Forum goals and activities

The one-day forum *Working Towards A Digitally Inclusive Society* was held on April 12, 2019 bringing together for the first time in BC agencies and stakeholders concerned with digital literacy and digital rights. The goals of the forum were to raise awareness about the connections between digital education and digital rights, share information about issues of digital inequalities people were experiencing, and gauge interest in further collaboration and collective action. 110 participants registered and 108 attended for all or most of the day. These participants included representatives from frontline literacy and social service agencies, university researchers, librarians, non-profit social rights and anti-poverty groups and adults who experience digital inequalities.

Key messages and conversations

The day began with a welcoming by Elder Doris Fox who reminded us that communities work best when ‘no one is above and now one is below’. This imperative to lift up marginalized voices and those who experience discrimination online and offline arose over and over during the day.

The keynote speaker, Marianela Ramos of Open Media introduced the concept of digital rights, the ways in which digital rights are being transgressed through digital technologies and the need for a collective movement to address this. Ramos’ address gave workshop participants language, terminology and concepts to work with during discussion groups held throughout the day on topics including:

- The work of libraries in digital equity;
- The need for an equity lens in City of Vancouver’s digital strategy, and for more participation from everyday citizens in how this is rolling out;
- The poor design of government online forms and services that keep low income people away from resources;
- The deep inequalities in access to high speed Internet among Indigenous communities that leads to education and socio-economic exclusions;
- The role of digital media in the safety and security of street involved youth;
• Promising practices in teaching digital literacy from a rights perspective;
• The role of Free Geek in promoting environmental and social sustainability via hardware and software.

The afternoon panel, moderated by Vancouver Community College educator Shantel Ivets, drew on the concept of intersectionality to make visible how different groups are positioned online and in digital policy through relations of colonialism, racism and discrimination. We heard from groups how digital policies and government and corporate uses of artificial intelligences disproportionately harm LGBTQ2S+ communities, Indigenous communities, low income and racialized citizens and migrant workers.

**Successes and take-aways.**

The support of SFU Harbour Centre and SFU Public Square to include the Forum in the activities of the Community Summit on Disinformation provided an ideal opportunity to extend the reach and capacity of the Forum. This allowed us to make connections between disinformation and digital inequalities, and to include in this vital conversation grassroots community groups and local citizens. These groups sent clear messages:

• ‘Nothing about us without us’: people who are affected by digital technologies and policies should have a role in their design;
• 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 these into their work;
• Digital inclusion is not by default a ‘good thing’: we must consider the kind of society in which people are being included and the potential for harm by being online;
• More information 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;

**Feedback and next steps**

We had a budget for 100 participants and many more wanted to come. We would like to expand participation in the Forum or hold such events more often, with smaller groups. We will also create more opportunity for participants to share their work with one another, more time for the group discussions and a venue that has capacity for parallel sessions to accommodate hands-on workshops.
We received 60+ evaluations. Some representative comments:

**What did you like most about today?**

[I appreciated] the diversity of voices in the room. Having indigenous voices, trans and queer voices, community and academic voices gave a rich conversation with many crucial points.

Liked the criticality in the room. No censorship. Lots of thoughtfulness.

Everything – everyone was a wealth of information. I’m new in this area and I feel like I can start to ask the right questions to serve our clientele; Concentration of expertise was amazing.

How important the framing is of justice, access, risk, privacy, safety, etc. One community’s stance is not the same as another’s.

**What were some challenges of the day?**

As always, momentum and sustainability. How to keep the good ideas and intentions harnessed for further good work?

The scale of the issues can be overwhelming but they are important for all of us. How do we deal with this as under-resourced groups?

It feels like we could not take deep dived into the issues-->we just skimmed the surface. Not sure how it could have been structured for more in-depth conversations. You made a good first start.

There was consensus that we need another such forum next year, supported by calls to action that will emerge from this first forum. We are grateful for the collaboration with Open Media, the Digital Justice Lab, SFU Public Square and SFU Harbour Centre, the UBC Learning Exchange, the DTES Literacy Roundtable, SFU and UBC Faculties of Education, the Vancouver Public Library and more....and we hope we can build on these relations to 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. The success of the partnerships that made the forum possible also shows that universities have a key role in supporting under-resourced community groups such as those who attended and organized the forum, for example in support for meeting venues, helping to find and generate relevant data, supporting research collaborations, and promoting the work underway in community venues.