

INTEGRATING GENDER INTO CANADIAN INTERNET POLICY

From the Information Highway to the Digital Economy

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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of gender and Internet policy in Canada from the mid-1990s to the present day. It first traces early federal policy (Fourth World Conference on Women, federal plan for gender equality, and the Information Highway Advisory Council [IHAC]). Turning to the 2000s, the article reviews Canada's influence in international initiatives (World Summit on the Information Society). The article then reviews Conservative government initiatives (digital economy agenda, *Digital Canada 150*), illustrating a decline for digital inclusion. With a new Liberal government, the article concludes with areas of engagement by government and civil society toward digital and gender inclusion.

Keywords: Canadian digital policy, digital economy, digital inclusion, gender and the Internet, women and digital inclusion

In the 1990s, the Canadian government was recognized as a global leader in promoting the Internet for economic, social, and cultural growth through their creation of national programs to increase Internet access for citizens, and internationally, via participation in global information infrastructure initiatives. Canada also recognized the need to increase gender equity on the Internet, and this was reflected early on in policy statements that highlighted the need to ameliorate access barriers for women.

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A much earlier working paper that looks at gender equity to the Internet in Canada is Leslie Regan Shade's "Stirring up the Pot? Integrating Gender Into ICT Policy, Practice, and Evaluation." This built on some of the work presented with Dr. Barbara Crow as "Gender, Digital Divides and ICT Agendas in Canada," at the Oxford Internet Institute session on "Critical Perspectives on the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS): Civil Society Participation and Issues," March 4, 2005. A more recent paper is Shade's "Missing in Action: Gender in Canada's Digital Economy Agenda."



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The decline of federal government support for public access to the Internet in favor of marketization, and the diminution of equality issues within federal programs and policies, began in the latter part of the Liberal leadership under Prime Minister Jean Chrétien, continued throughout Paul Martin's tenure as prime minister, and reached its apotheosis during Stephen Harper's nine-year reign as Conservative leader starting in 2006. Indeed, the Harper government, as it preferred to be called, ushered in a new regime of discursive and material shifts in Canada's social and digital policy. Earlier policies and programs whose goals were to foster and nurture participatory citizenship, and which recognized the need for gender equality, were replaced by those that instead aimed to stimulate consumers' access to goods and services. No longer seen as a trailblazer on the global stage, nor a model country in the promotion of information and communication technologies (ICTs) for the public interest, Canada's digital agenda under the Harper government was negligent in this regard, despite the documented persistence of digital divides.

This article provides an overview of how gender has been considered in the development of Internet policy in Canada from the mid-1990s to the present day. The article first traces early Canadian federal policy in which gender was considered an essential component for universal access to the Internet, including in the 1990s, participation in the 1995 Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing, the federal plan for gender equality, and the federal Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC).

In the 2000s, Canada played an international role in promoting gender equity to the Internet, as evidenced by the government's support of the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) Gender Caucus and the Civil Society Communiqué coordinated by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO. Monitoring Canada's subsequent progress in implementation of Beijing and WSIS commitments as part of the Beijing+20 and WSIS+10 reviews will also be addressed.

The Conservative government's development of the digital economy through an initial consultation in 2010 and subsequent *Digital Canada 150* agenda will then be reviewed, to ascertain whether and if gender was on the agenda. Proposed legislation on cyber-surveillance and cyberbullying highlights how contested the issues have been with respect to maintaining the public interest, and how the discourse has neglected citizen engagement, social inclusion, and gender.

The election in October 2015 of a Liberal majority government with Justin Trudeau as prime minister, and his commitment to gender

parity within ministerial appointments, has been widely lauded.¹ Many Canadians are hopeful that the new government will offer a commitment to evidence-based policymaking in science and technology and reinvigorate the public interest in digital policy. At this time, it is premature to speculate about how the new government will address the digital economy, and whether gender will be considered. The article nonetheless concludes with suggestions about areas of cooperative engagement for government and civil society toward digital inclusion for Canadians.

The 1990s

Early Federal Government Initiatives

As the Internet was becoming popularized and commercialized during the mid-1990s, Canada considered gender equity to ICTs in their public policy deliberations. Several passages in the 1995 Federal Plan for Gender Equality, *Setting the Stage for the Next Century*, were concerned specifically with information technology:

The absence of equity and access-related research [to the information infrastructure] is of growing concern. For example, it appears that women do not use the Internet or Freenet to the same extent, as do men. This is of concern, given that much of the information needed to make informed decisions in today's world, and even the decision-making process itself, is being conducted along the cables of cyberspace. Those without access to this new technology that is rapidly transforming the way business is done, will be left out of the mainstream.²

The Federal Plan also questioned the effect of competition and market-driven scenarios to develop the information infrastructure, stating that “rapid global expansion of telecommunications and the deregulation of markets may reverse gains women have made in achieving equality of access to participation in all forms of cultural expression.”³

1. Edwards.

2. Status of Women Canada, *Setting the Stage*, para. 270.

3. Loc. cit.

The IHAC and Public Interest Responses

With the announcement in 1994 of the federal IHAC, whose objectives were to examine the economic, social, educational, and cultural opportunities of the Internet, arose the formation of grassroots and community groups concerned about ensuring the inclusion of public interest principles in policy development.⁴ One such group, the Coalition for Public Information (CPI), a nonprofit organization founded initially through the Ontario Library Association, formulated, through a series of public consultations, *Future-Knowledge: A Public Policy Framework for the Information Highway*.⁵ Under their principle of Universal Access and Ubiquity, gender issues were highlighted. The *Future-Knowledge* report is prescient in its identification of a range of gender issues, which are sadly still problematic today, notably the lack of women within ICT leadership roles and the perpetration of sexism and harassment within social media and gamer cultures.⁶ As *Future-Knowledge* stated a little more than twenty years ago,

Women are still under-represented in almost every aspect of computer culture, from programming, to product design, to use of the information infrastructure. The Coalition encourages the development of educational software and training material which is gender-sensitive, takes into account gender differences in learning styles, and avoids sex stereotyping. . . . The Coalition recommends the development of on-line harassment guidelines which would govern the use of the Internet by everyone who receives an Internet account. These guidelines would also include grievance procedures for complaints of on-line sexual harassment.⁷

The IHAC's final report, *Connection, Community, Content*, recognized the need to address social and gender barriers to ensure equitable and universal access to the information infrastructure. As IHAC wrote,

Women's issues and concerns . . . must be addressed. Some of these, such as safety, privacy, and security, could be largely addressed by

4. Clement, Moll, and Shade.

5. Skrzyszewski and Cubberly.

6. See Miller; Parkin.

7. Skrzyszewski and Cubberly.

early implementation of related recommendations . . . women have to be able to use the Information Highway and contribute to the content carried. The government can raise the awareness of content and hardware providers and can also implement public awareness campaigns targeted to women.⁸

In their response to the IHAC report, the federal government reiterated their commitment to ensuring universal access and noted the challenge of gender. Recommendation 13.21 directed several government departments to “conduct and/or support the research necessary to identify how gender, age, and other social factors create differences in participation of the information highway.”⁹

The composition of the IHAC advisory board was critiqued because of the overwhelming presence of industry and corporate interests, with scant representation by the public interest community.¹⁰ A follow-up workshop to IHAC, funded by Industry Canada and led by the Information Policy Research Program at the University of Toronto, brought together public interest voices to discuss access issues. This workshop also enabled an Ad Hoc Committee, funded by Status of Women Canada,¹¹ to identify specifically gendered aspects of access to the Internet by women and women’s groups. Some of these access barriers for women included affordability, the need to increase both domestic and community access to the Internet, and the perceived benefit of developing online gender issue information services.¹²

8. Canada, Information Highway Advisory Council, *Connection, Community, Content*.

9. Canada, Information Highway Advisory Council, *Building the Information Society*.

10. See Clement, Moll, and Shade.

11. Status of Women Canada originated from a recommendation made in the 1970 *Royal Commission on the Status of Women*, and became a departmental agency of the federal government in 1976, with a mandate “to coordinate policy with respect to the status of women and administer related programs.” SWC “promotes equality for women and their full participation in the economic, social, and democratic life of Canada.” Its priority areas have varied throughout the years; currently the three areas are: to increase women’s economic security and prosperity; to encourage women’s leadership and democratic participation; and to end violence against women and girls. Throughout the years, SWC has funded a variety of programs related to gender and the Internet and have been the federal entity reporting to the UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW). See <http://www.swc-cfc.gc.ca/abu-ans/who-qui/index-eng.html>.

12. Shade, “Using a Gender-Based Analysis.”

Post-IHAC

As Internet policy in Canada developed over the latter half of the 1990s, government initiatives were preoccupied with e-commerce, through the Electronic Commerce Task Force in 1998,¹³ and broadband deployment, through the 2001 Broadband Task Force.¹⁴ Given this intensity of focus on technical issues, from high-speed Internet access to cryptographic development for security, considerations of gender fell by the wayside. Exceptions included two initiatives funded by Status of Women Canada—a 1997 Women’s Internet Conference consisting of Canadian women’s groups to discuss Internet equality issues, and a workshop on women and the knowledge-based society. Another project funded by the Canadian Congress for Learning Opportunities for Women (CCLOW) investigated the role of digital learning technologies for women. Table 1 provides a timeline of various Canadian activities and initiatives related to gender and the Internet from 1995 to 2015.

2000–2006

The Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing and the Platform for Action

In the early 2000s, Canada continued to play a role in domestic and international activities related to the Internet. Canada was a signatory to the *Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action* that stemmed from the Fourth World Conference on Women in 1995. Section J.1 specifically identified the need to “increase the participation and access of women to expression and decision-making in and through the media and new technologies of communication.”¹⁵ Toward these goals, governments, nonprofit organizations, the media, and industry were tasked to develop educational and training programs for women in ICTs, to encourage the use of the Internet for women’s participation in democratic processes, and to fund the development of alternative media to promote women’s voices.

13. Industry Canada and Department of Justice.

14. Canada, Industry Canada, *The New National Dream*.

15. UN Women, “Beijing Declaration.”

TABLE I Canadian Initiatives on Gender and the Internet, 1995–2015

Year	Event	Funders/ Organizers	Stakeholders	Gender and ICT Outcomes	Publications/ Policy
1995	Fourth World Conference on Women	UN and global governments	Governments, civil society, and academics	Reiterated need for women to enhance their skills, knowledge and access to ICTs	<i>Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action</i> , Section J.1
1995	Federal Plan for Gender Equity	Status of Women Canada	Canadian government	Emphasized ICT access; questioned impact of competition and marketization to develop ICTs	<i>Setting the Stage for the Next Century: The Federal Plan for Gender Equality</i>
1995	Public consultations on Internet development	Ontario Library Association/ Coalition for Public Information	Civil society, government	Gender equity recommendation included in the Universal Access and Ubiquity section of report	<i>Future Knowledge: A Public Policy Framework for the Information Highway</i> (Skrzeszewski and Cubberley)
1995	Information Highway Advisory Council	Industry Canada	Canadian government, “blue ribbon” panel	Recognized that gender and social barriers need to be removed to ensure equitable and universal access to ICTs	<i>Connection, Community, Content</i> , final report

TABLE I Canadian Initiatives on Gender and the Internet, 1995–2015 (Continued)

Year	Event	Funders/ Organizers	Stakeholders	Gender and ICT Outcomes	Publications/ Policy
1995	Canadian government response to IHAC report	Canadian federal government	Canadian government, civil society	Rec. 13.21: called on numerous government departments to identify how gender, age, and other social factors create differences in access and use of ICTs	<i>Building the Information Society: Moving Canada into the 21st Century</i>
1995	PAR (Policy Action Research) listserv	Canadian Advisory Council on the Status of Women; transferred to Univ. New Brunswick under a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) Standard Research Grant	Canadian government, civil society, academics	A forum for gender issues related to ICT policy	PAR listserv
1996	Report on Internet use by women's organizations	Status of Women Canada	Canadian government, civil society	Survey of how Canadian women's groups use the Internet and identification of access barriers	<i>Report on the Use of the Internet in Canadian Women's Organizations</i> , L.R. Shade

(Continued)

TABLE I Canadian Initiatives on Gender and the Internet, 1995–2015 (Continued)

Year	Event	Funders/ Organizers	Stakeholders	Gender and ICT Outcomes	Publications/ Policy
1997	Internet guide for feminist organizations	Canadian Research Institute for the Advancement of Women (CRIAW)	CRIAW member organizations	How to guide for women's organizations	<i>Computer Networking: Spinsters on the Web</i> , Ellen Balka
1997	Developing a Canadian Access Strategy: Universal Access to Essential Services (workshop)	Industry Canada; Status of Women, Women's Programme; Information Policy Research Project at Univ. of Toronto	Ad Hoc Committee for the Workshop (Ellen Balka, Simon Fraser University, Madeleine Bosco, Canadian Women's Health Network; Scarlett Pollock, Womenspace)	Gender access issues as input to IHAC	<i>Using a Gender-Based Analysis in Developing a Canadian Access Strategy: Backgrounder Report</i> , L. R. Shade
1997	Women's Internet Conference, Ottawa	Womenspace, funding from Status of Women Canada	Canadian women's groups	Gender equality issues related to the Internet	<i>The Women's Internet Conference Report</i> (Pollock and Sutton)
1997	The Janus Project: New Learning Technologies—Promises and Prospects for Women	CLOW	Canadian women's groups	Review gendered impact of ICTs for women's learning	<i>New Learning Technologies: Promises & Prospects for Women</i> . A discussion paper by Jennifer O'Rourke and Linda Schachter

TABLE I Canadian Initiatives on Gender and the Internet, 1995–2015 (Continued)

Year	Event	Funders/ Organizers	Stakeholders	Gender and ICT Outcomes	Publications/ Policy
1998	Women and the Knowledge-Based Economy and Society Workshop	Status of Women Canada, Policy Research Secretariat	Canadian government, academics	Gendered implications of KBE/S for women; develop policy linkages	<i>Women and the Knowledge-Based Economy and Society</i> , Heather Menzies
1998–2004	ITU Task Force on Gender Issues	CIDA	Canadian government	Resolutions to create gender-sensitive indicators and sex-aggregated data; gender mainstreaming in programs	<i>Gender Mainstreaming in ITU Activities</i>
2000	Review of Beijing+5	Status of Women Canada	Canadian government, UN, civil society	Assess Canada's progress in implementing the <i>Platform for Action</i>	<i>Canada and the United Nations General Assembly Special Session Beijing+5 Fact Sheets</i> , 2003
2003	47th UN Commission on the Status of Women	UN, Status of Women funded Canadian representative Womenspace	Canadian women's groups through e-consultation	Considered women's access, use and participation of ICTs for empowerment; reiterated Section J	<i>Women and the Internet: Participation, Impact, Empowerment, & Strategies</i> , Womenspace
2003	International Women's Day theme: <i>World-Wide Women: Surfing the Digital Revolution!</i>	Status of Women Canada	Women's groups, academics	Promoting use of Internet for women's empowerment	Various factsheets
2003	WSIS	Canadian government, with input from Gender Caucus	WSIS Gender Caucus	Inclusion of gender equity paragraph 11A into WSIS Draft Principles	<i>WSIS Draft Declaration of Principles</i>

(Continued)

TABLE I Canadian Initiatives on Gender and the Internet, 1995–2015 (Continued)

Year	Event	Funders/ Organizers	Stakeholders	Gender and ICT Outcomes	Publications/ Policy
2005	Paving the Road to Tunis: WSIS II: Canada's Civil Society Views on the Geneva Plan of Action and the Prospects for Phase II	Canadian Commission for UNESCO	Canadian civil society	Gender equity statements in civil society communiqué	Canadian Civil Society Communiqué
2005	TPRP	Industry Canada	Government, industry, some civil society	Some civil society statements recommended access programs to account for gender but final report does not mention gender	<i>Telecommunications Policy Review Panel Final Report, 2006</i>
2005	Review of Beijing+10	Status of Women Canada	Canadian government, UN, civil society	Assess Canada's progress in implementing the <i>Platform for Action</i>	Beijing+10 fact sheet states that delegation to CSW consists of Minister of Canadian Heritage and Minister to SWC
2010	Digital Economy Consultations	Industry Canada	Government, industry, civil society	Not explicitly stated in the government document, but several interventions mentioned gender	Attention paid to gender in the University of Toronto Consensus Document and the submission from OCAD University

TABLE I Canadian Initiatives on Gender and the Internet, 1995–2015 (Continued)

Year	Event	Funders/ Organizers	Stakeholders	Gender and ICT Outcomes	Publications/ Policy
2012	Universal Periodic Review	Civil society	Government, civil society	Specific concern to increase broadband access in rural and remote communities, and increase social network and digital storytelling opportunities for First Nations women	Joint submission to the UPR by the Association for Progressive Communication, OpenMedia.ca, the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic (CIPPC), TeleCommunities Canada and Web Networks and several academics
2014– 2015	SWC priority funding areas	Status of Women Canada	Community groups, youth, and women	Prevention of cyberviolence and women in technology projects	Ongoing capacity-building in communities
2015	Review of Beijing+20	Status of Women Canada	Canadian government, UN, civil society	Assess Canada's progress in implementing the <i>Platform for Action</i>	Ongoing
2015	Review of WSIS+10	Government of Canada through Department of Foreign Affairs and International Trade (DFAIT)	Canadian government, UN, civil society	Access Canada's progress in implementing WSIS commitments	Ongoing

In 2000, the Beijing+5 review produced countrywide assessments of the *Beijing Platform for Action*. In general, most countries were concerned that issues raised in Section J still remained, while new ones, such as intense deregulation and competition within the telecommunications sector, had emerged. Canada's report noted that while more women were online,

women's representation in positions of decision making in high-tech firms remained low.¹⁶ Through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), Canada became involved in the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) Task Force on Gender Issues, whose goals were to promote gender mainstreaming of telecommunication programs and policies.¹⁷

Three years later, as part of the Canadian contribution to the 47th UN Commission on the Status of Women (CSW) meeting in March 2003, Status of Women Canada's theme for International Women's Week was titled, "World Wide Women: Surfing the Digital Revolution!" Their fact sheet, while noting challenges and risks, illustrated the positive benefits of ICTs for women's economic and cultural development: development of pan-Canadian and global communities and linkages, access to a wide variety of information, and use of the Internet for activism—the peace movement against the war in Iraq was then escalating and the Internet was playing a key role in mobilization. Absent in the fact sheet were any recommendations toward gender mainstreaming of Canadian programs operating under the "Connectedness" agenda, where Industry Canada funding was facilitating the development of community access sites in rural, remote, and urban areas.

Womenspace was chosen by Status of Women Canada (SWC) to be the nonprofit group to represent Canada at the CSW meeting in New York. Prior to the meeting, they consulted with a wide cross-section of women's groups, electronically and through an offline strategy of "phone calls and faxes, including tapping into fax trees, print advertisements, attending meetings, and asking specific groups to take their members to a public access site."¹⁸ Their recommendations for equity included the need for gender-based analyses on programs, fulsome funding for women's groups to get online so they could engage in civic participation, concerns with combatting online pornography and sexual tourism, and more effective consideration of gender in the development of e-government initiatives.

Canada and the World Summits on the Information Society

Canada also participated in the World Summits on the Information Society (WSIS) in 2003 and 2005 and played a pivotal role in calling

16. Status of Women Canada, *Canada and the United Nations*.

17. Ibid.; ITU, 2000.

18. Womenspace.

attention to the need to examine the gendered dimensions of access to the Internet. WSIS was seen as an opportunity for diverse women's voices to be advanced regarding their active participation in the ongoing design, development, and diffusion of the Internet, but of concern to many was the WSIS process itself. Despite its governance model of multi-stakeholderism that brought together governments, industry, and civil society, the process for participation was bureaucratic, favoring industry groups and governments, with numerous restrictions posed on the nature and involvement of civil society groups. Leading up to the 2003 Summit, several civil society groups were concerned that the WSIS documents did not reflect an inclusive human rights-centered approach. During the numerous deliberations in the crafting of the WSIS Draft Principles, global women's groups promoted the inclusion of a paragraph on gender equity proposed by the Government of Canada. In September, a t-shirt campaign was initiated by the NGO Gender Strategies Working Group. The t-shirts, which many NGO delegates wore, contained the message "WSIS has a missing paragraph" (on the front) and the text of Paragraph 11A (on the back). Paragraph 11A read:

A focus on the gender dimensions of ICT is essential not only for preventing an adverse impact of the digital revolution on gender equality or the perpetuation of existing inequalities and discrimination, but also for enhancing women's equitable access to the benefits of ICT and to ensure that they can become a central tool for the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. Policies, programmes and projects need to ensure that gender differences and inequalities in the access to and use of ICT are identified and fully addressed so that such technologies actively promote gender equality and ensure that gender-based disadvantages are not created or perpetuated.¹⁹

However, despite these advocacy efforts, the final text of the WSIS Draft Principles was edited, reflecting a diluted reference to the use of ICTs for women's empowerment and the mainstreaming of gender equality.²⁰

19. Language proposed by Canada during the WSIS Intersessional Meeting in Paris from July 15 to 18, 2003.

20. Gallagher.

An opportunity to create a detailed statement on gender equity transpired in the lead-up to Phase II of WSIS. In May 2005, the Canadian Commission for UNESCO organized a Canadian response to Phase II, bringing together more than 200 people from all provinces and territories and the private sector, civil society, academia, and all levels of government—federal, provincial/territorial, and municipal. The event, *Paving the Road to Tunis—WSIS II: Canada's Civil Society Views on the Geneva Plan of Action and the Prospects for Phase II*, produced the Civil Society Communiqué, which affirmed Canadian values of human rights, equality, cultural diversity, diversity, freedom of expression, privacy, and gender. Specific statements on Gender Equality were included in the Communiqué:

1. Appropriate technologies that account for the roles of women and their interests using both old and new technologies and appropriate software and applications;
2. The use of ICTs as a catalyst for better governance to give women a stronger voice in democratic processes in society;
3. Providing women and girls with the skills to protect themselves from ICT-facilitated harassment and exploitation;
4. Support for increased representation of women and girls in scientific and technical education, and the use of ICTs to promote their increased participation in education at all levels;
5. Promoting increased employment in the IT sector for women and the use of ICTs for their enterprises.²¹

The Telecommunications Policy Review Panel

In contrast to the inclusive nature of the Canadian Civil Society Communiqué was the technocratic 2005 Telecommunications Policy Review Panel (TPRP), a government-appointed panel with the mandate to review the Canadian telecommunications framework and make recommendations to Industry Canada toward modernization.²² The opportunity for community groups to participate was difficult, but several groups, including the Canadian Research Alliance for Community Innovation and Networking (CRACIN) and Womenspace, submitted public interest perspectives. CRACIN reiterated concerns about the persistence of

21. Canadian Civil Society Communiqué.

22. Telecommunications Policy Review Panel.

digital divides and urged that appropriate programs and services address the diversity of access needs within Canada's multicultural population, including Francophones, First Nations, immigrants, women, and youth. Womenspace also highlighted the need for appropriate funding to ensure access for all Canadians, recommending funding for women-centered information portals, public kiosks for Internet access in safe locations, consultative processes on ending online violence against women, and a call for a gendered analysis of the proposed Government Online project.²³

Released in 2006, the final report of the TPRP recommended further deregulation of the telecommunications industry and a reliance on market forces to further competition and growth in the sector. While highlighting the need to develop the technological infrastructure, the report acknowledged that effective and universal access to the Internet also depends on the development of the social infrastructure—"the training, support, relevant applications, and human beings on the ground."²⁴

2009–2015

Whither the Federal Digital Strategy?

Anticipation had been building for years that the Harper government would usher in a digital strategy. Critical issues including copyright reform, broadband as a basic service, net neutrality (referred to as Internet traffic management practices), metered Internet services (usage based billing), and privacy policy updates were just a few of the many digital policies Canadian citizens had concerns about.

Finally, in the summer of 2009, Industry Canada convened an invitation-only forum in Ottawa whose goal was to identify key areas of action "necessary for Canada to regain its leadership position in the Digital Economy."²⁵ Buffeted by steadily declining broadband penetration rates, as documented by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and no longer able to claim status as a global innovator and leader in broadband access, the Conservative government set out

23. Cited in Shade, "Stirring up the Pot?"

24. Longford, Moll, and Shade, 45.

25. Industry Canada, *Canada's Digital Economy*.

to devise a national digital strategy centered on the promotion of business innovation using ICTs and assurances for a stronger online marketplace.

Following from this forum, the March 2010 Throne Speech, outlining the Government's agenda for the parliamentary session, launched a "digital economy strategy to drive the adoption of new technology across the economy," the release of copyright reform legislation, and the opening up of foreign ownership in the telecommunications sector, "giving Canadian firms access to the funds and expertise they need."²⁶ Two months later, Industry Minister Tony Clement announced a sixty-day online consultation on Canada's digital economy, the results to be synthesized into an "action plan" for Canada's digital economy.

The consultation paper on the digital economy focused on five broad areas: (1) Capacity to Innovate Using Digital Technologies, (2) Building a World-Class Digital Infrastructure, (3) Growing the Information and Communications Technology Industry, (4) Digital Media: Creating Canada's Digital Content Advantage, and (5) Building Digital Skills for Tomorrow. Over 2,000 submissions and ideas were inputted to the online forum. The description of "digital skills" was illustrative of the economic framing of the consultation paper, which eschewed for the most part social aspects. Lacking was a holistic vision that conceived of digital skills as an element of citizenship and social justice, and a blind spot in the discussion was a nuanced consideration of race, class, and gender inequalities.²⁷

The Decline of Public Access Internet Programs

During this period the government reduced funding and "sunsetting" programs and policies created as part of their 1990s "Connecting Canadians" agenda. The general aims of this program were to address the digital divide, stimulate community economic development, and promote workforce modernization. Under the "Connecting Canadians" umbrella, the popular

26. Canada, Industry Canada, *Shaping Canada's Strategy*.

27. See Shade, "Missing in Action." Two submissions were notable for their consideration of gender. OCAD University (formerly the Ontario College of Art and Design) remarked on gender and the digital divide and the need to increase women as owners and workers in small technology companies, the mobile industry and within social media (OCAD University). A Consensus Document on the Digital Economy, organized at the University of Toronto and signed by over eighty academics, public interest stakeholders, and citizens is notable in its emphasis on a citizen-based strategy that accounts for affordable, universal access, a legal right to broadband Internet access, participatory citizenship and social inclusion, and promotion of privacy and other civil liberties. See "Consensus Submission"; OCAD University.

Community Access Program (CAP) provided funding for public Internet access sites in schools, community centers, libraries, and friendship centers in urban, rural, and remote regions across Canada.²⁸ No federal programs directly addressed women's access to the Internet.²⁹ While CAP was not developed to explicitly address gender equality and women's access, the closure of CAP sites became not merely an economic and social issue, but a gender equity issue as well, as many women used and depended on CAP sites to gain Internet access.³⁰ In addition, as Leach and Turner document, in the rollout of CAP sites across the Province of New Brunswick, women not only comprised the mainstream of clients, but also a majority of site managers. As they described, this created a "feminized space, where clients' encounters with the technology was explicitly and instinctively tailored by manager-instructors to recognize and respond to gender-based needs."³¹

The diminishment of Canadian programs and policies for the public interest was noted in a 2012 submission by a coalition of public interest groups to the Universal Periodic Review (UPR).³² The UPR is a mechanism of the United Nations; first conceived in 2008, it reviews the human rights practices of all member states once every four and a half years. The 2012 UPR submission (presented at the UN in May 2013) reiterated concerns surrounding access to online information and community networks, with a particular concern about low broadband access in rural communities and First Nations communities. As the submission argued, the low access rates were exacerbated by the evisceration of the CAP, which resulted in inadequate broadband infrastructure, high costs, and the lack of an integrated digital strategy for socioeconomic and political development. The submission recommended that the government "acknowledge the critical importance of universal access to the Internet as a facilitator of civil and political and economic, social and cultural human rights,"³³ reinstate the CAP to support community networks in rural communities

28. See *CBC News*, "Ottawa Cuts CAP Public Web Access Funding"; Moll.

29. See Howard, Busch, and Sheets.

30. Moll and Fritz.

31. Leach and Turner, 8.

32. Universal Periodic Review. Groups that endorsed the UPR included the Association for Progressive Communication, OpenMedia.ca, the Canadian Internet Policy and Public Interest Clinic (CIPPC), TeleCommunities Canada and Web Networks. It was also endorsed by several academics.

33. *Ibid.*, F.2, para. 44.

and First Nations communities, engage with local communities to expand rural Internet access, and in the development of a national digital strategy, address the needs of on- and off-reserve First Nations, Inuit, and Métis communities, “including expansion of existing social network and digital story telling programs for women in First Nations communities.”³⁴

Digital Canada 150

Four years after issuing the digital economy consultation paper, the Harper government released their digital economy agenda, titled *Digital Canada 150*. Looking forward to Canada’s 150th birthday in 2017, the document celebrated Canada’s enduring fascination with long-distance transportation and technological infrastructures to build the nation. Its main pillars included “connecting Canadians, protecting Canadians, economic opportunities, digital government and Canadian content.”³⁵ “Connecting” referred to deploying broadband in rural and remote regions, increasing spectrum offerings, and implementing a wireless code of conduct for the telecommunications and mobile industry. “Protecting” included instituting legislation on cyberbullying and antispam measures and updating the private-sector privacy legislation, the *Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA)*. Economic opportunities included investing in both small and medium-sized firms to develop digital capacities and in universities to develop technological innovation, and amending intellectual property laws to harmonize with global treaties. Digital government highlighted the government as a model user and the promotion of open data. Canadian content focused on digitizing Canada content and culture, enhancing the Canadian Media Fund, and creating original digital content.

Digital Canada 150 enumerated how it was meeting the goals of the five pillars through the creation of legislation, programs, and policies, but noticeably absent in the document were statements about citizen engagement, social inclusion, and the socioeconomic factors of digital and data divides. These absences are especially stark when considering the two pillars of Connecting and Protecting.

Connecting: Digital divides in Canada remain persistent, with domestic access to the Internet determined by socioeconomics. This reality is borne

34. *Ibid.*, para. 46.

35. Canada, Industry Canada, *Digital Canada 150*.

out in several studies measuring Internet access. Statistics Canada data from 2010 indicated that 97 percent of Canadians in the top income quartile (+\$87K) had access, but for those in the bottom quartile that figure was only 54 percent. In other words, 50 percent of Canadians with incomes of \$30,000 or less did not have convenient access to the Internet.³⁶ In order to account for a more robust look at the dimensions of the digital divide, Haight, Quan-Haase, and Corbett³⁷ examined access, level of online activity, and use of social media. As they point out, Canada is unique in its low density of population compared to geographic size, making the rollout of broadband in rural and remote communities physically challenging and a difficult business rationale for service providers. An additional challenge is relating Internet access and use to Canada's high immigrant population, especially in the populous urban environs of Vancouver, Toronto, and Montreal, where most new immigrants are clustered. Another report issued in 2014 by the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) detailed that Canada ranked sixteenth globally in Internet penetration in 2013, with 87 percent of Canadian households connected to the Internet. However, as they also document, while 95 percent of Canadians in the highest income quartiles were connected to the Internet, only 62 percent of those in the lower income quartile were connected. Rural access to broadband was still a challenge, with only an 85 percent rate, and low access rates are even more pronounced in the Canadian North.³⁸ Disaggregation by gender, race, and immigration status was not detailed in this report.

Protecting: The introduction of cyber-surveillance legislation by the Harper government established their emphasis on a "law and order" approach to social and political issues. In 2012, controversy arose over their introduction of Bill C-30. Commonly referred to as the "Lawful Access Bill," Bill C-30 sought to expand upon the search and seizure, interception, surveillance, collection, and decryption capabilities of Canadian law enforcement. An objective of the bill was to remove legal and technical barriers inhibiting access to information held in private Internet and mobile accounts. In other words, the proposed bill mandated warrantless disclosures of subscriber information and data, an issue that provoked widespread condemnation across the country by many groups and individuals concerned with its flagrant infringement of civil liberties.³⁹

36. *CBC News*, "No Internet in 1/5 Canadian Homes."

37. Haight, Quan-Haase, and Corbett.

38. Canadian Internet Registration Authority.

39. Obar and Shade.

The government rationalized the introduction of the Bill as the need to ratify the Council of Europe Convention on Cybercrime and to increase cooperation on international investigations. The other reputed justification was to “protect children,” even though the actual content of the bill contained no mention of children or predators except in its title, which was changed after the legislation had been drafted and sent to the printers. The Bill’s original title, *An Act to Enact the Investigating and Preventing Criminal Electronic Communications Act and to Amend the Criminal Code and Other Acts*, thus became the shorter and dramatic title, *The Protecting Children from Internet Predators Act*. This move suggested that the Conservative government was indeed acting disingenuously.

Bill C-30 was one example where the discourse of “protection” permeated legislation, and this was also reflected in heightened concerns about cyberbullying brought about by widespread media attention to several tragic teen suicides. As stated in *Digital Canada 150*, the Government introduced Bill C-13, the *Protecting Canadians from Online Crime Act*, which made it a criminal offense to distribute intimate images without the consent of the person depicted. Passed in 2014, Bill C-13 (S.C. 2014, c. 31) amended the *Criminal Code* and other Acts (the Canada Evidence Act, the Competition Act, and the Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Act), making it an offense for the nonconsensual distribution of “intimate images” via telecommunication systems without the consent of the person in the image. The offense is punishable by a maximum of five years’ imprisonment on indictment or six months’ imprisonment on summary conviction.⁴⁰ However, as Bailey argues, the Parliamentary debates and legislation point to how the “conceptual elasticity” of the term cyberbullying “has, to a certain extent, facilitated co-optation of tragic suicide cases and protection of ‘innocent’ children as a guise for a long-standing agenda to expand state surveillance, while offering no comprehensive plan for addressing the relational and systemic issues and responses repeatedly highlighted within the debates themselves.”⁴¹

Alongside the legislation, a national public awareness campaign, Stop Hating Online, was initiated to raise awareness among Canadian youth of the impact of cyberbullying and the potential legal consequences.⁴² The campaign evidenced very gendered notions of who constitutes a perpetrator

40. Government of Canada, *Protecting Canadians*.

41. Bailey.

42. See <http://stophatingonline.ca>.

and who is a victim of cyberbullying. The campaign discourse and cyberbullying legislation became an avenue for the Conservative government to reach out to their base in pushing their “tough on crime” agenda, but it also obfuscated systemic issues related to gendered violence. While instances of cyberbullying impact both men and women, the gendered and ageist nature of the term has not been widely interrogated. Westcoast LEAF (the Women’s Legal Education and Defense Fund) argued that

Too often, analyses of the problem of “cyberbullying” erase its sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic, and otherwise discriminatory nature, and ignore the context of power and marginalization in which it occurs. The term “cyberbullying” also suggests that online harassment and abuse is only a problem for children and youth, when we know that misogynist hate speech and threatening behaviour online greatly affects adult women, too.⁴³

Instead, Westcoast LEAF advocated the use of the term “cybermisogyny,” suggesting that it “encapsulates the diverse forms of gendered hatred, harassment, and abusive behaviour directed towards women and girls online.”⁴⁴

Status of Women Canada and Gender Equality

Under the Conservative government, Status of Women Canada closed regional offices, cancelled the Policy Research Fund that supported independent policy research, changed funding eligibility criteria to allow for-profit organizations to apply alongside nonprofit groups, and, most notoriously, dropped the word “equality” from its mandate.⁴⁵ While “equality” was later reinstated into the mandate, a review of program funding and priorities conducted by Stinson highlights the dramatic changes in program funding priorities starting in 2013, where content areas included ending violence against women and girls, improving women and girls’ economic security, and providing leadership opportunities for women and girls. As Stinson points out, projects that partner with business groups and

43. Westcoast LEAF, 7.

44. *Ibid.*, 5. The global dimensions of cyberbullying and cybermisogyny are documented by the United Nations Broadband Commission.

45. Standing Committee on the Status of Women Canada.

with an avowed economic focus have been the beneficiaries of funding—a distinct change from prior funding that went to women’s organizations and research and advocacy about women. As a result, many feminist organizations across the country have been shut down and “women’s organizations and feminist perspectives have been shut out of policy development federally and have less presence and capacity to engage in making change at the provincial and local levels as well.”⁴⁶

Several recent SWC programs focus on women and the digital economy. A series of Women in Technology projects was funded from 2013 to 2015, with the aim to “provide [for] more women an opportunity to play a greater role in the Canadian Digital Economy, where they remain under-represented.”⁴⁷ Funded projects included Communitech Corporation in Kitchener, whose goals were to “increase recruitment, retention and advancement of women in technology sector companies in the Waterloo region”⁴⁸ and Digital Nova Scotia, designed to “enhance women’s participation in Nova Scotia’s digital economy” by seeking to increase women’s participation in senior-level executive positions within the technology sector.⁴⁹

Community responses to cyber and sexual violence is another SWC funding priority, with the goal “to support women and community partners in working together to develop and implement appropriate strategies that prevent and eliminate cyberviolence (e.g., cyberbullying, Internet luring, cyberstalking) against young women and girls.”⁵⁰ Terms of reference for the projects include a needs assessment, knowledge mobilization, development and implementation of a project strategy for communities, and a project evaluation.

One of the funded participatory projects, YWCA Canada’s Project Shift, worked with their project team, partners, and young women to create recommendations for a multipronged approach to ending cyberviolence. Actions are designed for implementation within educational institutions; to increase awareness amongst parents, teachers, and other adults; to inform legal and legislative systems; to work in tandem with the ICT sector; and to create public education and awareness nationally and within local communities.⁵¹

46. Stinson.

47. Government of Canada, “Harper Government.”

48. Loc. cit.

49. Digital Nova Scotia.

50. Status of Women Canada, *Cyber and Sexual Violence*.

51. See Estable and Meyer and <http://ywcacanada.ca/en/pages/cyber/about>.

Beijing+20

The twentieth anniversary of the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action in 2015 brought about another round of countrywide assessments of progress. In their brief (300-word) response to Section J.1 on Women and Media, the Canadian government only described existing broadcasting content legislation on gender stereotyping and portrayal, and noted a few provincial programs that promoted positive and nonsexist portrayals.⁵² There was a noticeable absence in the government report of any references to ICTs or the digital economy, an odd omission given their focus on the digital economy and the SWC funding priorities.

In contrast, a report comprising consultation with Canadian trade unions and civil society assessed Canada's commitment and progress of the Beijing Platform and chastised the government for

a marked slowdown in the rate of progress towards closing the gap between the well-being of women and men. . . . along with important and persistent differences between different groups of women, with Aboriginal, racialized, and immigrant women, as well as women with disabilities, all suffering a disproportionate burden of inequality.⁵³

The report also highlighted “a notable shrinking of the federal government's role in addressing the barriers to gender equality both at home and as part of its international commitments.”⁵⁴

Regarding Section J, the civil society report commented on the continued objectification of women in the media and their slow progress in employment in the media and ICT sector. The report mentioned how social media were used by women for “technology-assisted resistance projects channeled at challenging sexist and violent behaviour that has long been reinforced by media portrayal practices”⁵⁵ citing the example of Hollaback!, a nonprofit international movement whose objectives are to end street harassment around the world using social media, crowdsourcing, and mapping.⁵⁶

52. Government of Canada, “Implementation of the Beijing Declaration.”

53. Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives, 7.

54. Loc. cit.

55. *Ibid.*, 67.

56. See <http://www.ihollaback.org/>.

WSIS+10

Unlike the 2005 civil society consultation on Phase II of WSIS coordinated by the Canadian Commission for UNESCO, which brought together a range of stakeholders to craft a fulsome Civil Society Communiqué, the ten-year review of WSIS, WSIS+10, was conducted in relative secrecy and with unseemly haste. CIRA, with assistance from the Canadian Commission, gathered together twenty-four stakeholders comprising the tech community, the private sector, academia, community groups, and youth in Ottawa to address the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) “Zero Draft.” The “Zero Draft” addressed issues of ICTs for development, bridging the digital divide, creating an enabling environment, financial mechanisms, Internet governance, enhanced cooperation, human rights, and confidence and security in using ICTs.⁵⁷

The Canadian civil society consultation highlighted the need to consider the multiple dimensions of Internet access in a socioeconomic framework, recommending giving priority to communities to determine their specific access needs. In addition, the group highlighted that Indigenous peoples, people living with disabilities, and women face unique access challenges that need to be addressed. The group also encouraged the renewal of the Internet Governance Forum mandate, and called on the UNGA to consider Internet access as a human right, privacy as a fundamental human right, and the role of the Internet in protecting and preserving Indigenous and local knowledge.⁵⁸

The Government of Canada, through the Department of Foreign Affairs, Trade, and Development, offered their response to WSIS+10. With respect to the digital divide, the government noted their appreciation of the need to recognize the gendered nature of access. However, they asked for a refinement of language about the gendered digital divide, to specify the particular vulnerabilities of girls’ equality in the use of the Internet, measures to ensure “gender equality in the use of the Internet by 2020” and the need for measures to enhance women and girls’ participation and education with ICTs as “users, entrepreneurs, and leaders.”⁵⁹

57. See <http://digitalwatch.giplatform.org/instruments/wsis-10-resolution-zero-draft>.

58. United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting, “Canadian Civil Society Response.”

59. United Nations General Assembly High-Level Meeting, “Canadian Government Response,” 12.

Toward Sunny Ways?!

Out with the Old . . .

An internal SWC report ordered by the Privy Council Office to inform Deputy ministers across various Canadian departments about the economic and social status of women and girls in Canada was revealed through an Access to Information request filed by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC).⁶⁰ The report, conducted during the last year of the Harper government, noted that gender-based violence against women was persistent and increasing, and highlighted how marginalized women—Aboriginal, immigrant, and those living in rural and remote regions—are far more likely to be victims of violence and face economic hardships. International comparisons reveal that Canada has fallen behind on key social and economic indicators; and in terms of wage parity, the report bluntly noted that, “women have hit a brick wall.”⁶¹

These stark numbers are echoed in a UN Gender Inequality Index, documenting a decline in Canadian women’s labor force participation and a persistent gender wage gap. Austerity measures under the Harper government, including the withdrawal of a planned National Childcare program, elimination of allowable funding from SWC for women’s programs and services, and a lack of action on missing and murdered Aboriginal women contributed to a palpable increase in gender inequality under the Harper regime.⁶²

. . . And in with the New

Political change can bring about hope and optimism. Many Canadian citizens are counting on the new Trudeau government to usher in an era of transparency and accountability in governance, a restoration of funding for research, a national enquiry on missing and murdered Aboriginal women, an increase in Syrian refugees, a progressive policy on climate change, and a renewed commitment to international diplomacy, among many other pressing political and social items the new government will need to undertake. As Prime Minister Trudeau exulted in his victory speech upon being

60. Beeby, “Secret Status of Women Report.”

61. SWC internal report cited in Beeby, “Secret Status of Women Report.”

62. Hamandi.

elected with a majority government, “Sunny ways, my friends, sunny ways: this is what positive politics can do.”⁶³

Ministerial Mandate Letters, which list the specific tasks and priorities for each government ministry, were publically released in October 2015. How the digital economy will be taken up by specific ministries and what specific issues will be addressed were not clearly outlined. Broadband access is on the agenda, as the Minister of Innovation, Science and Economic Development (formerly Industry Canada) has a mandate to increase high-speed broadband coverage and stimulate competition and choice in the telecommunications sector.⁶⁴

An urgent issue the Trudeau government is faced with is reviewing and reforming Bill C-51, the Anti-Terrorism Act, which received royal assent in June 2015. Intense criticism of the bill from civil society, legal experts, academics, and privacy advocates centered on expanded powers given to law enforcement and the Canadian Security Intelligence Agency, concerns over the bill’s definition of what constitutes a terrorist act, and the erosion of privacy rights.⁶⁵ The Minister of Justice and Attorney General of Canada is tasked with supporting the Minister of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness in efforts to repeal key elements of Bill C-51, and to introduce new legislation strengthening accountability in national security while balancing rights and freedoms.⁶⁶

Canadians have an increasing appetite for participating in conversations about digital policy issues, as both activism against Bill C-51 and the recent, albeit not widespread, consultation on the WSIS+10 demonstrate. Women’s access to, and knowledge of, the structures of participation in digital policymaking is essential, a point made by Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) Chairman Jean-Pierre Blais, decrying both the paucity of women CRTC commissioners and the small number of women intervenors in key regulatory hearings such as basic access to telecommunication services.⁶⁷ Given rising income inequalities, the increase in precarious work, and persistent digital divides, Canadian policy needs to have a renewed focus on digital inclusion, particularly from

63. Keehn.

64. See <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-innovation-science-and-economic-development-mandate-letter>.

65. Council of Canadians.

66. See <http://pm.gc.ca/eng/minister-justice-and-attorney-general-canada-mandate-letter>.

67. Dobby.

an intersectional approach that brings in an equality lens. One challenge in moving toward a feminist vision will be to craft initiatives and policy that resist the allure of neoliberal feminism, which Fraser remarks is characterized by “a masculinist romance of the free, unencumbered, self-fashioning individual.”⁶⁸ Neoliberal feminism, as Rottenberg also argues, elides the structural conditions leading to inequalities, and thus ensures that women must accept and assume individuated “responsibility for her own well-being and self-care.”⁶⁹ This sensibility is epitomized by the propensity to champion entrepreneurship as an approach to sustaining a livelihood.

There also needs to be a renewal of civil society, and increasingly efforts are needed to ensure that trust is reinvigorated between government and civil society—a trust broken in the reign of the Harper government, through the political auditing by the Canadian Revenue Agency of progressive charities.⁷⁰

What is the discourse that scholars use for gendered social inclusion—is it about democratic empowerment (citizenry) or is it the perpetuation of the gendered audience commodity and ensuring women’s power in the marketplace (consumerism)? It is clear that both scholars and activists need to continue to examine digital policy issues through feminist political economy, which can underscore systemic and structural power dynamics emanating from governments, industry, and international policy regimes that can (and do) materially impact the gendered shaping of everyday uses of ICTs for social inclusion and cultural empowerment.

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68. Fraser, 220.

69. Rottenberg, 420.

70. Beeby, “Academics’ Open Letter.”

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