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Digital Literacy in Digital Strategy

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses the role of digital literacy as a digital strategy policy goal in Canada. It reviews previous framings of digital literacy and suggests how they could be broadened to avoid an overly superficial treatment of Canadians' negotiation of digital culture and policymaking.

Keywords *Digital literacy; Policy; Technology; Internet; Regulation*

RÉSUMÉ

Ce commentaire discute l'habileté numérique comme objectif politique au Canada. Il passe en revue des perspectives antérieures sur l'habileté numérique et suggère comment on pourrait dorénavant aborder celle-ci afin d'éviter un traitement trop superficiel des négociations canadiennes en matière de culture et politique numériques.

Mots clés *Habileté numérique; Politique; Technologie; Internet; Réglementation*

Introduction

Over the last two decades, versions of digital strategy policymaking in Canada have repeatedly concluded that the internet is part of an essential national infrastructure. From the Information Highway Advisory Council (1994–1997) to the National Broadband Task Force (2001) and the Telecommunications Policy Review Panel (2005–2006) to *Digital Canada 150* (2010–2015), it seems as though federal consultations pertaining to digital strategy continually revisit recommendations emanating from the same general regulatory framework, devised through similar processes. Generally speaking, this framework reinforces what might be called a broadly neoliberal stance that the internet is primarily conceived of in terms of economic growth, and, as such, the government's primary role should be to support the corporate development of digital technology

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(Crow & Longford, 2000; McNally, Rathi, Evaniew, & Wu, 2017). It is important to consider past policymaking processes in terms of how they have influenced the way a national digital strategy continues to be articulated in chiefly economic terms.

As an illustrative example, this article focuses on the role of digital literacy in federal approaches to devising a broad internet policy strategy. Digital literacy is an important dynamic to examine, given the typical distributive paradigm for internet technology, which focuses on access as purely about connectivity and hardware rather than about capabilities and software (Eubanks, 2011). Increasingly, federal approaches to internet regulation have acknowledged a central role for digital literacy as part of a broader digital strategy; for instance, the 2015–2016 *Review of basic telecommunications services* (CRTC, 2015) by the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) included several contributions on the significance of digital literacy, and yet the CRTC found literacy to be outside of its core mandate and did not integrate it into regulatory policy. A similar problem has plagued federal internet policymaking in the past, where literacy is acknowledged as important but not sufficiently explored as part of digital strategy that embraces neoliberal imperatives. Such strategy-making has significant material consequences for Canadians, whose quality of life depends on being able to navigate networked technologies, as discussed by Marita Moll (2012) in her survey of the now-defunct Community Access Program, which ultimately eroded the community networks it was set up to enhance. When comparing how the Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC) versus *Digital Canada 150* framed digital literacy as part of federal strategy, it becomes clear not only that the distributive paradigm has prevented governments from deeply considering the complexities of digital literacy but that the "lifelong learning" and "digital skills" promoted by these policies further the association between internet technology and individual responsibilization.

Among the five key principles that structure its first final report of 1995, the IHAC included "lifelong learning," arguing that "if Canadians are to compete effectively on the global Information Highway, they need to embrace learning and be more competitive, innovative and creative" (p. ix). The second final report similarly concluded that "the new technology is creating opportunities for lifelong learning that will be critical both to workers and industry, given that skills will need to be constantly updated in a knowledge economy" (Information Highway Advisory Council, 1997, p. vi). These pronouncements were arrived at through a process that was extensively critiqued on the basis of its exclusiveness—no broad public consultation was actively solicited—and lack of representativeness—Industry Canada appointed members of IHAC, and they largely represented Québec and Ontario business interests (Barney, 2004; Birdsall, 1999; McDowell & Buchwald, 1997). The idea of lifelong learning, in particular, was a conceit established at IHAC's first meeting in May 1994, when the working group on Education/Learning and Training was struck under the assumption that "Learning must be viewed as a life-long activity—the working group will explore how the information highway can play a pivotal role in this respect" (Information Highway Advisory Council, 1994, n.p.). The implicit assumption behind the notion of lifelong learning is that the individual is solely responsible for keeping pace with technological change; if

one should fall behind, any negative consequences of such inequality are thus cast as the individual's own fault. Moreover, as indicated in those first meeting minutes, learning was from the outset tethered to "consumer awareness," defined as "getting Canadians to adopt tech and develop digital skills" (Information Highway Advisory Council, 1994, n.p.). The way the deliberative process was predetermined meant that the regulatory approach to digital literacy in the three-year IHAC endeavour remained narrow and indicative of a neoliberal, distributive approach to internet technology. The IHAC's framing of literacy as lifelong learning proved to be influential and was directly adopted in the government's digital strategy, as incarnated in its *Building the Information Society* report (Industry Canada, 1996).

Around fifteen years later, the 2010 Speech from the Throne announced national consultations on the development of a comprehensive digital economy strategy. What became *Digital Canada 150* was released in 2014 and updated in 2015. As opposed to the experts-only model of the IHAC, Industry Canada first held a series of expert panels, then produced a consultation paper that initiated a period of public submissions through a government website. The consultation paper frames the issue of digital literacy under the banner of "Building Digital Skills for Tomorrow" in order to prepare Canadians to "access, use and interpret a growing and increasingly complex range of digital information" (Industry Canada, 2010, p. 32). The fact that the consultation paper framed digital literacy this way delimited the ultimate recommendations of *Digital Canada 150*, despite the broad public engagement that was received. For example, even though well over 100 submissions discussed digital skills in multiple ways—in relation to accessibility, Indigenous communities, online privacy, and digital citizenship, for example—the ultimate recommendation of *Digital Canada 150* was to create a Digital Literacy Taskforce oriented around the consumption of digital technologies as an economic driver (Shade, 2014); moreover, no such taskforce was actually created. Instead, in 2018, the Ministry of Innovation, Science and Economic Development announced a funding package of $29.5 million for a Digital Literacy Exchange Program. The program is in progress at the time of writing and may well result in support for diverse initiatives. The language of the announcement, however, still echoes the "digital skills" language of *Digital Canada 150*. So, while *Digital Canada 150* would seem to include a more democratic process of consultation than the IHAC, its ultimate recommendations—noted to be ineffective by many critics (e.g., Geist, 2014; Hadziristic, 2017)—were constrained by the neoliberal assumptions that underpinned the way consultations were framed at the outset.

Even though around 15 years separate the IHAC and *Digital Canada 150*, there is a repetition of the essential framing of digital literacy. Digital skills and the notion of the continuous development of those skills according to the paradigm of lifelong learning forms a consistent policy goal, one that absolves the government of its responsibility to support the social infrastructure necessary for economic transition and instead responsibilizes the individual as a skills-bearing subject, where these skills are primarily envisioned in relation to consumption (Smythe & Breshears, 2017). Moreover, the skills framing in Canada's most recent digital strategy, *Digital Canada 150*, missed the opportunity to consider major changes to the characteristics of digital culture in the

intervening years since the IHAC. Given the contemporaneous networked climate of endemic dataveillance, digital labour, and algorithmic bias, and more recent developments such as misinformation, political bots, deep fakes, cryptocurrency, and the dark web, which may have been at least anticipated by forward-looking policies, digital literacy could include a whole host of new competencies that emanate from a critical perspective (e.g., Buckingham, 2009; O'Neill, 2010; Smith, Shade, & Shepherd, 2017). For example, the digital citizenship model suggests that rather than being solely measured in terms of consumption, digital literacy should be conceived of more broadly as encompassing digital media production as well as general critical literacy about how technology shapes contemporary life (e.g., Hobbs, 2010).

At the same time, the lack of a specific plan for how to achieve digital skills, and for whom, has resulted in a paucity of even basic digital literacy training support at the federal level in Canada. Due to the segmentation of literacy across provincial and territorial jurisdictions, adult literacy in particular "is coordinated by a small cluster of powerful texts, in the absence of a coherent policy framework" (Smythe, 2015, p. 7). These texts, often introduced at the provincial level, range from more conservative—such as Alberta's (2009) entrepreneurial vision for digital literacy—to more critical—such as the pluralistic approach to languages, social contexts, and cultural identities taken by the Northwest Territories Education, Culture and Employment (2008) framework. The inconsistencies between provinces further hinders attempts to integrate new perspectives at the federal level, even though federal support could potentially bolster more localized programs. This is important given the way that adult basic training is most crucial for marginalized Canadians, such as Indigenous communities, people living in poverty, newcomers to Canada, and those with disabilities, to participate in digital life. If a national digital strategy is to be effective in this context, it needs to go beyond an instrumental positioning of Canadians as consumers to instead considering how digital culture conditions contemporary citizenship in specific ways for specific groups.

So, how should current consultations address digital literacy as part of digital strategy in a way that would attend to a range of competencies and the needs of particular communities? One inroad would be a provision for digital policy literacy (Shade, 2012; Shade & Shepherd, 2013), a kind of "meta-literacy" about how such policies get made. Digital policy literacy encompasses policy processes, political economic parameters, and infrastructural affordances that shape technologies, making it a potential counter to neoliberal responsibilization in its systemic approach. Digital policy literacy challenges existing frameworks for the creation of a national digital strategy by investing diverse communities with an understanding of how policy gets made, which in turn opens up avenues of intervening in policy frameworks beyond the tokenistic tendency of consultation (Arnstein, 1969). The work of MediaSmarts, a nonprofit organization that has produced influential research in this area, offers some examples of how this can be done. MediaSmarts' large-scale survey of digital literacy in Canada identifies best practices in place throughout the country that employ a digital citizenship model of literacy (Hoechsmann & DeWaard, 2015); some of these, such as open educational resources, include elements of digital policy literacy in provoking critical engagement with the infrastructural parameters that structure digital inequalities. In its best incar-

nation, an intervention stemming from digital policy literacy might thus prevent the recurrence of the same old strategies from the usual policymaking suspects by considering what "lifelong learning" and "digital skills" might mean, and for whom, in the larger context of the internet's political economy.

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