



A WORLD WITHOUT DIGITAL INCLUSIVITY: WHAT IT MEANS TO SECURITIZE TECHNOLOGY

Date: April 30, 2021

Disclaimer: This briefing note contains the encapsulation of views presented by the speaker and does not exclusively represent the views of the Canadian Association for Security and Intelligence Studies.

KEY EVENTS

On April 23, 2021, Neor Tiku presented *A world without digital inclusivity: What it means to securitize technology* at the 2021 CASIS Generation Z Congress. This presentation was followed by a group panel question and answer session, whereby congress attendees were provided with an opportunity to engage in discussion with Mr. Tiku. Primary discussion topics included understanding the digital divide in Canada and possible measures to close this gap, inclusive of Canadian approaches taken to potentially close this gap in access.

NATURE OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

Neor Tiku focused on the digital divide as a security issue, as it potentially prevents marginalized groups in Canada from utilizing and benefiting from sustained, affordable digital access and technology development. This arguably results in these groups not being able to access information. He examined what the digital divide is, how it exists in a Canadian context, measures taken to potentially narrow the gap in the digital divide, and successes and failures of the attempts made to do so in Canada.

Question Period

Discussion during this period covered a wide scope, including technology as a human right; where key players, such as Elon Musk, fit into this; and general measures to address the digital divide. The importance of funding and policies were highlighted throughout this period. Finally, the link to racism and marginalization resulting in unequal access to technology was discussed, as well

as whether it is easier to mitigate toxic masculinity online and how the COVID-19 has impacted this digital divide.

BACKGROUND

Presentation

During this period, Mr. Tiku discussed the ever-evolving ecosystem built around technology that possibly makes internet access and digital connectivity unaffordable. He added that this may result in Canada's most marginalized groups suffering from a 'digital divide'. The digital divide refers to a "gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information/communication technology," which may create an environment of continued digital illiteracy and access-gaps that reinforce social inequalities within Canada. He provided information on his background, specifically his previous experiences that led him to further observations of an arguably evident digital divide. He mentioned his history of spending weekends at soup kitchens in Vancouver, where he met less privileged people. From this, he noticed the access gap for not only food, but also internet services, which inspired him to start "Connect Vancouver" with the aim of bridging the digital divide.

The digital divide may result from categorical inequalities in society that produce variable distribution of resources, possibly leading to unequal access to digital technology. Alternatively, uneven access to digital technologies may result in mismatched participation in society that reinforces specific inequalities and unequal distribution of resources. Access to technology is only one of the many factors to consider when addressing the digital divide. Other key factors to consider are digital literacy, as well as affordability, quality, and sustainability of access to digital services.

In Canada, the digital divide is perpetuated by both prohibitive pricing structures and continued access gaps between Canada's urban, rural, and Indigenous reserve areas. Research has indicated that high market prices have led to more than one third of the Canadians who were surveyed forgoing expenditures on essentials like transit, clothing, and food, in order to afford and maintain home internet. The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) recommends that every household have access to broadband with download speeds of at least 50 megabits per second, and the federal government has set a goal to have Canada-wide broadband by 2030. The majority of Indigenous and rural users remain below the federal standard. The top five telecommunications companies (Bell, Rogers, Shaw, Telus and Quebecor) earn almost 90% of total

revenue, as they control the internet market. Canadian companies earn considerably higher revenues per gigabyte of mobile data. Furthermore, Canada also ranked 209th out of 228 countries for the most expensive mobile data costs. Digital inequality through internet access and speed also exists and may be seen in Indigenous communities, and services in remote regions of Canada may also be slow and costly. For example, internet use occurs in 97.7% of urban households, 40.8% in rural Canadian households, and 31.3% on Indigenous reserves.

Despite the possible presence of the digital divide in Canada today, measures can be taken to potentially narrow or close this gap. Progress has been made through federal policy, the CRTC, ConnectTO, and Telus. For example, ConnectTO has provided affordable municipal infrastructure to assist those who cannot afford internet access, while Telus has given out over 10,000 free phones to those who cannot afford it throughout Canada. Other measures that may close the digital divide include helping to transform our societal framework and dominant view of internet access from a 'privilege' to a 'right' for all Canadians; supporting policies which work to expand internet and telecommunication infrastructure to rural areas, including sustained government intervention to address gaps in service; advocating for market reforms that reduce the cost of service for internet access and provide cost-effective digital access; and promoting digital literacy training and the provision of free programs to help generate an equitable utilization of online services.

Just as progress has been made, there have been challenges. For example, policy change to address the digital divide in Canada was revoked, although the CRTC was able to possibly prove that large companies charged 77% more than small companies. Generally, it can be argued that people have needs beyond basic food, clothing, and shelter. Technology access should be prioritized as a critical necessity within our society and Canada should lead by example, ensuring that digital access is distributed through a fair, equitable, and egalitarian system.

Question Period

The discussion surrounded the importance of funding to bridge the digital divide, which seems to be getting more attention now as a result of COVID-19. Some of the measures discussed included policy changes and a general educational framework to understand digital access. According to Mr. Tiku, understanding digital access as a human right and not a privilege may help address this gap once countries take the responsibility of addressing security concerns associated with full implementation of internet use.

Questions related to the digital divide in countries other than Canada were commented on by Mr. Tiku, with his response being that other countries may also experience a digital divide. For example, India possibly has an existing digital divide.

Discourse concerning how Generation Alpha may affect technological security, whether the public or private sectors should control it, and how issues such as racism and toxic masculinity relate to the digital divide were also addressed. Upcoming generations will potentially change securitizing technology, as they arguably have a high ability to set precedence, a concern that many wealthy nations have. However, some problems may arise with bridging the gap in terms of adapting the technology with other generations. For example, not all “boomers” may use technology, even if they have access to it.

Alternatively, racism presents very unique circumstances, which could potentially be dealt with via policies and good ethos. To work towards closing the digital divide, there should debatably be a balance between private and public influence, as they are both arguably important. For example, political decisions need to be made concerning Elon Musk’s ‘Starlink’ and Amazon. Finally, in terms of the propagation of toxic masculinity online, in Mr. Tiku’s opinion, it is more likely to occur online due to the ease-of-use and anonymity created by online forums.

KEY POINTS OF DISCUSSION

Presentation

- There is an existing digital divide within Canada, specifically between rural and urban areas.
- Internet services are disproportionately slower and more costly in rural areas, as compared to urban areas within Canada.
- We must work to ensure that our societal framework of internet access is not seen as a privilege, but rather a right. This can be done through promoting digital literacy training to ensure equitable access to services.
- Sustained government intervention through policy and funding is required to address gaps in digital service.
- Although issues surrounding the digital divide in Canada still persist, Canada has made great progress, for example, through ConnectTO and the CRTC.

Question Period

- COVID-19 has arguably brought more awareness to the existing digital divide.
- Viewing internet access as a right and not a privilege, along with continued funding and policy change, is possibly needed to bridge the gap in both the Canadian and global digital divide.
- There should be a balance between private and public influences for digital provision and ethical policy creation.
- Upcoming generations may potentially change securitizing technology, as they arguably have a high ability to set precedence through online platforms. For example, the propagation of toxic masculinity may spread more online, and Generation Alpha can possibly impact the direction this takes.



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