Fi at night when libraries and agencies are closed, leading to feelings of insecurity and vulnerability.

Based on participants' responses to the research questions, a series of vignettes were created to capture the complexities of the downtown digital landscape. These vignettes are included in their entirety on the following pages.

Vignettes for Forum Discussion

In order to structure discussion in the forum, participants broke into groups, each with a vignette from Dr. Smythe's study. Each vignette outlined digital equity and literacy issues that were raised by members in the community in their interviews.^{xi} The following vignettes provided a basis for forum discussion, and are included in their entirety below:

Vignette One

"No information is better than inaccurate information"

Many people we interviewed expressed opinions about how information about services are presented online in websites or directories such as Linkvan and 211. They shared that the accuracy and timeliness of information is vital. One respondent put the problem this way: "It is better to have no information than to have incorrect information." This vignette draws from different interviews to explore this powerful statement. As you read, consider these questions:

- Should information online be designed so that people don't need to interact with service providers face to face to book a service (For example, booking a shelter bed, or an appointment with a health care provider)?
- How can information about services be made more timely, accurate and accessible?

One woman who was homeless at the time of our interview explained that cell phones are not good tools for searching for services, unless the information is laid out for a mobile device as they are in Linkvan. She said most services assume people have access to ADOBE (PDF) and a printer. She brought out a large folded poster-sized calendar she has created that plots out her activities day by day. She did a lot of research to create this calendar, and she comments that it is hard to find accurate information, especially about meal times and showers. "If you say there are showers available, it is important to know WHEN they are, because if we spend time lining up for showers we might miss a meal, or vice versa. *Being homeless is very time consuming.*"

Another man told us: "It's better to have no information than to have the incorrect information." He explained that when the City of Vancouver announced Creekside Community Centre would be open as a shelter on a very cold night in February 2017, he walked all the way there in the snow, in running shoes, only to be told that the center would not be open after all. He then had to walk from Creekside to 1st and Commercial to another shelter. The experience was exhausting and humiliating.

For another woman, the current method to book a shelter bed is frustrating. She is kept on hold for more than an hour, only to be told the bed that she was trying to book has been taken. She would like Linkvan to include a feature where people could book beds and make appointments online in real time so that she would not have to use her cell phone data only to find out she was unsuccessful in getting that all-important place to sleep. She also pointed out that technology access is only one aspect of this problem. There is simply not enough shelter beds or services to meet demand.

Vignette Two

“It’s like you’re off the grid”

Cell phones, their safety and the safety of people are connected. Cell phones get stolen often. People need to be creative to access Wi-Fi and use phones to keep in touch with family. As you read this vignette, consider,

- Does it need to be so hard?
- With so many cell phones in Vancouver, how can we ensure homeless and low- income citizens have access to working phones?
- How can we help people keep their devices and contacts safe?

Eight people we interviewed said they had recently lost or had their cell phones stolen. This is a problem for everyone, but especially those who are homeless and who sleep in shelters. People sleep with their phone under their mattress or inside their shirts. When they need to charge them, they cannot turn away for a moment, “...or it’s gone!”

Losing a phone can also mean losing a crucial link to family and friends because they also lose their contacts’ information. As one respondent said, “When people are ready to make a change in their life, to ask for help, the first thing they need is a cell phone.” Going without a phone when one is homeless can feel especially lonely and vulnerable. One young woman who is homeless told us that she puts her laptop and cell phone in lock up at a local community agency at night. *“After 8pm. I have no technology on me [...] I don’t want them to get stolen when I am sleeping out. It’s like I am off the grid!”*

Vignette Three

“Because not everyone has a phone”

This vignette is about a conversation with a participant called Nicole (not her real name). We wanted to share this part of our interview with her because her story shows us that digital access is always precarious and small changes can affect if and how people are connected. Nicole also demonstrates how innovative people are in gaining access to scarce digital resources. As you read, consider these questions:

- Have you experienced similar challenges in getting access to a device and the internet? Or, do you know other people who have experiences similar to those of Nicole?
- What are some other barriers to access?
- How do people navigate these barriers? What are some ways digital access could be more available for Nicole and other people who live in the DTES?

After Nicole has tried out the Linkvan app, Suzanne asks, “Is there anything you think would make this app better?” Nicole points out, “A lot of people don’t really have phones.” Suzanne asks Nicole if she has a phone. “No!” exclaims Nicole, “I sold it.” Nicole has had various devices in addition to the phone that she once had – a desktop computer that she has lent to a friend for his daughter to use, one laptop that was stolen and another one she has recently pawned but intends to get back. From what we can tell, Nicole currently has no devices, but relies on public computers at a women’s centre, which she uses daily.

We ask Nicole if she finds internet to be too expensive. “No,” she says, “it’s free.” Suzanne looks surprised. “It’s free?” “You just have to stand outside for a long time,” she laughs. “I can see people standing there

all night using the internet. [...] some places leave it on.” Nicole explains that when some local service providers close up for the night, they leave on the Wi-Fi signal for people to use. When she had a phone, she too would tap into these signals and is familiar with several such invisible ‘hotspots’ in the area.

When we ask Nicole how she charged her phone (when she had one), she identifies several exposed outlets throughout the neighborhood. “That place where the old people live? They have one outside. [...] And downtown where the [piece of public art] is, right in there, right at the benches. You go anywhere around the [name of hotel], and they have outlets everywhere.” She observes that there are more available outlets over on the more affluent West Side than here. “They should put more outlets here,” she remarks.

Vignette Four

“What if?”

During our interviews, some participants imagined a more accessible digital landscape. We had fun in our conversations with Tracy and Nicole (not their real names), speculating about how internet access and digital skills could be made available through computer stations in different areas of downtown. Both Tracy and Nicole came up with this same idea, in different interviews.

- What do you think of this idea?
- What other ‘what if’ scenarios can you imagine to make digital access more equitable in this community?

Suzanne asks Tracy where she usually gets information. She answers: “I usually see it posted on the wall, like...at community centers and stuff.” Suzanne: “Oh ya? Like posters?” In response, Tracy comes up with this idea: “Yah, but they should have a touch screen inside. Like [the ones] they have inside the social services office.” Suzanne picks up on the idea: “Like with a touch screen? That would be really cool.” “Like a kiosk kind of thing?” Sherry asks. Tracy explains the idea a bit more: “It’s like a main screen, right? And you can go right into the background to find out information.”

In another interview, another participant, Nicole, comes up with a similar idea. We ask Nicole what suggestions she has for improving the LinkVan app. Nicole points out that there are many times when community organizations are not open, and in that case people do not have access to the internet.

“Unless you guys put computer screens all around the DTES. You guys should just have a place. You can have somebody stand there and they can have like a computer pad, so people can go there and find things out. Just like a little tiny booth.” Sherry asks, “Like an ATM machine?” “Ya ya. Kind of like that [...] and it doesn’t have to be expensive or anything, but you have to have somebody there.” “Would you use it?” Suzanne asks. “Ya,” Nicole says, “a lot of people would. Tourists, everybody. I think a lot of people would use it [...] But it has to be in an open area, like Oppenheimer park, around there or somewhere that everybody goes.”

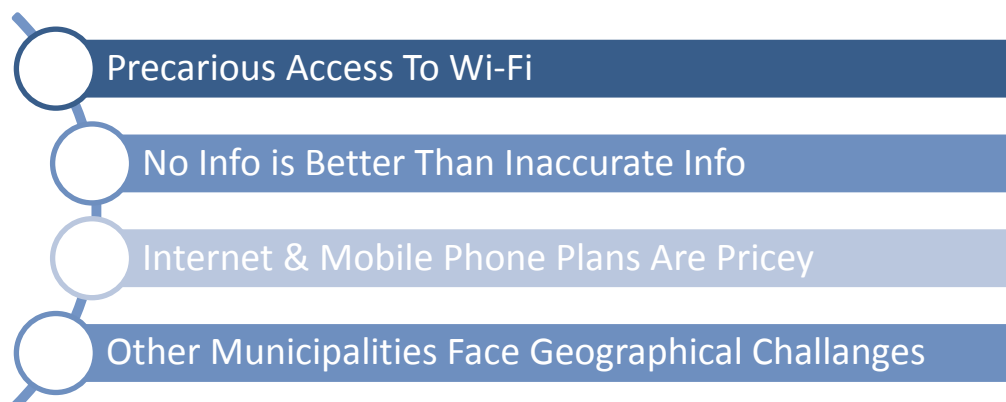
“Usually I don’t get a straight answer [from community organizations]. But if you had a booth like that it would make things clearer.”

After all, lots of fancy shopping malls and office buildings have kiosks that help people find the shops and services they are looking for. Why not one in the DTES?

Forum Discussion

After reading the vignettes, forum participants engaged in group discussion. Below is a summary of the ideas and thoughts put forwards by participants, grouped for readability into identified current **issues** and potential **solutions**.

Issues



Precarious Access to Wi-Fi

Wi-Fi is very necessary, as it is a main communication point to family and friends. Physical safety in accessing this necessary Wi-Fi was noted, particularly at night, as the Vancouver public Wi-Fi is not readily available in the DTES, nor is Wi-Fi always available in shelters. This causes some to go out at night for internet access, or to public spaces when they may rather be in more safe and private settings. A community member mentioned that they don't care whether the Wi-Fi connection is secure (private) or not, they simply need access.

No Info is Better Than Inaccurate Info

One participant mentioned that 'no info [about services] is better than inaccurate info'. Getting the wrong information is challenging for those in urgent need, as they will sometimes walk a long way to a shelter only to find out that the beds are full. It was also mentioned that there is a lack of dissemination of information. Unless you are a member of an internal network or are already tapped into local services or relationships with providers, it is hard to understand the full scope of what community and city services are available.

Internet & Mobile Phone Plans are Pricey

The high cost of internet and mobile phone plans in Canada versus in other countries was another issue. This is one more barrier for access in the DTES and other low-income neighborhoods.

Other Municipalities (New West, Surrey) Face Geographical Challenges

Access to library services, a valuable resource in digital literacy skills and in gaining computer/Wi-Fi access, is more spaced out in municipalities like New West, PoCo, and Surrey. Services are generally more centrally located here in Vancouver, which means that there is less geographical challenge to access them here than in other municipalities.

Solutions

Policy Design

One solution that was brought up focused on the need for policy changes/designs, at both municipal and provincial levels. There was the idea of having BC housing create a real-time housing list, although this met with more questions, as there are a lot of factors at play.

Usability of Services

It was mentioned that all service organizations and services should pay attention to whether their systems and technologies are actually usable, as in many cases some services require people to spend long hours on the phone to social assistance offices, when phones have been removed from public spaces. Others require access to Adobe/PDF and printers to fill in forms. But it is also true that the best technologies or service directories cannot replace actual services.

Technology Design & Access

Many questioned how we design services, and whether they are gated for certain members of our society- we would want to have technology designed not for the 'model user', but for everyone.

For example:

1. The idea of a public kiosk was popular, like those currently implemented in subway stations in Hong Kong, in former phone booth locations in New York City (LinkNYC) and in airports. These could provide short-term access to email and service information. Innovations and partnerships with the private sector could potentially be introduced here, and it was agreed by some that it is worth researching what is happening in other countries as a model.
2. The need for charging stations and more public Wi-Fi.
3. A map that shows Wi-Fi frequency-where, when, and how people access Wi-Fi, and to think of digital access as a continuum rather than an 'either/or' status.
4. Better distribution of cell phones and a means for people to learn to back up their contacts - cell phones need not be a scarce commodity in this community.



iCentre: free internet service + Wi-Fi inside MTR stations, Hong Kong.
Taken from <https://www.flickr.com/photos/seeminglee/8084206141>

Finally, people called for an audit of digital literacy classes available in the Downtown East and South, including who could access these, the pedagogies they use and what people want to learn. This could build upon learning from the Linkvan project's Tech Cafés.

The vibrant discussion and participation was greatly appreciated. Thank you to everyone who participated in this forum, and thank you for taking the time to read this report. If you would like to discuss anything related to these topics, please contact:

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