

**WORKING TOWARDS AN INCLUSIVE DIGITAL SOCIETY**  
**SUMMARY FORUM REPORT**  
**AUGUST 13, 2019**

On April 12, 2019 the DTES Literacy Roundtable, UBC Learning Exchange, and SFU Faculty of Education brought together community-based agencies and stakeholders from across BC who are concerned with digital literacy and digital rights. The aims of the forum were

- to raise awareness about the connections between digital education and digital rights;
- to share information about digital inequalities experienced by organizations and the communities they serve; and,
- to share resources to help address these issues.

Participants included representatives from frontline literacy and social service agencies, university researchers, librarians, non-profit social rights and anti-poverty groups and adults who have lived experience with digital inequalities.

We set the stage for the day by introducing participants to the concepts of digital inclusion and digital justice.

**From digital inclusion to digital justice.**

Advocates of digital inclusion often use the metaphor of a three legged stool to describe what is necessary for a digitally inclusive society. These are: 1) broadband access; 2) computer access; 3) digital literacy education.

Digital inclusion forms the basis for many policies adopted by local, provincial and federal governments. But attendees at the forum expanded on this concept of digital inclusion asking, “What is the nature of the digital society in which people are being included?” If this digital ecosystem is biased, unequal, racist, insecure or discriminatory, than digital inclusion might only lead to more inequality. We proposed that digital inclusion should therefore include justice, for example.

- 1) Access not just to broadband, but also to affordable, secure broadband;
- 2) An ecosystem that is free from data surveillance and includes privacy and data rights;
- 3) Software and platforms that are user friendly, designed for different groups and transparent about how data is collected and used;
- 4) Access to low cost/no cost quality tech support and digital literacy education that enfold critical use, ethics and democratic values.



Figure 1: The digital inclusion stool. Artist: Maggie Miland

*After all, the most digitally literate people in the world can and do leverage their skills to wreak havoc and hate. Digital literacy is not just about skills, but about ethical, anti-racist, decolonizing engagement and design.*

The keynote speaker, Marianela Ramos Capelo of [Open Media](#) built on these concepts of digital rights. Marianela spoke about the ways in which digital rights are being transgressed through digital technologies and the need for a collective movement to address this. She spoke about the concept of “[Tyranny of Convenience](#)”, the threat to democracy from unaccountable forms of automation, biased data, and lack of real consent in the design and implementation of technology.

Marianela gave participants new and rich language, terminology and concepts to work with as we moved into small group discussions that followed the keynote. Figure 2 is a graphic presentation of the problems of digital inequality and possible solutions. There are elaborated in the group discussions, summarized below.



Figure 1: A graphic representation of the problems of digital inequality and possible ways forward. Artist: Maggie Miland.

There were 8 discussion groups throughout the day, the notes below reflect these conversations:

**What are the most significant barriers to equity in accessing e-government, online forms and information?**

- When people can access online forms, but they don't have the expertise to complete it. People are often at their most vulnerable when they need to access services, the lack of computer skills needed to fill out the forms may further marginalize them.
- Employment forms are more user friendly, but still pose significant challenges to navigating and completing the form without basic computer skills. More education is needed, but so is better design.
- There is a lack of privacy and security of personal information when filling out government forms in public spaces, using public computers. If the person needs help with it, they must share personal information with strangers (org staff).
- Agency staff are often not trained in the areas people need help with the most. Staff can inadvertently do harm because they do not know all the rules/requirements for online sites.
- Youth experience privacy agnosticism, they feel helpless to control galleries of data, and the fight for the use/sale of their data.

- The cost of data, tech, and tech help is often prohibitive. If everyone is to be included in the digital landscape these costs must be addressed. Data through cellphone access is not the same as broadband access and should never be considered a viable substitute for a secure web connection.

**Actions for digital equity advocacy.**

- Have government workers available in communities to help with filling out forms, taxes, etc. This has been largely successful in rural environments;
- Advocates need to develop a shared understanding/dialogue about the equity issues that their clients/communities experience;
- We need to open a communication pathway between front line social service organizations and government services to bridge the lack of trust in faceless, automated systems; we need accountability for how data that people are asked to provide are secured and are being used by government;
- Online forms need to be in clear language;
- There must be recognition that cell/data is insufficient as a secure mode to access the web. Large telecom companies and cell phone companies must be accountable for the provision of secure and affordable internet and data plans;
- Government services should engage in co-design and undertake usability testing among a broad spectrum of communities who use their sites. Who are model users? Who are being excluded? For example, people with concurrent disabilities, those who are homeless and precariously housed need to be part of this conversation;
- We need to create a Canadian digital service – a code of conduct around accessibility and privacy located in specific communities and for specific needs, e.g. Veterans Affairs.

**Local Government: How is the City of Vancouver’s Digital Strategy rolling out for everyday citizens.**

- The poor design of government online forms and services keep low income people away from resources;
- The creation of “apps” that replace face to face interactions with government is designed for the average citizen who has ubiquitous access to tech/data. This makes it difficult for people who do not have this type of access to participate in their civic government;
- If you are designing for us, include us by designing with us.



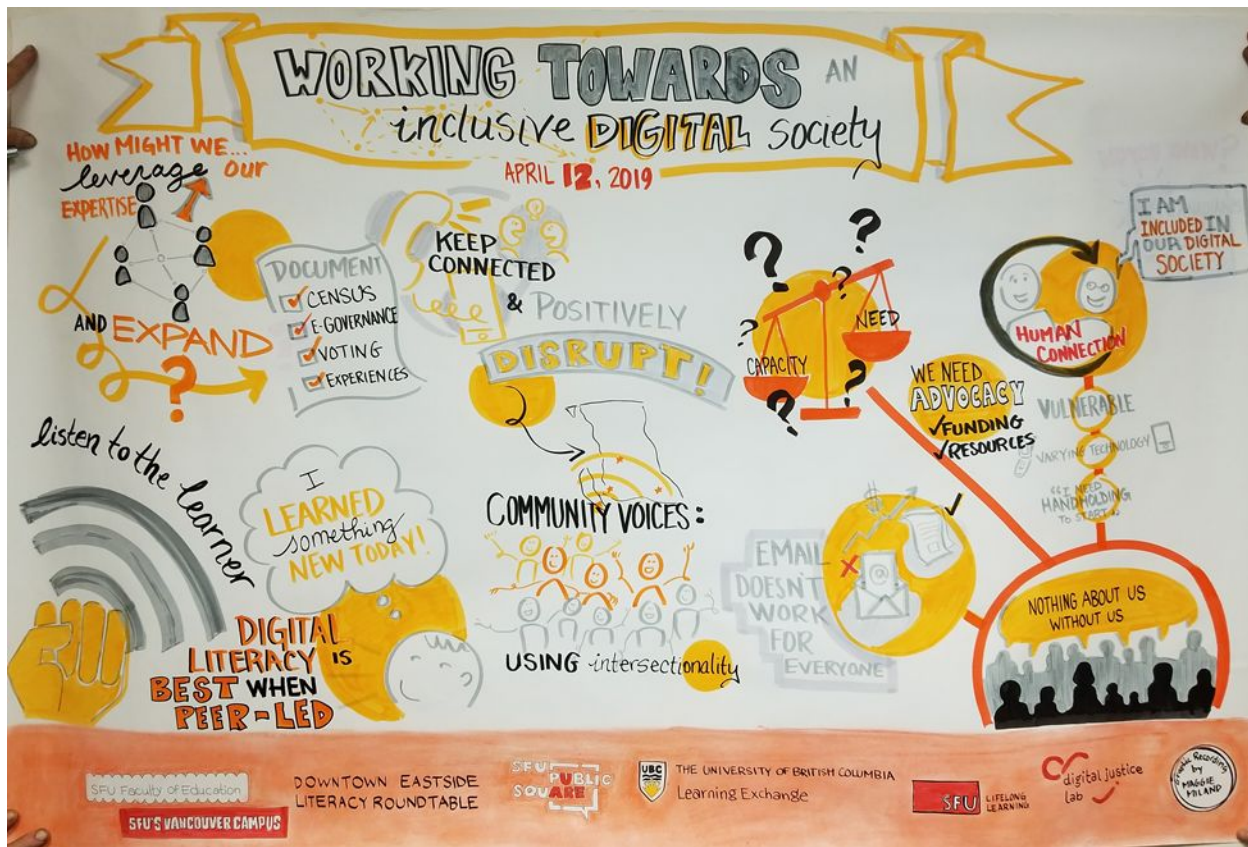


Figure 2: Generating strategies and actions for a digital justice movement. Artist: Maggie Miland

**Infrastructure: The deep inequalities in access to high speed internet and tech.**

- The cost of high speed access (needed by most sites) is prohibitive to low-income individuals
- Lack of infrastructure to support high speed internet and internet costs where available among Indigenous communities, particularly rural communities leads to education and socio-economic exclusions.
- Agricultural migrant workers in Fraser valley from Guatemala and Mexico are excluded from the local digital ecosystem and yet this system is vital to them for connections to family and for information about their work. Many workers rely on access to working devices through donations. Employers may or may not provide access to the Internet. This, combined with precarious citizenship status and lack of English language skills leads to disinformation and misunderstandings that are tied to employment/safety;
- There must be more consistent access to medial literacy education and other forms of academic education for street involved youth to enhance their online security and protect them from disinformation;
- Many low-income community members trade their privacy for access to the internet, but are not always aware of the data and privacy they are giving up.
- Free Geek plays a vital role in promoting environmental and social sustainability via hardware and software; this is where digital justice and climate justice connect.

### **Promising practices in digital literacy education.**

- There is a need for quality, ongoing community-based digital literacy classes that are low cost/no cost and that use a common language;
- Promising practices in teaching digital literacy should be from a digital rights perspective. Digital literacy is not linear. There is a need for community-based organizations to respect people's' urgency by negotiating what's important to them in each interaction. Someone who needs to create an online job profile for a job closing in an hour will not want to learn how to send an email before they can apply. Digital educators and mentors should watch for moment where people become empowered by the process and build upon this. Access is about benefiting from being online;
- "Keep everybody in the circle" – Adopt an intersectional approach to teaching that respects people's experiences of colonization, racism, gender-based discrimination, ageism.. Decolonizing and Indigenizing digital literacy curriculum will help to keep everybody in the circle;
- Do-it-yourself learning is not the answer. Many tech companies are developing platforms to teach digital literacy skills in a self-paced, 'do-it-yourself' approach. This approach does not help people with low literacy skills, it does not address the many questions and learning needs people have, it does not model a critical literacy approach to unpack discrimination and bias online and it can reinforce the values of white, male tech designers.
- We need to interrupt disinformation online by breaking down social isolation, and valuing community-based, relational education that brings people together to learn and have their ideas challenged;
- Make use of peer to peer teaching and learning, as this often works best.

### **Youth and digital justice: A survey by the agency [Check Your Head](#).**

- Critical use of technology is key
- Youth are influenced by the online world - Influencers/social media add stress and fuel depression and anxiety by reinforcing negative thoughts. Add Fake News, fear mongering, disinformation and targeted advertising to the mix and youth can quickly be overwhelmed;
- Extremist groups have figured out algorithms to target vulnerable youth: **What is our societal response??**
- Digital media is strongly associated with mental health. It is becoming a substitute for social skills: Language used online is different to that used in persons; online language can slide into cyber bullying, sad talk (e.g. normalizing suicidal thoughts). Cries for help online are met with no resources or support, and online communication can be used to avoid important conversations;
- Personal vs. corporate responsibility – there need to be more education and discussion of the bigger picture: Who owns your data??
- For marginalized youth the online world can feel vulnerable and dangerous. There needs to be a safe space for youth, how are resources being developed to protect this vulnerability?

The afternoon panel, moderated by Shantel Ivets (Vancouver Community College), drew on the concept of intersectionality and the ways in which different groups are positioned online and in digital policy through relations of colonialism, racism and discrimination. These digital policies and processes can disproportionately harm LGBTQ+ communities, Indigenous peoples, low income people, BIPOC and migrant workers.



Figure 3: Intersectional approaches to digital justice

## KEY MESSAGES AND CONVERSATIONS

### Successes and take-aways.

The issue of digital inclusion is one that affects all aspects of society, but it's especially impactful on marginalized communities and community members; discriminatory uses of technology and the lack of equitable access to technology resources further push people to the margins. It is important that these conversations continue, that advocacy continues and that they include grassroots community groups, people with lived experience, and all levels of government. The following messages were repeated throughout the day:

- 'Nothing about us without us': people who are affected by technology design and policy should have a role in its development;
- There is no 'one size fits all' in digital inclusion. All agencies and institutions should consider how different groups will be affected by their digital policies;

- Digital equity and inclusion are not add-ons: All organizations and institutions should build principles of digital justice into their work;
- More research is needed about how different groups are affected by digital inequalities;
- Educators need more training in digital literacy strategies. Digital literacy should not only be about teaching people how to use technologies and digital information, but also how to question them;
- Digital education is also about educating governments and institutions about the effects of their policies, strategies and designs in people's lives;
- There is a need to continue a big tent coalition across sectors and disciplines because digital society affects everyone.

We are grateful for the funding support from the Digital Justice Lab, SFU Public Square and SFU Harbour Centre, the UBC Learning Exchange, the DTES Literacy Roundtable, SFU Faculty of Education and the UBC Faculty of Education (LLED). We hope we can build on these relations as we take this work further. The forum raised issues of digital inequity in all its forms and we see this as an area for further research and public education, particularly as the 'smart city', big data, digital governments and automation unfold. We ended with strong consensus that another Digital Justice forum is much needed and we look forward to building this vision of a more digitally just future together.

For more information about this report and the Digital Justice project please contact the forum organizers:

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