The eQuality Project

Annual Report 2015-2016

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This report can be downloaded from:
www.equalityproject.ca

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Our Mission:

To help young people create a networked environment where they can play, learn, communicate, and participate equally, free from surveillance and identity-based harassment.

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Why eQuality?

We are a seven-year partnership project funded by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, developing new knowledge about young people's experiences of privacy and equality in networked spaces.

What's the Problem?

If you've been following the debate around young people and networked technologies, you've probably heard two somewhat contradictory stories. On the one hand, young people are savvy technology users who will drive innovation and wealth production in the information economy. Therefore we don't need to over-regulate the online environment because it will stifle their natural talent for innovation and slow down economic growth. On the other hand, young people online are at risk of being exposed to offensive and hateful content, releasing too much personal information which will be "out there forever", and being victimized by bullies and trolls. Young people therefore need to change their behaviour and adults should intervene to make sure this happens.

Both of these stories have made it hard for young people to thrive in a networked environment.

Let's look at the risk side of the equation. Policymakers, school administrators, and parents seeking to protect youth have too often turned to surveillance to monitor them whenever they use networked technologies. Young people tell us that the lesson they've learned from all this "spying" is that they aren't trusted by adults, and that makes it hard for them to trust adults in return. Surveillance also shuts down opportunities for them to benefit from networked technologies, because it makes it harder for them to privately access information and draw lines between their roles as student, employee, family member, and friend. Worst of all, surveillance makes

it harder for them to go to an adult for help when they do experience online racism, sexism, homophobia, or other kinds of identity-based harassment or violence, because too many of the policies put in place to protect them rely on harsh interventions that don't necessarily take their needs and perspectives into account.

The other side of the equation – the emphasis on innovation – has encouraged a particular kind of commerce, where online technology users "trade" information about themselves in exchange for "free" services. This information – often referred to as big data – is crunched and analysed by algorithms that sort people into categories for institutional purposes. Young people are a prime target group for this kind of sorting, because they typically drop terabytes of data as they go about their daily lives. They also influence millions of dollars a year in family spending, making them an ideal demographic for online marketers.

The hope is that big data analytics can help us be more efficient and secure because they can predict just about anything, from consumer behaviour to terrorist radicalization.

Sometimes these predictions are helpful. Statistical analysis has helped take baseball, for example, to a whole other level. However, when you apply algorithmic thinking to young people's data, things can get tricky because big data analytics don't actually predict anything: all they can do is take vast quantities of information about an individual (some of which is accurate and some of which is not), and assume that that individual will do what he or she did in the

past. Even more problematic, the algorithm assumes that any individual will do exactly what people like him/her have done before. This inherently conservative view of behaviour means that young people can get trapped in their statistical profiles. Add in faulty assumptions about the impact of race or gender, say, and those profiles can deepen discrimination and make it harder for the most vulnerable youth to break out of marginalization.

Think of it this way. If the algorithm profiles you as a teenaged black male living in poverty, it will wallpaper your social media with ads for criminal lawyers, but not ads for law school, because it assumes that you are more likely to commit a crime than the non-racialized teenager living in a middle class part of town. This constant reinforcement can become a self-fulfilling prophecy, especially as other algorithms "steer" you towards predatory banking apps and low-end employment that capitalize on poverty. Mathematician Cathy O'Neil explains it well: "... models that profile a person by his or her circumstances help to create the environment that justifies their assumptions. This destructive loop goes round and round, and in the process the model becomes more and more unfair."[1]

The discriminatory potential of big data analytics is particularly problematic in a networked environment, where young people are surrounded by ads, music videos, and movies that often reproduce identity-based stereotypes. The fact that young people's "success" on social media is measured through the number of likes and followers they attract creates an incentive for them to emulate these stereotypes. It also sets them up for conflict, because those young people who don't emulate the stereotypes well are particularly vulnerable to harassment.

To solve the problem – to create a networked environment where young people can flourish – we believe we should stop trying to "fix" kids and instead focus on fixing the environment itself. To do that, it is essential that we first listen to young people to better understand their perspectives and experiences, and then help them build the tools they need to create an online environment that works for them.

Who We Are:

We are a partnership of academic researchers, community organizations, educators, policy-makers, and civil society groups working with youth to identify evidence-based practices and policies that promote healthy relationships and respect for privacy and equality online.

What We Do:

We are working together to create new knowledge about young people's experiences and needs with respect to networked technologies. Our research is informed by participatory action methods that see young people as equal participants in the knowledge-creation process. We are also committed to using intersectional methods that explore how different identity markers interact to shape young people's sense of self and opportunities.

We will use the new knowledge we develop to create innovative education, policy and public engagement initiatives (such as classroom modules, media production-based learning activities for youth, workshops, train the trainer programs, policy intervention toolkits, and an online repository of multi-media materials) to help parents, teachers, school administrators, communities and policymakers work with youth to ensure they have the support they need to fully engage in digital society.

[1.] Cathy O'Neil. (2016). Weapons of Math Destruction: How Big Data Increases Inequality and Threatens Democracy. New York: Crown, p. 29.

19 External project partners from across Canada

Student research assistants **27** working on a variety of projects

20 Publications produced

600+ Tweets

$50,000 Funding from the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada for a joint project with MediaSmarts investigating youths' privacy decisions aboutpictures posted online

Presentations at national and international conferences **67**

Research at a Glance

Creating new knowledge about networked technologies, online discrimination and identity-based conflict between young people online

Big data algorithms are hard to crack. So in February, 2016, eQuality partner George Mason University brought together leading computer scientists, data analysts and researchers for a day-long workshop in the DC area. We unpacked the logics built into algorithms and explored real-world examples of both the intended and unintended discrimination that can occur when computer models use proxies to sort youth into profile categories.

To see how this process works up close and personal, we've conducted an analysis of the information practices of Mattel's Hello Barbie doll. Hello Barbie records everything a child says and then uses algorithms to analyse it in real time to decide what Barbie should say back. Parents are required to read 7.9 hours of legal documentation and enter into complex legal agreements with Mattel and third party ToyTalk before the doll can be activated. We've also looked at how Barbie's dialogue reproduces gender and racial stereotypes.

Our analysis of commercial services that place students' social media accounts under surveillance to identify "risks" identifies a myriad of ethical issues. As eQuality's Leslie Shade and Rianka Singh conclude, "Balancing social media privacy for young people with the need to ensure their safety and security does not mean that we sacrifice their privacy rights, nor jeopardize their rights to free speech and participatory communication. The rights of children and young people are intertwined with their use of digital media"[2]

2. Journal of Social Media and Society.

Policy at a Glance

Creating digital media policies that respond to young people's needs.

At the request of the Open Society Foundation in the United Kingdom, we prepared a report on big data discrimination and young people, which includes a set of policy recommendations for actors working on human rights issues related to big data. Key takeaways include:
➢ the need for algorithmic transparency to ensure that discriminatory big data analytics can be held to account
➢ the need to proactively address the underlying roots of discriminatory outcomes produced in the big data environment.

eQuality researchers Jane Bailey and Shaheen Shariff and eQuality partner Julie Lalonde participated in the Province of Ontario's Summit on Sexual Violence and Harassment held in Toronto in 2015.

In response to the January 2016 Consultation and Call for Essays: Online Reputation issued by the Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada, we submitted a report that focused in particular on policy solutions to mitigate online reputational risk, especially in the context of vulnerable groups.

On October 9, 2015, eQuality researchers Jane Bailey, Valerie Steeves, Leslie Shade, and Sarah Heath, and Dillon Black from eQuality partner OCTEVAW, met with a delegation from Korea to discuss the human rights challenges young people face online. The delegation was particularly interested in innovative legal and educational approaches to better help young Koreans navigate online commercialism and harassment. The group discussed Canadian legislation and jurisprudence, explored the empirical results of The eGirls Project and eQuality partner MediaSmarts' Young Canadians in a Wired World research project, and shared best practices around education and outreach.

The delegation included representatives from the National Human Rights Commission of Korea, the Korean Ministry of Justice and the Anti-Corruption and Civil Rights Commission of the Republic of Korea. The meeting took place at the offices of eQ partner Human Rights Research and Education Centre and included involvement from the Centre's Director John Packer and Assistant Director Viviana Fernandez.

Outreach at a Glance

Creating and disseminating educational and outreach materials to help Canadian youth make the most of their digital media experience


In March 2016, eQuality partner YWCA invited eQuality researchers Jane Bailey and Valerie Steeves to join a panel discussion at the NGO Commission on the Status of Women Forum in New York City that paralleled the United Nations Commission on the Status of Women meeting also taking place in New York City. Women from around the globe gathered to discuss the need for gender equality in networked spaces.

We launched the PushBack module on our website. The interactive timeline chronicles how young people themselves have used networked communications to push back against discrimination. These campaigns not only highlight the ability of youth to use the online environment for positive change, but they also show how young people can – and do – support other youth and marginalized communities throughout the world.
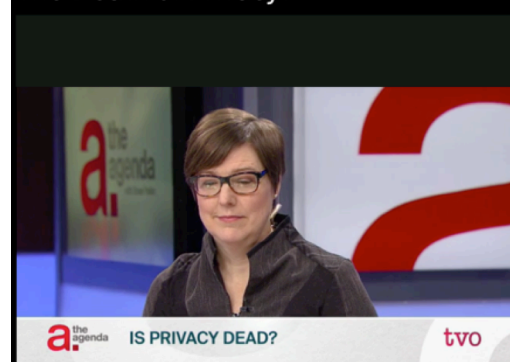
eQuality researcher Valerie Steeves challenged the view that young people don't care about their online privacy during a panel discussion on TVO's The Agenda with Steve Paiken. Drawing on years of social science research, she argued that we need to go beyond laws that equate disclosure with consent, and instead develop laws and practices that protect the social value of privacy.

In the Spotlight:

The YWCA joined the eQuality Project in 2016. Director of Member Services & Development, Raine Liliefeldt, talks about her hopes for the project.

What brought you to working with young people?

I have had a rather meandering career path full of lots of really interesting roles. It started in entertainment and education, I was always working with children and youth. I made a jump to corporate and finally landed happily in the non-profit sector where I`ve been for over 14 years.

How did you become involved in The eQuality Project?

I met Jane Bailey at Defining the Legal Lines: Youth Cyber-bullying and Wellbeing conference in November of 2013 at McGill. We had one of those hallway conversations that ends up being as important as having attended an entire day of workshops or listening to a host of speakers. I learned so much from her in those two minutes. She came onto Project Shift – Creating a Safer Digital World for Young Women as a partner. We heavily consulted The eGirls Project research as well. I was very happy to be invited to partner on The eQuality Project.

Which eQuality activities interest you?

I am astounded by the work of all the academics on this project. The work on intersectionality is interesting, and I love the conversations around creating an Internet that reflects our values.

Any websites/groups/twitter feeds to recommend for those interested in similar work?

I love the positivity of the community response in supporting those who are experiencing online harassment https://iheartmob.org/. Cyberviolence is connected to offline gender discrimination and inequality. We can start shifting this when we enable women and girls to engage with the Internet- from access, to developing and coding to creating the safe space they want it to be. Organizations like Ladies Learning Code, http://ladieslearningcode.com/ Take Back the Tech https://www.takebackthetech.net/, Women Action and The Media http://www.womenactionmedia.org/why-wam__trashed/why-wam-matters are doing incredible things to move this work forward.

What would you like to see as a long-term outcome of the project's work?

Many non-profit organizations don't have the critical resources to engage in research. Projects and partnerships like this one offer non-profits that kind of support, and the opportunity for knowledge mobilization and collaboration. Big vision: A feminist Internet. It is on the horizon and hopefully our work on The eQuality Project brings us closer – I hope.

A phrase/quote/passage that inspires you:

"Be the balm."

Somebody who you would like an opportunity to meet in person/or a place you'd like to visit:

People: Sade, Issa Rae & Nnedi Okarofor
Places: Chefchaouen, Morocco and always happy to go back to Cape Town and Bali.

The eQuality Team

Our Researchers:

VALERIE STEEVES
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SARAH HEATH
Project Coordinator

Our Partners:

THE ALBERTA
TEACHER'S ASSOCIATION

THE CANADIAN
CENTRE FOR GENDER
& SEXUAL DIVERSITY

CANADIAN INTERNET
POLICY AND PUBLIC
INTEREST CLINIC

CANADIAN
RACE RELATIONS
FOUNDATION

CANADIAN TEACHERS'
FEDERATION

CANADIAN WOMEN'S
FOUNDATION

EGALE CANADA HUMAN
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ALBERTA

HUMAN RIGHTS
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EDUCATION CENTRE

MEDIASMARTS

ONTARIO COALITION OF
RAPE CRISIS CENTRES

OTTAWA COALITION TO
END VIOLENCE AGAINST
WOMEN

STATUS OF WOMEN
CANADA

THE VANIER INSTITUTE
OF THE FAMILY

UNIVERSITY OF OTTAWA

UNIVERSITY OF TORONTO

UNIVERSITY OF
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