Overcoming Digital Divides Workshop Series: Low-Income Commu...

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SPEAKERS

Erin Knight, Toby Harper-Merret, Dionne Pelan, Karim Bardeesy, Viveca Ellis

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K **Karim Bardeesy**   00:53

Welcome everybody, I'll just wait for people to file into the virtual room. We'll get started in a minute.

E **Erin Knight**   01:03

Good Morning.

K **Karim Bardeesy**   01:17

Hi everyone and welcome to the second part of our overcoming Digital Divide series, a six part workshop presented by the Ryerson Leadership Lab, the Brookfield Institute for Innovation Entrepreneurship, the First Nation's Technology Council, and Simon Fraser University's Public Square, and supported by our title sponsor TELUS. My name is Karim Bardeesy, and I'm the Co-Founder and Executive Director of the Ryerson Leadership Lab and we're thrilled you're able to join us today. Before we begin, I want to take a moment to recognize those that aren't able to gather with us today, the frontline workers, the health care providers, the caregivers, people on low incomes, people who we are trying to support through this conversation. All those who this conversation is intended to serve,

that is, those who remain disconnected from quality safe reliable internet. And so to help address those gaps in access we'll be making a recording available with a transcript and a summary of the major takeaways from our conversation. We also have some accessibility features for the conversation today. You can access a virtual transcript of this session in a separate window. In the top left hand corner of your zoom screen you will see a red button that says, Live, you can click the arrow that appears next to the text after the red Live button, and you'll be given the option to view the transcript. If you're prompted to make an account, just click the X to close it. Before we begin, we'd like to give a land acknowledgments today those reflective of where Ryerson University's main campuses and where I'm in the west end of Toronto. We do this as a symbolic and restorative act, one among many that has happened and to follow, and part of a wider ongoing and hopefully transformative reconciliation project here at Ryerson University. Ryerson, and most of the city of Toronto is on the territory of the Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, and the Huron-Wendat. It is covered by the Dish with One Spoon treaty, Treaty #13, and the Williams Treaties. We are committed to honoring our obligations to these nations, to treaties and to justice for Indigenous peoples, more generally, through this workshop series we hope to do that by amplifying Indigenous voices, and ensuring that we are making space to consider the unique realities and digital divides faced by Indigenous peoples in Canada. And our first session had a bit of a focus on this issue of connectivity for Indigenous and remote and northern communities so we encourage you to check out that session that is available through this series, we're excited to continue the series with a discussion about Internet access with a focus on adoption for low income communities. We hope to shed some light on the affordability challenges and accelerate public discourse on effective policy solutions. And by better understanding the conditions shaping Canada's digital divides we hope to pave an accelerated clear path towards meaningful digital inclusion. Perhaps one of the great opportunities of the 21st century for economic and social inclusion Canada today if we get this right. And I'm so thrilled that we have some guests who are on the front lines of these questions as policymakers, as activists, as people working in community, especially in the light of the pandemic and the move towards online delivery of critical government services and remote work, access to the internet at sufficient speed is more pertinent now than ever before. Internet access and adoption now significantly affects people's health outcomes, their health opportunities, their financial stability, their emotional well being. This is something that all the panelists, many of you would have known intellectually or have felt. But now it is a felt need across Canada. And so our workshop today we'll include introductory remarks from each panelist and a discussion guided, directed by two guiding questions that I'll put out there and we're going to ask you to take part we've got. We want to accept your questions through the chat function. We'll be using the Jamboard tool through this platform that you can use to participate in as well and our excellent series facilitator Nour, Abdelaal will be supporting that. And now to our guest speakers who we are so honored

and excited to have with us today and we're in fact honored to have you. As they are from across the country. First we'll start with Toby Harper Merrett, the Executive Director of Computers for Success Canada, a not for profit organization supporting the Government of Canada's digital equity and economic develop programs, he's a public good professional with expertise in information communication technology and has contributed to research and policy programs internationally and across Canada. He's a member of the band forum, he's particularly interested in addressing the challenges of underserved and at risk communities and he joins us today from Montreal. Welcome, Toby.

T Toby Harper-Merret   05:50
Hey, thanks very much.

K Karim Bardeesy   05:52
Next we have Erin Knight, the Cccess Campaigns Lead and a Digital Rights Campaigner at Open Media, where she works to help make the internet more affordable and accessible to all. Born and raised in rural Manitoba, Treaty 2 territory, Erin is Métis with family roots in the San Clara, Turtle Mountain, and St. François Xavier areas. Through her campaigns and activism, Erin provides a unique understanding of the digital needs of low-income communities. And Erin is joining us today from Calgary, welcome Erin. Next we have Dionne Pelan, the Computer and Dropping Programs Coordinator at the UBC learning exchange, which is a hub offering a unique learning environment that provides free community based programs for residents and organizations, student experiential learning programs and support for community based research and knowledge exchange activities. Dionne is a non-traditional educator with over 15 years experience teaching and leading community based digital literacy initiatives, using effective adult education approaches and Dionne joins us today from Vancouver. And finally we have Viveca Ellis. Vivica Ellis is the Outgoing Interim Community Organizer and Leadership Development Coordinator at the BC Poverty Reduction Coalition as a community organizer and passionate advocate for reducing poverty, because we're trying to bring the voices and experiences of individuals living in poverty into discussions on public policy solutions. She also founded the BC poverty Reduction Coalition's Community Action Network, which is a community based leadership program for people with lived experience of poverty and she is also joining us today from Vancouver, welcome. And you can tell that we've got four panelists here who are working at the frontlines of both the policy side and the action side, and so really looking forward to hearing through them some of the voices that too often are not heard and hearing your voices as well in this key issue of Internet access and digital access for people in low income communities. We're hoping, as I mentioned, that we'll collect your input using Jamboards which you can access through the link in the

chat. To add a comment, use the sticky note tab on the left hand side of your screen. One of our team members will be on the back end helping organize your responses as they come in. Some context to this conversation for for all of you. And we have put out a framing paper about this issue with the Brookfield institute that we recommend for reading as well. As of 2017 only 69% of households in the lowest income bracket had a computer and internet access at home, compared to 98.5% of households in highest income bracket. It's almost a 30 percentage point difference. Almost half of households with an annual income of $30,000 or less did not have access to high speed internet in 2018. Think of that in the context of the possibility of doing remote work, or the inability to do remote work without that access. Think about that in the context of the needed health, educational and other services that right now as we speak in Ontario and across Canada are being expected to be used through those means. Like most categories of household expenditures low income households spend more than twice of their income. That is 5.4% on internet and mobile phone services compared to all households at 2.1%. The Ryerson Leadership lab with the Brookfield Institute has done some survey research for the City of Toronto on this. In the City of Toronto 34% of households indicated they're worried about paying their home internet and cell phone bills over the next few months, with rates increasing to 51% among low income individuals and 51% also among those who are unemployed. Most recently, Canada's telecommunications companies have provided a $10/month internet access for low income families with children through the program that Toby runs Computers for Success Canada, as well as some other additional programs from some telecom companies for low income seniors, students in need and households in low income community housing. These programs exist, are they enough? Is there a greater role for public subsidies or other public policy to address this challeng? And that's what we're going to talk about today and we're probably going to unpack a bunch of issues through that they're very current today in the public policy and news environment of Canada. So I look forward to that conversation to your perspectives on these questions. But first, for our panelists. And as I'm asking these questions, we welcome again your participation through the chat, keep that chat box open. And we'll start. Perhaps with with Erin, with the first question, what steps must Canada take to increase the adoption of high speed internet, regardless of income, Erin, what are your thoughts on that question.

Erin Knight 10:43

Thank you. Sorry, I was trying to find my mute button. Yeah so, I mean, put simply, I think everybody knows this, I'm not saying anything revolutionary, but we need to make the internet high quality available everywhere and affordable at every income level. And obviously that's easier said than done but there are some tangible things that the government can do to get us at least moving on the right path. So when it comes down to affordability, which is a huge topic when it comes down to talking about low income folks

in the digital divide. I do think that it starts with a basic understanding of why somebody might not have a top tier connection at home. And unfortunately, when we talk about the digital divide, there's sometimes this myth that gets thrown around that people intentionally choose to settle for less when it comes to their internet connection, and that's actually just not the case. Like nobody chooses, or virtually no one chooses to have an internet connection that doesn't meet their needs if they can help it. So if you're on the wrong side of the digital divide, it's pretty much for one of two reasons which is a fast quality connection might not be available where you live, or be even if it is available you can't afford it. And I think this, you know, as someone who, as you mentioned, grew up in rural Manitoba, I'm intimately familiar with poor quality, and lack of availability of Internet, and even as the person that I am, I say that without affordability, there is no accessibility. And in a lot of ways Canada's current approach is to focus on access to a connection, and hopefully that deals with the affordability problems later on, and we can get more into that like in the second question, possibly, but overall, that means that we might be creating affordability problems in our attempt to fix our access problem, if we don't consider how the two interact. And fundamentally, I believe this happens because we have a patchwork system overall that helps to or hopes to tackle the problem, kind of in bits and pieces, we lack a national cohesive plan from our federal government that addresses Internet access and affordability in tandem, at the system's level. And I think it's true that everyone, regardless of how much is in their bank account how much money they make, deserves a fast and high quality, internet connection, but if we actually hope to make that seem and a reality. I think we need to do better than our current piecemeal approach.

K Karim Bardeesy   13:04

Thank you some great pieces to put on the table around the potential trade off between affordability and access, and what a national plan would look like and what the respective players would have to do to contribute to that. Thank you, Erin. Perhaps next alternative Dionne, and then, Toby and Vivica. Dionne your take on this question What steps must Canada take to increase the adoption of high speed internet, regardless of income.

D Dionne Pelan   13:28

So I think some of the issues are, you know just jumping on what Erin said briefly around affordability. A recent study I read from the CRTC's Communications Monitoring Report said that people who are in the lowest percentage of income spend nine, somewhere around 9.1% of their income for broadband. So, the sort of idea, and I think like Erin said we'll probably dig into that later. But the idea that it's a choice is not really true because

it's a choice between food. It's a choice between rent and paying your other bills, so it's not, it's not really a choice, it's a choice without a choice. But the government needs to start looking at sort of this like Erin said as well the patchwork that we have across the country. So different access in different places. You know, some of its based on population, some of it's based on income. So in the Downtown Eastside where I work, internet connections are hard to come by for a lot of the community members, and so they rely heavily on free public Wi Fi or what they can share and scam from their neighbors. So it's, it needs to start at all levels of government need to start working together to address that to look at, which ways they can sort of see those gaps that are emerging and coming sort of larger.

K   Karim Bardeesy   14:56
And we know that with some time in some cases with free public Wi Fi becomes a security risk and other risks that wouldn't cover.

D   Dionne Pelan   15:03
All kinds. Yeah.

K   Karim Bardeesy   15:06
Thank you, Dionne and just a reminder to us, the traditional bundle of essentials that are looked at in poverty statistics and others relate to food, shelter and clothing. But I think there's a strong case to add communications, the basic communications needs as the next part of that. Toby, some really good points put on the table here. You run a national program that attempts to address some of these issues. What in your opinion must Canada do to to increase the adoption of high speed internet, regardless of income.

T   Toby Harper-Merret   15:37
Thanks. So first I just want to acknowledge that I'm here on Kanienkehaka territory as a settler. My daughters are fifth generations that we're here in Montreal, and, really appreciate the opportunity to speak and I think the the questions are really well framed and the input so far is, is really precise and I think precise language is key to this discussion. I totally agree that what we have here is an equity problem, we have to look at who is not benefiting because yes, you know, it might be 5% of middle income families that are not benefiting from the use of internet but it's much greater than that. If you look at the lowest income households in the country. So in terms of steps I mean there are steps that are underway. I am the Executive Director of a nonprofit that delivers a bunch of

programs for the Government of Canada in this space, notably the Computer Schools Program which has delivered a couple million computers across the country and it's in its several decades of operation, as well as youth employment and digital skills programs but most relevant to this conversation is that compute is Connecting Families Initiative which is $10 Internet for low income families. I checked the ticker, this morning and it's it's over a million months of $10 Internet that have been served through that initiative at this point. So there are steps underway, but I think it's important as Erin in particular, pointed out that there are multiple divides and they do intersect, but we need to be clear about what we're talking about. There's this infrastructure issue getting fundamentally network access to 100% of Canadians. That's the first step and it's got to happen and there's a lot of public and private money going into the building of that infrastructure to reach, you know, the first one or 2% that really aren't connected at the moment. And that's you know that's fiber and wireless and satellites and all sorts of stuff and it's going to get faster and better undoubtedly with that investment, but also recognize there even more people in Canada who do have great broadband to their home, but don't benefit from its use. So there's a bigger population of people in Canada who have good internet access, but don't benefit from its use for a number of intersecting socially determined reasons. And I think, so just to repeat that there's about the same number of people folks and the folks in the lowest income quintile as there are who live in rural and remote regions in Canada. And so what this series I think is showing is that we have an equity issue, where there are social determinants that predict, essentially, digital disparities and we call those digital services, essential. I think that's really a social justice issue.

K Karim Bardeesy   18:30

Thank you and I look forward to hearing more about what those intersecting issues might be and maybe the Viveca might want to tackle some of those in her answer to this first question, Vivica, your take on this working with low income communities directly. What steps must Canada take to increase the adoption of high speed internet regardless of income.

V Viveca Ellis   18:50

Right, excellent question. And thanks to everyone for your comments so far. So really, I'm here to report from being at the vantage point of the Poverty Reduction Coalition, throughout a pandemic, the Poverty Reduction Coalition has around 110 members here in BC across the labor and the nonprofit sector so we heard an enormous amount about this, especially from community. So I think what I'd like to explain is that the work that we've done this year on digital equity and getting together our policy framework really starts with the big picture idea which is that what we're fundamentally advocating for is

publicly provided universally available high speed access for all, regardless of immigration and citizenship status. So that is our large framework. And the second most important piece I think in terms of steps would be looking at, access to information solely from a human rights framework perspective, that access to information actually is something that upholds and preserves, access to education other fundamental rights that we have access to education, access to health care, particularly during a pandemic. Those things are then, I can hear some children. Okay.

V Viveca Ellis 20:22
Just to the next piece I just wanted to say is that, at the Poverty Reduction Coalition, access to information is one of seven pillars in our blueprint for justice. That's nestled under universal basic services. So when we were advocating for a Poverty Reduction Strategy for British Columbia, we didn't include access to information as a pillar, we had housing, food, education, health care, but over the past year as we developed our new policy platform, we are positioning, access to information as one of those central pillars, coming from our Human Rights Foundation, and we're further advocating for, you know, just to go beyond all of these piecemeal solutions that really parse those below the poverty line into the deserving and undeserving for, you know, going beyond these piecemeal programs connecting families is only for families that are very very low income, it leaves out a large swath of very low income families. We heard stories of families being cut off because their child turned 18 in the middle of the pandemic, that's it. No more internet access for you you're outside this program now. So and then, for example, TELUS For Good targeting only those accessing disability assistance in British Columbia and Alberta and leaving out everybody on regular income assistance when they are required to do a daily work search online. So I'll paint a portrait of our greater policy platform as this discussion continues, but those are the two primary things that I think we need to start with looking at this notion of publicly provided universally accessible access, what that looks like, and really coming out from a Human Rights Foundation.

K Karim Bardeesy 22:04
Thank you, Vivica and I would add on that, that you're in a province that just recently did a comprehensive report on basic income and alternatives to basic income. That is probably worth weaving into this discussion and, in some way that I haven't quite figured out how to do but you'll start to do it. Really interesting point around taking a human rights approach to this and we might want to see if there's expertise on the Jamboard or elsewhere around. Oh, around that question obviously the CRTC has a, has an assessment of what basic internet access is, but we haven't yet I don't see this in the rights jurisdiction through the Charter and courts yet so that'll be interesting to follow. There's a question in

the in the Jamboard that I think. I don't know if it would be fair to ask Toby the question right away but I'll see who if he wants to take a first shot at it. What's the research on whether those $10 programs are meeting the needs of the people who are using them. What else might we might we need on top of that.

T Toby Harper-Merret   23:11

Yeah, sure. I mean it's a program that I was a participant in designing and certainly I'm intimately familiar with because we've been delivering it for three or four years now. And I think it is a great attempt on the part of the service providers in partnership with government, federal government to address this issue. I'll make two points of clarification I think one that is important is that it is very much not a subsidy initiative, it does not provide any money from like public money to the service providers to participate and it gets a, an important point to clarify, the providers who are involved are involved, voluntarily and in some cases on top of their own parallel programs. The other point I would make and you know it's big and so there are I'm sure there are lots of outliers and exceptions and we do, we're in touch with a lot of our beneficiaries on a regular basis, but nobody has been cut off from this initiative, even if you're no longer eligible nobody has been removed from the eligible population doesn't mean that your service wasn't cut off for all sorts of other reasons, but we're talking about, as I said, over a million months of $10 Internet served

K Karim Bardeesy   24:29

Can you share the dashboard that you refer to, a dashboard I think we'd all like to see that at some point.

T Toby Harper-Merret   24:33

I'm sure you would, I'm very much not allowed to share that. But the idea is that we are accompanying this with both live, you know, monitoring of the initiative through and through, as I said, you know, there's a portal whatever it goes through and we have a good read on that but also we really benefit from the company medical, scientific committee that is doing lots of follow up work with beneficiaries of the initiative, independent of us and of government made up of academics from across the country including Catherine Middleton at Ryerson. And so their work has gone back and ask folks, how it was like why did you take it, why did you not take it, how are you benefiting. And we've gotten a great, great amount of feedback and really clear picture of who those folks are, I think actually kind of a unique picture of this population in Canada and its relationship to digital services. So, to answer your question, those folks that are getting

$10 Internet, or this initiative, really, really appreciate it. They really, really like it. And as I said, that's mostly people who already had the internet because most Canadians already have the internet. And they were repriced to $10 and therefore they're making less difficult trade offs between rent and food and telecommunication services and you know that's something that they're really like. There is another population that were sort of about 15%, who didn't have internet before, and became new subscribers through a $10 plan. And I think that's again, that's the important distinction to make is between people repricing issue and an a new subscriber issue is sort of a traditional digital divide, where I don't have the internet, and another one which is a little more nuanced and a little more sticky, where, below a certain level of income and therefore I'm paying a certain portion, more than the median household does.

E Erin Knight 26:36
Yeah, I just wanted to make one little statement about that. I don't know if it's in reference specifically to connecting families but there is a piece a survey that Acorn had done regarding connecting families and Acorn found that 2% was the number. When we look at you look at uptake for the connecting families program, and then contrasted that with 3.4 million people in Canada who may be in need of the program. So while I'm not familiar with a lot of research into it. I do know that Acorn does have that stat out there, that 2% was the uptake for connecting families.

K Karim Bardeesy 27:17
Simple thinking, Toby. Yeah, I'm

T Toby Harper-Merret 27:19
just gonna say Acorn, I think is an excellent and obviously very directly grounded organization advocating on these issues and they were certainly at the table and we've been in touch with them since, and I certainly follow their work and think it is generally of high quality and certainly very useful

K Karim Bardeesy 27:38

Viveca you want to get on this.

V Viveca Ellis 27:40

Yeah. Just when it comes to the the $10 month initiatives and connecting families I see them as separate but what we're advocating for through our digital justice for BC campaign and platform out here is for $10, within our BC Poverty Reduction Strategy call together BC, for the provincial government to finance $10 month internet access for all below the market basket measure poverty line, the Federal MBM. Not to just you know have these limited programs that target just low income families and a very low target there. And just for example those axiom Disability Assistance and then after two years I believe they are often. And the other main piece that I wanted to point out is that for the $10 month access, one of the things that really came forward from the settlement sector within the Poverty Reduction Coalition, from many in the nonprofit sector is that we cannot no longer separate internet access and speed and availability from access to education and access to education is a right that we must protect in a pandemic and yet so many were unable to continue their education particularly whether it was ESL adult education that's really essential for skill building, especially for newcomers. So we're also advocating for the provincial government to step in with the federal funding as well to ensure $10 A month internet access for anybody accessing education in British Columbia, Regardless of what that is, whether it's ESL adult education right up through higher education. And then looking at other innovations like for example, building all nonprofit BC housing with $10 a month Internet access built in, so we should, why don't we build that into our affordable housing stock and look at it as a, as essential to you know, nonprofits, or modular housing as a fridge and stove, really essential taxes so I just wanted to sort of point out those pieces that we're talking about $10 a month it's a beautiful solution. And I know some that access it and they love it but it's just, it has such limited availability that we don't see the impact on the ground here in British Columbia, the hundreds of people that I work with that are below the poverty line. I was at a meeting recently and somebody who lives in the Downtown Eastside was hovering at a Moby bike station mobile bike station to steal to get the Wi Fi to access the meeting, and he was in the rain without an umbrella, hovering at the bike stall, just to, you know, connect with community at a meeting so we can avoid this, he doesn't have access to any $10 month program at this time. So just that we want to expand, expand that program and really looking at a larger application.

K Karim Bardeesy 30:18

Dionne do you want to get on this.

Dionne Pelan 30:21

Viveca and I were working on that project and in doing some of that we heard from a lot of different people, and and Toby, that you said nobody was cut off, but I personally last year was working with groups in the summertime trying to get them reconnected, because their kids had aged out, but their kids were going on to college or their kids were going on to other things and they were really panicked because they didn't know how they were going to be able to do it. And I think, you know, When we talk about what groups are what responsibility needs to happen, it has to happen at all levels, because the cities have infrastructures and ability to sort of look at building those things in. And I think in Canada we often play catch up. So we sort of start patching and building in, but we need to start looking more forward thinking and thinking about how do we build those infrastructures into communities and into neighborhoods, because, for example, the city of Vancouver has free Wi Fi available all over the city, but in neighborhoods like the Downtown Eastside. There is exponentially more people on it because they don't have internet access, which means their quality goes down, and then you have folks who are trying to do their banking trying to do their medical appointments trying to do all of these things over open public Wi Fi, which none of us would, you know people who have access and people who understand what that means we would never dream of doing a medical appointment standing on a corner, using free Wi Fi, but that's the reality for some of the folks I work with, because that's the only internet that they have.

Karim Bardeesy 31:56

So hearing a lot of interest in the $10 per month concept, and we should come back to, you know how scalable some of these programs are and what the respective private and public sector shares of those are, and whether there's some comments in the chat. I'll get to on the private sector roll on this in a second. But there's also comments in the chat and on the Jamboard from Teresa Affleck from Sean Maher, around the role of municipal infrastructure. You've mentioned a couple times already, how much potential is there to drive access, perhaps safer, more affordable access through new infrastructure build bike stations are mentioned some really exciting municipal projects, some of which have have risks, not just data, risks, but other forms of risks so can you talk to us a bit let's get into a bit more of the conversation around what municipal infrastructure to support access to low income people actually looks like on the ground. And Erin do you want to start with that,

Erin Knight 33:00

Sorry can you repeat the question

Karim Bardeesy 33:02

we've got a lot of conversation around how we can use municipal infrastructure or affordable housing infrastructure to better embed affordable, safe access for low income people in particular, you mentioned that you might, you mentioned the bike station perhaps as a not safe option but are there safer options are there affordable options that can be built into infrastructure, or the cooperative models that might be available for for people of low income to access.

Erin Knight 33:32

Yeah, so I'd like to speak to this maybe not in the context of what municipal infrastructure can be utilized but overall in general, the topic of community owned broadband because we've actually seen this rollout and small cities across Canada and especially in the United States, we've seen recently Toronto looking at building its own community owned broadband network, which would be fantastic. But the way I see it is that the role that communities can play is designing networks that work for them, that have their people in mind that aren't so much bottom line focus as they are on delivering services that people need, the way that a public system should these particular networks that are owned by communities are that you know, communities have a network and they provide wholesale services to an ISP who then sells retail services, There's many different models but overall what we've seen is this actually, in general, provides cheaper prices than what we see from competitors. This happened in Oldenburger right now you can take a look the own net I think it's called is a fiber network in old Alberta. They provide cheaper services per gigabyte in for many funds than Shaw, their direct competitors in that market. They provide often times better quality services, especially for smaller communities. So overall, like I see the role for communities to play is pretty significant in alleviating the lack of affordability issues that we have in Canada when it comes to internet. It just comes down to supports I think we've seen like with the universal broadband fund for example, at the federal level that it's not super welcoming actually to community on broadband a lot of it is focused on public private partnerships which can be great, but also as we know in the telecom market, there could be some, some power imbalances when it comes to communities working with certain nice teams. So, overall, like I would say like there's just such a great role for Phoebe's to play in the affordability issue, but infrastructure in particular, probably best equipped to speak to.

Karim Bardeesy 35:44

And we haven't we actually have a dedicated session on this in this series on June the second on public access and public infrastructure models so we'll probably take up more of that conversation there and, you know this. This isn't necessarily communities building their own broadband, there's, there's lots of different ways that this can, this can be done. There's been again I just want to, before we go to the public versus private, a little bit I want to poke a bit at the, there's a lot of enthusiasm in general for the $10, per month kind of model. Who should reach next, how can we chalk up more points on Toby's dashboard, and to which populations. You mentioned the graduating students, potentially, people are graduating into into another phase of life. Any, any ideas on where the next phase of this should reach.

Dionne Pelan 36:39

I think there are sort of populations that have been left out so I work with a lot of urban singles. So those are low income people who are, you know, either working for or just low income, and they don't have access, they aren't sort of needy enough for these packages but they don't have the ability to afford regular packages and then you have these whole groups where they're working really hard and trying to make ends meet, but they just can't afford it and there's nothing out there for them. And so, it lowers their ability to be upwardly mobile it lowers their ability to participate. We know some of the university and college students who are maybe living in a room with lots of different people, like living in sort of close sheltered housing, and they didn't have internet either, so we had students, you know, and Vivica probably knows some of these as well but people who were having to look at dropping out of college, because they couldn't afford their internet to be able to, and they couldn't afford it, where all six people who live in the house could be on streaming classes at the same time. And so for them the option was just to take a year off of schooling, and for some people, actually going to school, is a huge step. And so when you put another barrier in the place, it's some of them may not return back to school and we see that with some of the high school kids who are living out on their own as well so kids who are coming out of care or different things, and there are packages out there but I think sometimes people don't know about them, and a lot of times they just barely miss, miss the threshold to qualify for it. And so there's that gap in between the two that I think we need to look at addressing as well.

Karim Bardeesy 38:33

And a broader policy context here where a lot of people where their incomes just crawl up a bit more over some thresholds and they lose access to a number of programs I know this is something provincial ministries of finance are supposed to pay attention to but often it's a, it's a real barrier to to accessing any number of services and subsidies

question that I want to pull on based on a couple of comments in the chat, and not necessarily pegged to the, the computers for success programs that Toby is running but more generally, you know that that's a that's a privately sector, private sector funded program, but there's been some comments in the chat that, you know, perhaps these are some more like CSR initiatives or corporate social responsibility initiatives rather than real access initiatives or that, in fact, some of, some organizations are these, these organizations are highly profitable doing quite well. And so they can, they can direct some, some of their profits towards access initiatives without fundamentally changing the business model does anyone want to comment on whether there's a role for greater public sector investment in these initiatives, does anyone want to take on any of the competition policy questions that are maybe arise from and other questions that arise from the the way we have our internet players access players, organized in Canada, and there's a reference we might need some help interpreting some of the comments in the chat, there's some important players in the larger ecosystem that will probably understand who they are. So private versus public role of investment and the role of public policy in driving in driving better access, we want to start with that.

Viveca Ellis   40:30

I can dive in a little here, because I'm the one who piped up right at the start with our primary ask which is for publicly provided universally accessible access for all, which is the biggest. So without getting into the competition discussion, I would say that, you know, what we're really stepping up here in BC in the context of the pandemic is the inclusion of provincial funding within our large, you know, multi year quite ambitious Poverty Reduction Strategy to fill that gap. So, and exactly, making it truly a publicly provided service, starting with those below the market basket measure in British Columbia. So, you know we have this, our legislated target is to reduce overall poverty by 25% and child poverty 50% by 2024. So why don't we look at access to information and high speed, quality, Internet access as a fundamental part of the journey for many who are, we're climbing out of poverty in British Columbia and start with that. So I would say that, you know, I am speaking from the provincial perspective here but that we need provincial investment, every province in Canada, and we need a federal emphasis on affordability because availability, does not mean accessibility right and and this is, this is where we have a huge gap in our federal mandates around that 900 million and where it's landing, that we have to address affordability, federally in our strategy we have a Federal Poverty Reduction Strategy and it does not actually address affordability and so I just that, that's, I think I'll stop there, but we are definitely advocating for much more significant investment in publicly provided programs that aren't piecemeal.

K Karim Bardeesy 42:29

We hope that the policymakers who were in this video townhall perhaps not identifying themselves or hearing these messages. Anyone else want to take up this question.

E Erin Knight 42:39

I won't speak too much to it but I did want to just because I will go into it I think in the second question that we end up discussing but I want to say that, like the nature of our telecom market is so dysfunctional, that there's just a number of potential solutions on the table I think any of them are viable and we should try one of them, great never tried zero of them. There's like many different approaches that we could take to actually fix the big competition problem for example, there are solutions like Viveca has proposed. There are solutions being proposed in the chat with regards to end providers and access to wholesale networks, both on the wireless side and on the broadband side, there is community broadband, which would be like, public or public involvement in service provision. There's just a lot of different approaches so if there are policy makers in the chat or, you know, in tuning in today, I would say there are those options on the table like we can work with each other and try and make them happen.

K Karim Bardeesy 43:43

Anyone else wanna jump in on this.

T Toby Harper-Merret 43:46

I just got to reinforce something that Dionne said I thought was really important which is that the point here is that we're talking about some sort of different service for some different population and I think it's really important that we reflect, it doesn't mean there can't be innovations the way Erin just described, I think really well, it's that, you know, the average people in Canada, don't go to the bike terminal to do their homework. Right, that's not a normal thing that we would expect to be the intended outcome of policy decisions. And so it's really important I think this, it seems like an obvious point but it's one that I think we need to keep reinforcing, which is we want internet use across all income brackets to look like what internet use looks like for the middle income that's kind of the idea here. And yes, absolutely again to Dionne's point like this is a very targeted population, the program that we run. It's, you know, it's over a million families so it is, you know 3 million Canadians or so 8% of the population or something, but you know that, but it's the target population is people who are on the maximum childcare benefit. So that's, you know, it's a great proxy program to use, it's families below a certain income, children under 18 like that. That's great. It's a big population, but it's not everybody and

everybody's got a long list of who might benefit for and those are totally reasonable and justifiable target populations, just in the program that we help deliver what we agree to with 80% of the Canadian telecom market who have voluntarily participated in this initiative and are serving as I said, over a million months of $10 Internet this time is, you know there are constraints. These are private companies right and they are in some cases public companies but for profit companies and they are voluntarily investing in serving this population with an off market price. Far be it for me to come to their defense but the idea here is that government targets the population, we bridge that to the service provider and the service provider provides the service.

K **Karim Bardeesy** 46:10

Dionne do you want to get in. So, thanks, we're gonna move to the second motivating question and so if you're on the Jamboard thanks for filling up our Jamboard, and there's some great notes that we want to reflect back at the end of the conversation we're going to get to the second question and I'm going to try to pull in some of the other pieces in the chat, don't worry if you don't feel you haven't been heard yet. We'll try our best to pull in your pieces in the second part of the conversation. Once again, you're with the Ryerson leadership Lab, Brookfield Institute First Nations Technology Council, And Simon Fraser University's Public Square project, supported by TELUS conversation on Overcoming Digital Divides in Canada, with a focus on low income communities. And this is the second question we wanted to put to you. And maybe we can get a bit of point here on public policy here. Now that we've done some diagnosis and heard some of the perspectives and learned from some of the program, pieces that are already existing. And some of the program frames and policy frames. We have a human rights frame safety frame, frame of laddering up to greater and greater populations. Given the internet is an essential service as characterized by the CRTC and perhaps an accepted point of premise in this conversation, but not yet followed by all the policy tools that do that. How can Canada ensure that internet service prices generally are affordable for low income households. So you had this question in advance so I'm hopeful that someone will be, have a few notes to go or else we can roll with the conversation, as we've had today on tackling this question. Maybe I'll look to Vivica. She wants to take that on, given that the internet is an essential service, how can we ensure that internet service prices are affordable for low income households.

V **Viveca Ellis** 48:05

Well, I think I sort of jumped the gun here because I've been focused on this all along in the discussion. And I think that, obviously, access to information is a huge missing pillar, from our federal Poverty Reduction Strategy and many provincial strategies, and the pandemic

is brought to light the necessity of including it. And not only addressing accessibility and speed but affordability as well. So, I think, you know, I wanted to say to and give another shout out to BC Acorn, because, as a community organizer and I come from organizing among women in poverty and I know many many single mother led families that access the connecting families program. You know, this as a policy area in British Columbia, to be honest, it's been largely overlooked for a very long time, to be frank, and it really is communities that are organizing doing very grassroots boots on the ground organizing that have been yelling very loudly in a really effective way about this issue for a long time, and actually weren't heard for quite some time and I think BC Acorn just kept at it and kept at it and kept that at federally and provincially here in BC, put out their reports. So, you know the the issue around affordability is something that for most of us right, you pay your $75 a month and there you go right there's not a question of course you know, you get it you have internet access at your home, whereas we haven't really taken the time for a long time to listen to communities and people in poverty families in poverty, with single adults in poverty, and what it's really like when you're living with a hierarchy of needs. Right. And, you know, are you going to pay your hydro bill or are you going to afford Internet access and it's so costly. So I think we're at a bit of a tipping point around beginning, how to understand what affordability, really means for low income communities and and what, what kind of access they actually do and don't have. So in terms of concrete, I think I've summarized, you know, we're really focusing on access to education, and this notion of a much more universally accessible $10 a month program, but just to speak to some comments in the chat. One of the things that the First Nations Technology Council on Denise Williams is a member of the core group and along with Dionne and Mosaic QPBC represents all the library workers in British Columbia, but downloading of Internet access onto that infrastructure which is very problematic. But one of the things that we think is really important is looking at this from the notion of spectrum sovereignty, and it was Denise who brought that into our discussion that we are on unseeded land, air and water. And when we're looking at how we build our affordability programs, we have to really identify how we build a participatory framework where communities have say and buy in and control over how we build this policy. So I'm not jumping out here I've shared our policy points but we really need to talk about how we now build it, and how we build it with communities, taking into account here in British Columbia our legislated commitment to UNDRIP. And this notion of spectrum sovereignty and the rural urban divide, I just wanted to speak somebody in the comment mentioned that there's a lot of focus on large urban centers and talking about municipalities, and I am not at all a subject, you know, an expert in this issue but having the FNTC in our group and we were doing our work talking about the 203 Indigenous communities in British Columbia. And that gap and the work there is, how do we make sure that communities really have a role in a say in the development of all this policy. So I'll stop there.

K   Karim Bardeesy   51:59

Sorry, same question, given the internet in central service, how can we ensure that internet service prices are affordable for low income households, who wants to take this next. Tell me.

T   Toby Harper-Merret   52:13

I mean, I think, speaking on my own behalf, that we can and should do everything we can so everything all at once, you know, outrageous stackable, you can we can do, competition and we can do regulation for competition and we can do innovations, some, some of which we've named already in terms of service models and, like, utility approaches and also so we can do all that stuff, and we need to have off market pricing because I think regardless of those first few and this is, this is the thing I know about the most is, you know, you can drive down like the market will drive down prices and it may not be going as fast as we want and yet it is going down and innovations will help, but it will land on a floor, and then there will be a whole bunch of folks underneath that. And those folks are still paying doctors above the median to pay for this extensively, essential service. And so, you know, I think we can work with the models we have we, can try some peripheral models to serve particular communities. And then I think there is a public policy issue here where there needs to be an off market price for a certain portion of the population in Canada.

K   Karim Bardeesy   53:30

So an all in approach, using all the policy tools and perhaps persuasion tools and suggestive perhaps of a national strategy, in the in the Jamboard on the first part of the conversation there was a question about whether we had a national strategy. Do we have one we just don't know it and it's just maybe a bit more timid than is needed, given the issues or do we not have a national strategy? If we did, if we don't have a national strategy who could help lead that there was question in the chat about it, which are the politicians that are taking a leadership role in this. So maybe I'll make the question a bit more of this part of the conversation but more pointed for you, Erin and Dionne, do we have a national strategy? If so, what would that look like. And who are the leaders on that.

E   Erin Knight   54:19

I'm happy to chime in. Now there's a lot of things I want to say I'm sorry I apologize but I'll try to address that at the end a little bit, I do want to just speak to the second question a

little bit. And also just chime in on what Viveca said about rural affordability, it's a huge problem, I'm from a very small town, about four and a half hours northwest of Winnipeg. And so, lots of people there rely on satellite services. I have a cousin who pays almost $400 a month between their satellite services and their mobile services just for internet at their home. So that's obviously super unacceptable, and a lot of the approaches that we discussed like don't really factor in satellite services so it's just like sending people to keep in mind, but I wanted to kind of dial it back and like emphasize something that I think we need to talk about when reframing this issue which is the fact that Canada which has some of the highest prices in the world for wireless and Internet services, and if we just kind of like sit with that fact for a second. That's like some of the highest prices in the world and the entire world. I think that every policymaker really needs to sit back and say like, what on earth is happening in Canada, in our telecommunications sector that's causing this, and like what needs to change right now, because you know we can look at prices coming down relevant or relat relevant to what we have in the past or like what we have today but I think I can tell you those prices are in line with international, like other companies, or sorry, other other countries internationally. Like we don't really have affordability if we're always going to be the most expensive in the world. So I just wanted to put that in there as like another metric for us to consider, as we're discussing this, but I think like what I wanted to emphasize was just the nature of our dysfunctional telecommunications market allows for massive service providers to price gouge people coercively raise rates with few market consequences. They shut out competitors at every turn. And over the years our government has collectively put billions of dollars behind closing the digital divide. Very much so, in the hands of these providers who have a vested interest and not doing what we need them to do.

E Erin Knight   56:32

And this happens largely without a real plan towards support and competition and choice it's a lots of times as I mentioned the beginning towards connecting people physically to the internet but as everyone has pointed out, that doesn't necessarily translate into accessibility. So a lot of the federal money that we're seeing being advertised in bold and brash and all sorts of things, is actually reinforcing the system that keeps connectivity unaffordable in Canada, and everyone hears made really great points about the, the low income internet programs and they think they can, they can certainly alleviate a lot of pressure on a lot of people, and we've already recognized that there are millions of people who are still being left out by the qualifiers and as Toby said, there is also a place I think for this off market price for people who will always not be able to afford the floor in a highly competitive system. And I think in the short term extending those qualifiers will be super important, but in the long term I want to kind of point back to what I said at the beginning about, you know, strengthening, an approach that is system wide, fixing the

systemic problem in Canada with our embedded wireless ecosystem, because this systemic changes but we need versus a patchwork quilt of programs, and we need to see prices come down overall relative to other countries, as I said, and so in moving towards a systemic change, the government really needs to take concrete steps to improve choice and affordability, or sorry choice and competition, which will then improve affordability, because we have these huge players that are dominating the internet and wireless markets, they're awfully, I cannot speak. I'm so sorry, operating in oligopolies whichever limiting your choices that providers, then they're keeping prices artificially high. And so when the government has funding and policy that actually cements these oligopolies rather than supporting and funding competitors or alternatives, as I mentioned, there's going to be broadband and there are indie providers as well who can beat the competitors in this area. It just cements this affordable system, and I think like it the elephant in the room is, it's about to get worse because Rogers at this time is attempting to buy up shop. I think everyone is very scared that that might happen, consumers, advocates, organizations, businesses and more everyone is saying prices are too expensive in Canada. We need more competition and choice amongst other things, and then this deal is going to move us in the opposite direction. And so like, I'm just saying how ridiculous it is to think about consolidating our telecom services even further than they currently are, and it will almost certainly lead to higher prices we already saw this happen in Manitoba the 2017 when Bell bought out MTS which was the fourth wireless carrier in the province, that's my home province, I was actually an MTS customer when that happened, and prices went up and that deal was worth, I think, don't quote me on this, I think it was worth 3.9 billion. And so this Shaw-Rogers deal is worth about 26 billion. So if you just kind of like, think about the scale of the impact that we might see in Canada, when it was already so bad it's much smaller consolidation. So I think it goes without saying that the government absolutely needs to block the Shaw-Rogers deal. But yeah like I mean all together. This leads back to the core issue that I've been talking about which is that the government needs to understand that every time a policy or funding announcement or regulatory decision supports those incumbents over the others helps keeps the helps keep the internet more unaffordable relative to other countries, and instead of all this kind of just disjointed stopgap measures that don't actually result in meaningful change, I think that we need, like I mentioned that national strategy that fosters choice and competition I didn't explore use of alternatives like maybe broadband which are demonstrated to result in lower prices. And I've been very very blunt with this answer I apologize I did want to say just about the question that was posed, right before you pass it over to me about the national strategy. We don't actually have a cohesive national strategy, we do have bits like the like connecting Canada or whatever it's called, like these pieces do say we want this number of people to be connected by this time and we're going to do this but it's actually not a strategy. It's just say we're doing X like thing in this amount of time, but it's not actually showing, who's going to be connected by when,

what are the affordability measures that are built in how is the system going to be transformed. I don't really see that from the current plans I think that I wouldn't call a strategy.

Karim Bardeesy 1:01:14

Thank you that was well said in particular about what a national strategy would need to look for and measure over time. And on the competition policy questions so that's a third kind of horizontal lens we had the human rights lens. We had the essential services lens and then we also had the competition policy minds which is a very complex issue with lots of data going back and forth, much of which ends up in the hands of the CRTC and or the Competition Bureau for deliberation, I would recommend, there's a couple of folks on in this, I see in the participants of the conversation. Vas Bednar, Wendy Dobson some others who might want to promote their work on this or we can drop it into the chat, because this is, as Erin says very present policy conversation right now that does definitely bear on the broader question. And let's keep that Jamboard going for a bit longer, we're gonna wrap up soon with a couple more questions and I want to pick up on something I think it was either Dionne or Viveca said around the choices that low income people face. And one of the choices, actually, I'm guessing between home internet access, and mobile access and then the need to use your personal data plan on your mobile to kind of patch over to home internet. And relatedly, there's also a choice presumably between access to the service and purchase or procurement of a device to actually use the service, whether it's a low cost, tablet or a computer or a phone. Can we just speak to anyone who wants to take that on the the question of accessibility to devices for low income people, which is in a different marketplace, and has its own competition issues potentially but a very different set of competition issues and then the ones we're talking about here. And then, in a more global, global market, where maybe harder to have programs that without, you know, again, private or public sector subsidy, supporting.

Toby Harper-Merret 1:03:25

Computers for Schools, I don't want to interrupt anybody else but there's I mean there is a federal government program has been around for 27 years, has delivered 1.7 something million computers to target populations in Canada for mostly free, and also low cost depending on the beneficiary. And that's a really I think under recognized initiative of government to have had the foresight in the early 90s to say we're going to have an E waste problem, because look at how many computers we're buying for the civil service, we need to have a circular approach to this is the 1993. We are going to refurbish these and employ youth interns to do so, so they can learn about the digital world, and then we're going to redistribute these public assets into the community so that they can be the

first school computer classrooms etc etc and that's been going, and delivered by network every province and territory has a dedicated nonprofit that does that work of refurbishment and redistribution, that you know and that program is excellent and we, you know, it's one of the ones that we help support, and in BC it is particularly active and really really sophisticated and does great work in partnership with with BC government and others. So those computers come in from the private sector they come in from government, they come in from other technology partners they get refurbished and redistributed and, and just to say that in the context of connecting families, the $10 internet for a certain segment of that population is accompanied with a free computer and so the 2017 budget announcement around connecting families announced 50,000 computers would be distributed through that five year plan, and we're in year four and 43,000 have been distributed and we see each one of those go to the door and we certainly hear back from the families that have received them. And as I said, deeply appreciate that additional device in the context of multiple children doing their schoolwork, for example,

D Dionne Pelan 1:05:30

I think, Toby, Computer for Schools is fantastic for those who have access to those pieces just kind of going back to your point about digital cell phone or data that way. I know that there have been some studies recently that say a lot of low income community members are connected because they have digital access or data access on their phones, but it implies again that equality piece. Anybody who's ever tried to fill out a government form knows it's complicated, try doing that on a cell phone. With limited data try doing that on a cell phone again where you're sharing your data between a whole bunch of people and you're halfway through the form and your data cuts out. And what happens. And during the pandemic with a lot of community access places places such as the learning exchange that offer computer access, having limited hours and time a lot more people are relying on that mobile data to do important things, but the challenges don't go away in fact in some cases they're more complicated, because people can't do some of the things that are required on a mobile device, and you know we talked about access, but then when we're talking about digital devices it's also the literacy the digital literacy that goes with it, and digital literacy is different between a desktop or hard computer and a mobile device and a tablet, so it gets more challenging and tricky I know in BC some of our government forms aren't geared or they're only geared to work in Internet Explorer. I don't know a mobile device that comes with Internet Explorer. So it makes it more challenging, again for people. So when we talk about access, I don't think saying that people have mobile access is saying okay they have internet access that's fair, that's fine. It's not it's still that equality piece around. Is it is it equitable access to the internet and the more we require things to be done online, the more we need to address it through sort of a national

strategy through provincial strategies through city strategies as well. There's lots of different cities, looking at tackling this individually, but it needs to have a national strategy because otherwise you're just going to have better resource communities having better access, but that issue is going to be the same.

K Karim Bardeesy 1:07:58

Thank you that really helped put a point on some of the comments made by the panelists earlier about what access to low income people in local communities actually means and what some of the intersecting barriers might be Thank you. And we know that, you know, user designers are supposedly on top of this to make programs as accessible as possible to a large variety of users as possible but we know that doesn't always succeed. It's been an amazing conversation and there's lots of notes here, and some great notes in the chat, I don't know how we're going to summarize this back out to our community, but we will do it with due regard to the things you told us, the things you didn't tell us but winked out as at the things in the chat, and the things on which there was agreement on, on which we didn't have full agreement, and really looking forward to the next parts of our series on this. I'd like to thank each of you, Dionne, Erin, Viveca and Toby, joining us again from Vancouver, Calgary and Montreal for your time for your insight for your dedication to this project for the many different perspectives that just goes beyond maybe just the simple price point that maybe starts in the price point but there is so much richer, and so much more important set of policy considerations than are in the conversation. We'll be making the recording available with a transcript and a summary of the major takeaways for all of you. The Jamboard will remain open for people to give input. And so we've tried to in the series, capture the voices and the perspectives of a number of players, of communities and populations in this space, and around this more general question of overcoming digital divides. And so the next session will focus on the digital challenges faced by older older adults, that will be taking place on Wednesday April 28 in three weeks at noon Eastern time 9am Pacific time. You can register using the link in the chat that I believe Nour is going to put in the chat. And once again thank you on behalf of the Ryerson Leadership Lab thank you to the Brookfield Institute for Innovation and Entrepreneurship, Simon Fraser University's Public Square, First Nations Technology Council, and our title sponsor TELUS for your support of this series, check out our framing paper. Join us for the future conversations that we're going to have, and hopefully this serves as a platform, not only for policy discussion, but for action in your spaces or in the spaces of the organizations that are working with us. Thank you all of you, and enjoy your day.

K Karim Bardeesy 1:10:55

Thanks guys.