The eQuality Project Annual Report 2020 – 2021
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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.

WHAT'S NEW IN 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.

In 2020, The eQuality Project submitted a special comment to the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Right to Privacy Toward a Better Understanding of Privacy: Children's Right to Privacy and Autonomy. The submission was focused on The eQuality Project research outcomes, and emphasised young Canadians' opinions and lived experiences surrounding privacy rights, more specifically: the intersection of privacy, autonomy, and independence. As we have previously reported, in all of our research with young people, our participants consistently reported that privacy is very important to them, and that it plays a vital role in their developmental goals to become moral actors in their own right, contrary to many stereotypes about young people and their attitudes towards privacy.

As we enter the seventh and final funded year of The eQuality Project, and with the research portion of the project winding down in favour of outreach and dissemination, we thought it was an excellent opportunity to provide an overview of our research findings with young people, as highlighted in this special comment to the CRC.

Privacy, Autonomy and the Task of Growing Up: Young Canadians' Perspectives

Over the course of our research with young Canadians – through The eQuality Project (SSHRC), The eGirls Project (SSHRC), and Young Canadians in a Wired World (MediaSmarts), we've seen not only that young Canadians greatly value their privacy, but also the ways in which they attempt to circumvent systematic surveillance and data collection in the networked environment. However, children of different age ranges approach the issues of privacy and equality in the online environment in different ways.

For example, we've seen a discernable difference between the age groups of 11 – 12-year-olds and 13 – 17-year-olds in how they try to manage their online experiences, and from whom they seek guidance and advice. Based on our research findings, younger children typically involve their parents more in their online communications and explorations. Indeed, parents are considered an important part of young people's privacy infrastructure, and at an earlier age, they are key in helping them not only navigate the online environment, but also make informed choices as to what kinds of digital content to consume. This guidance improves not only children's privacy, but also their sense of autonomy in their experiences navigating the online environment.

As young people age, however, our research has shown that parents' perspectives often change from the earlier participation and guidance of their children's experiences in the online environment to one of surveillance in the guise of "protection." This shift is largely fuelled by government and corporate messaging that surveillance equals good parenting. We've found that this shift to a surveillance-based parenting style has the unintended consequence of causing teenagers to believe that the lack of privacy offered by their parents is due to a fundamental lack of parental trust. However, teenage research participants have indicated that if parents respect their privacy and autonomy, and maintain a participatory rather than a protective parenting style, they feel as though they have the space required to explore and experience the networked environment without fear of parental surveillance, and can much more easily bring any issues they encounter to their parents.

Despite the development of healthy parental strategies for helping one's children navigate the online

environment, our research has shown that neither parents nor children are well-equipped to address the corporate surveillance, manipulation, and data collection targeted at children online. This lack of tools and skills does not equate to ignorance, however. Indeed, our research participants are very much aware that they are under surveillance when they use networked technologies. This surveillance is not inhibited by location, either. Young people are under surveillance at school through educational technology platforms and apps, as well as on social media. The data-for-profit model that drives the Internet reaches into all aspects of their lives.

This all-encompassing corporate surveillance, and the resulting loss of privacy is particularly problematic for young people as the online environment allows them to develop, explore, and expand their identities as emerging adults. Indeed, 20% - 40% of research participants in 2015 reported that they used online resources to learn about their physical and mental health, as well as their relationships, and sexuality. However, with the increasing loss of privacy in the online environment, our research has shown that young people are steadily moving away from online resources because they recognize that their private searches are being collected, analysed, and fed into algorithms by corporations. Because of the sensitive nature on many of these online activities it comes as no surprise that this incursion into young people's privacy and autonomy has particularly negative effects on young people from equality-seeking communities .

Policy Implications and Recommendations

When it comes to addressing negative issues or situations that they encounter in the online environment, our research participants consider civil and criminal legal avenues as a last resort, except in the most extreme cases. They noted that not only are these avenues problematic due to the delays and expenses involved, but also that the process may further expose them to increased publicity rather than minimizing the damage, or repairing and/or redressing affected relationships. Instead, they prefer policy approaches that are consistent with an understanding of privacy, that support autonomy and equality, as well as contribute to the creation of a healthy online environment that is free from surveillance.

Indeed, they prefer policy changes that reduce the reliance on surveillance as well as the corporate access to their data. In addition, they want policies that not only minimize the publicity surrounding online attacks and limit the harmful behaviours at their source, but also policies that support them in their efforts to rebuild their reputations and relationships – i.e. through mediation and restorative justice services.

Thus informed by this research from the last 20 years, and based on young people's lived experiences and aspirations, we have advocated – and will continue to advocate – for policy changes that are grounded in the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, specifically those related to protection, provision, and participation in order to create a more inclusive and welcoming networked environment for all.

POLICY AT A GLANCE

Creating digital media policies that respond to young people's needs, and to disseminate new knowledge to policy makers and members of the public.

UN Report on Privacy & Children

The eQuality Project's Valerie Steeves and Jane Bailey penned a submission to The United Nations Committee on the Convention on the Rights of the Child, Regarding Draft Special Comment No 25: Children's Rights in Relation to the Digital Environment. Steeves and Bailey open their response with a series of general comments surrounding their research with young Canadians, concerning their experiences in the networked environment, including: the need for a strong rights-oriented responses to the issues that young people face online; a strengthening of regulations around targeted marketing, neuromarketing, and automated decision-making; the importance of privacy and equality; and, the negative impacts of surveillance and artificial intelligence.

Steeves and Bailey provided a series of recommendations in response to each paragraph of the Committee's report, informed by our research and outreach work with young people from across Canada, and requested that the Committee conduct an analysis that both recognizes the disparately negative impacts on children from equality-seeking communities and seeks to mitigate them.

RESEARCH AT A GLANCE

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

Ed-Tech & App Privacy

Last year, The eQuality Project worked with the Canadian Teachers' Federation to draft and develop an nation-wide survey of teachers across Canada, one section of which involved a discussion of educational technology that teachers employ in the classroom. Based on the results of that section, The eQuality Project has been working on an analysis of privacy policies across a broad range of educational apps and platforms that teachers have been using.

Once this preliminary analysis has been completed, we will follow that up with a further analysis of the privacy and data practices that teachers are using across Canada. This secondary analysis will help expand and explore the policy issues that relate to online learning and data stewardship in the education sector across the country.

CKO Report

In 2018, The eQuality Project partnered with UNICEF Canada and The Office of The Privacy Commissioner of Ontario (IPC) to launch Canadian Kids Online – a branch of UNICEF Office of Research – Innocenti's Global Kids Online Project. With support from our partners, eQuality Project researchers conducted a survey on the online experiences of Canadian youth, specifically investigating the ways in which the online environment can amplify constraints and opportunities for young Canadians, and how their knowledge, attitudes, and sensitivities to privacy issues affect their rights online.

The survey was designed to explore the risks and benefits experienced by young Canadians between the ages of 9 and 17, and was developed collaboratively by UNICEF Office of Research - Innocenti, the London School of Economics and Political Science, and the EU Kids Online network. In order to contextualize previous Canadian research from the past 20 years by The eGirls Project, The eQuality Project, and MediaSmarts, the facilitators of the Canadian Kids Online survey added an additional section concerning online privacy knowledge and practices.

Specifically, the survey was divided into two parts that examined the ways in which the online environment can amplify both risks and opportunities experienced by young Internet users, and how their knowledge, attitudes, and sensitivities towards privacy issues relate to the risks and opportunities that they experience, as well as how support from knowledgeable adults affected those same issues. The final report will be published in 2021.

#ConnectionChallenge

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the creation of a new socio-technical environment around the world. Lockdowns of varying degrees of severity around the world sequestered people into limited social bubbles and led to a rise in working or attending school remotely. This shift to online work and learning led to a new level of social isolation. In the midst of the fist lockdowns in Canada, one group of young people in Kingston wanted to explore the nature of this new socio-technical reality, specifically, the ways in which a reliance on technology and networked devices for communication and socialization effected their sense of connection to themselves and others.

Three years ago, this same group of young people

worked with eQuality's Valerie Steeves and Brock University's Valerie Michaelson to create the #DisconnectionChallenge – a two-week project that explored how media use effected their relationships and sense of connection to themselves, friends, families, and nature.

With this new project – the #ConnectionChallenge – the group wanted to investigate the challenges of maintaining meaningful connections with friends and family via solely digital means after the closure of schools, universities, and workplaces across Canada. Not only does this project focus on the maintenance of close relationships, it also highlights the everyday instances of human connection that are often undervalued or overlooked, such as simply being in a public space surrounded by strangers and the background noise of modern society.

COVID & Ed-Tech Teacher Interviews

In February 2020, The eQuality Project partnered with the Alberta Teachers' Association to launch the #DisconnectChallenge in Alberta. This two-week activity involved over 11,000 participants keeping a media diary for one week, followed by a one-week media fast. Following the completion of the #DC Alberta, eQuality Project researchers wanted to investigate the experiences and challenges teachers faced with respect to the use of learning technologies during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In order to explore this issue, we interviewed teachers from across the country to gain insight into their perspectives not only on the types of education technology that they employed, but also the ways that connection and disconnection have shaped young Canadian's experiences, both inside and outside the classroom, and whether that has changed during the course of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Our main areas of interest involved: the use of educational technology and applications; learning via networked devices; how the process of consciously disconnecting from networked learning environments informed young people's sense of connection; and, how the COVID-19 pandemic changed both their teaching practices as well as young people's experiences of learning through technology.

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OUTREACH AT A GLANCE

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

Emerald International Handbook on Technology-facilitated Violence and Abuse

Last year, The eQuality Project's Jane Bailey partnered with Nicola Henry (RMIT University) and Asher Flynn (Monash University) to co-edit the Emerald International Handbook on Technology-facilitated Violence and Abuse – a collected volume that investigates and highlights international perspectives on technology-facilitated violence.

This edited collection consists of chapters submitted by legal scholars, activists, and researchers from around the world including North and South America, Europe, Asia, Africa, and Oceania. In addition, the book features chapters by a number of eQ team members, including Jane Bailey and Raine Liliefeldt; Anne Cheung; Suzie Dunn; Kristen Thomasen; and Chandell Gosse.

The volume was published by Emerald Publishing in 2021 and is an online, open access publication, available here: https://www.emerald.com/insight/publication/doi/10.1108/9781839828485. The volume was publically launched at the University of Ottawa, co-hosted by The eQuality Project and the Centre for Law, Technology and Society in the autumn of 2021.

Screening Surveillance

The eQuality Project has partnered with the Big Data Surveillance Project (Queen's University) and the AI+Society Project (University of Ottawa) in order to co-fund the production of a fourth film in sava saheli singh's trilogy: Screening Surveillance (A Model Employee, Blaxites, and, Frames)

Screening Surveillance is a short film series that uses near-future fiction storytelling based on privacy and surveillance research to explore the potential societal scenarios that arise out of the increased use of big data, AI algorithms, government and corporate surveillance, and the subsequent loss of privacy, agency, and in many cases, control over everyday life events, be they medical, educational, or work related.

This fourth installment, tentatively titled #Tresdancing, follows a protagonist who is "caught" (read: mistakenly punished by algorithmic proctoring technology) cheating on an online math test and is told to make up their grades by wearing surveillance eyeglasses. The glasses challenge them to "get points" by solving everyday and in-the-moment math problems. Our protagonist is also part of a famous underground social media dance group who are known for trespassing illegally to create their videos. Hard choices ensue.

This near-future scenario explores the impact that surveillance, algorithms, education technology, social media, and police surveillance have on families and young people. Production is ongoing, and we expect to launch the film along with a collection of education materials (i.e. lesson plans, infographics, etc.) in late 2021 and early 2022.

Coded Bias

The eQuality Project partnered with the Centre for Law, Technology and Society (University of Ottawa), the AI+Society Project (University of Ottawa), and the ACT Project (University of Montreal) to co-host a screening of Coded Bias, followed by a Q&A session with the film's director, Shalini Kantayya moderated by sava saheli singh.
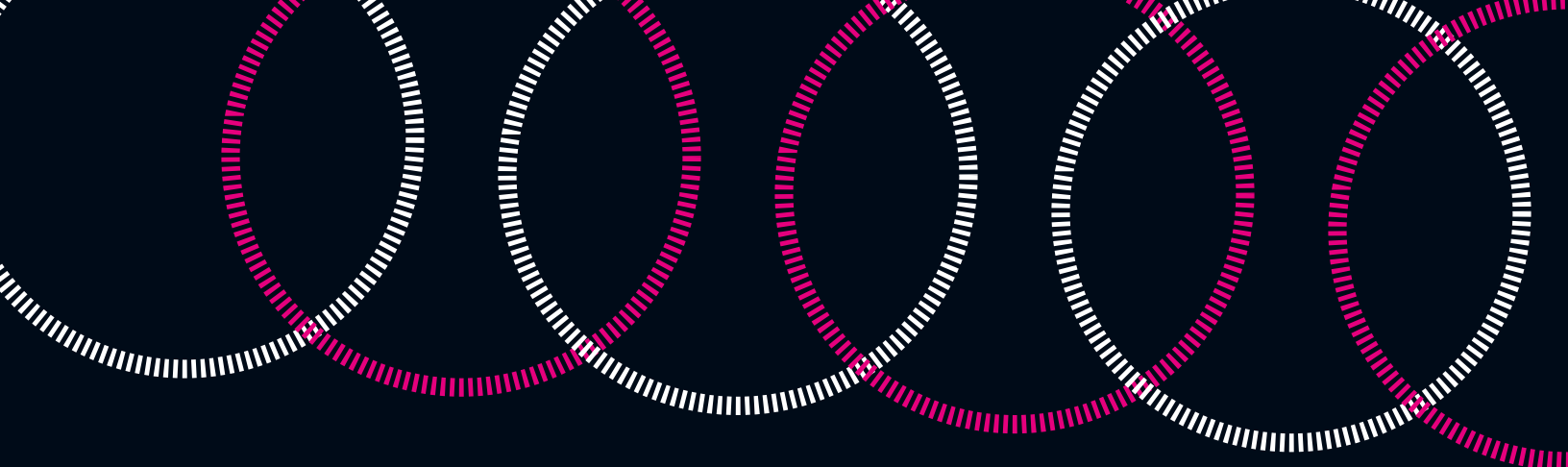
Coded Bias is a documentary film that explores the fallout of the discovery that facial recognition algorithms routinely fail to recognize dark skinned faces accurately – either misidentifying gender, or failing to recognize them at all. The film broadens this discussion surrounding bias in algorithms by highlighting real-life situations and stories that prove that AI systems and algorithms – whether used as oversight, security methods, or evaluation tools – are anything but "neutral."

eQ eBook – Modules

As we enter the seventh year of The eQuality Project, our thoughts have turned towards how we can extend the life of our outreach, educational and evaluation materials that we have developed over the course of the project. In order to ensure that The eQuality Project materials will continue to be available and accessible after the end of the project, we have decided to produce an eBook under a creative commons license for the continued use, modification, and enjoyment of eQuality Project materials.

Designed for teachers, community outreach workers, and parents, the eBook is designed to provide a compendium of materials to work with youth and to engage them in conversations around issues of privacy, surveillance, tech-facilitated violence, and equality. The Book is expected to be published in 2022, and a limited run of physical copies will be available.

The eQuality Project Monograph

In order to mark the end of The eQuality Project, the eQ research team is also hard at work on a volume that will serve as overview of the research takeaways from the past seven years of interviews, focus groups, outreach projects, and work with our partners and stakeholders. It will be co-written by Valerie Steeves, Jane Bailey, Jacquie Burkell, Pris Regan, and Leslie Shade, and is expected to be published in 2022-2023.

Young Canadians Parliament

The eQuality Project recently partnered with Children First Canada to participate in their Young Canadians' Parliament session. eQuality's segment was focused on online privacy and surveillance. Developed in conjunction and conversation with our Youth Advisory Committee as well as our Youth Summit Advisory Team, the session was based on the specific experiences of young people.

We developed a total of four case studies for discussion, and these materials will inform the structure of The eQuality Project's Young Summit, planned for April 2022.

Privacy Shorts – Continuing Education for Teachers and Parents

The eQuality Project is developing a series of short videos for teachers and parents that provide them with background information so they can better understand the main issues that young people encounter in the online environment. These videos will address how algorithms are used to sort children and elucidate the privacy issues that arise in the networked classroom and on social media.

IN THE SPOTLIGHT
sava saheli singh

How/When did you become interested in issues around (in)equality?

I am a woman, a woman of color, and a queer woman – these identity markers made me interested and invested in issues around (in)equality pretty much since I was born so this is a hard question to answer! I am, however, also aware of my various intersecting privileges in terms of class, caste, and gender, so understanding the nuances of how all these different elements of how I present in the world is a lifelong process of learning and listening.

How did you get involved with The eQuality Project?

When I was a postdoctoral fellow at the Surveillance Studies Centre at Queen's University, I became more familiar with Val Steeves' work, especially her work around technology and education. I then had the pleasure of meeting her a couple of times both at the centre and at a couple of workshops, where I was able to experience her energy, enthusiasm, and incredible insight, and I immediately knew I wanted to work with her. I finally got up the courage to let her know I wanted to work with her, and the rest is history!

Are there opportunities to involve and engage with young people in your field? Why is that important?

When conceptualizing Screening Surveillance, I very much wanted to make sure the project was accessible and relevant to young people because they have very little agency and say in how technology shapes their lives, and I wanted to create space for them to reflect on that relationship and be encouraged to feel like they could speak up and advocate for themselves. Today's young people have grown up with technology in almost every aspect of their lives with little or no chance to shape that relationship, so it is incredibly important for young people to be able to participate in the decisions about their lives, and also for them to feel supported by those of us who are tasked with making that space for them.

What's working well in your area of work, and what needs improvement?

I have been working on creative knowledge translation and mobilization projects grounded on critical surveillance and technology research. The response to my project has been incredible in terms of how useful the films have been to young people all over the world. This has been heartening because it means that speculative work in education is an important method for disseminating important ideas and concepts, as well as creating the space for important and critical conversations. I think a thing that is lacking is the recognition of this sort of work as scholarship. As an interdisciplinary scholar, I am able to bring various disciplinary and creative threads together, but this is rarely recognized as scholarly work. I would like to believe that I am slowly shifting that perception and allowing for more interdisciplinary work of this type to be taken up.

What's one piece of advice that you'd offer someone starting out in your field?

There is so much advice I could offer! But I think a key piece of advice would be to establish a strong relationship of trust and support with your colleagues, supervisors, and administrators. I would not have been able to do the work I have done without knowing that folks had my back. Also, work with talented people who get what you are doing and work towards the success of the project rather than individual success.

What would you like to see as a long-term outcome of The eQuality Project Partnership?

The work that The eQuality Project has done is so valuable and important, and such a great resource for educators, community organizers, and young people. I would like to see this work and the collaborations continue and grow – projects like this build deep and long relationships among all the stakeholders, and we must maintain those to continue having a deep and long lasting impact.

Is there a particular quotation that inspires you?

"Everything worthwhile is done with others." – Mariame Kaba.

THE NUMBERS

02 Workshops

07 Conference Presentations

$25,000 Grant Funds

09 Research Publications

4,200 Tweets

06 Policy Interventions

28 Workshop Participants

03 Public Lectures

WHO W

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.

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 social location affects young peoples' 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.

WHAT

E ARE

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Sexual Diversity
Canadian Internet Policy and Public
Interest Clinic

Canadian Race Relations Foundation
Canadian Teachers' Federation
Canadian Women's Foundation
Centre for Law, Technology & Society
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George Mason University
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Human Rights Research and Education
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Ottawa Coalition to End Violence
Against Women
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2020 2021

Annual Report