Canadian Internet Forum

Digital Literacy Consultation Backgrounder

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MEDIA AWARENESS NETWORK RÉSEAU ÉDUCATION MÉDIAS

Canadian Internet Policy Forum
Digital Literacy Consultation Group
Backgrounder - October 2010

Introduction

In October 2009, the Canadian Internet Registration Authority (CIRA) commissioned an opinion survey on Canadian public interest in Internet policy and decision-making. The purpose of this initiative was to determine the value in establishing a multi-stakeholder forum to explore Internet policy, management and governance issues of relevance to Canadians. In the survey responses digital literacy emerged as a major topic of interest, particularly as it relates to privacy, trust, identity, social media, and social cohesion.

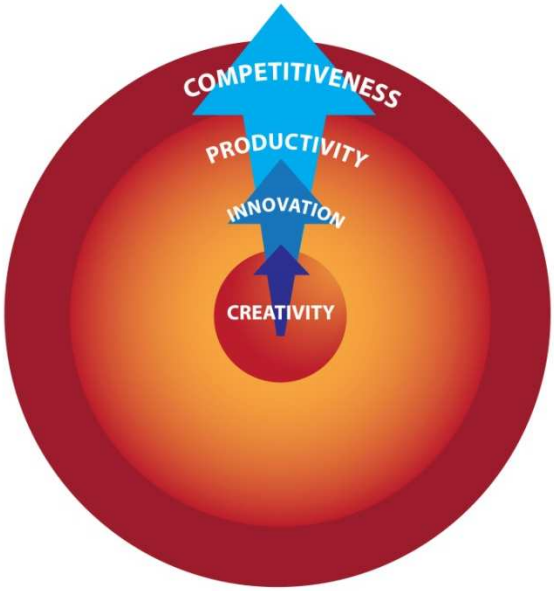
This consultation is the next step in the process. Its purpose is to gather diverse regional perspectives on digital literacy to inform the topics and streams for a national forum in February 2011.

This is timely, given that one of the five themes in the Government of Canada's May 2010 digital economy consultation process was "Building Digital Skills for Tomorrow." In their submissions, CIRA, Media Awareness Network, the International Institute for Sustainable Development – and others – highlight the importance of digital literacy skills development as a cornerstone for any national plan for the digital economy.

In its discussion paper, CIRA notes that those same forces that drive the Internet – digital technology, openness and global access – may also facilitate online threats that undermine security and trust. It concludes that if Canada is to take full advantage of the digital economy, the positive aspects of these forces need to be safeguarded and strengthened, and measures that foster greater security and reliability must be implemented. Digital literacy touches on many elements within this approach.

CIRA recommends a Canadian policy framework for the Internet that promotes the Digital Economy Value Chain:

The Digital Economy Value Chain



*The Internet stimulates human **creativity** with new technologies, outlets and opportunities; this leads to **innovation** in products, services and processes; which improves **productivity** for individuals and businesses; and boosts their **competitiveness** in the global digital economy.*

Within this framework, digital literacy is positioned as being essential for achieving these benchmarks.

CIRA also points out the importance of developing policy that acknowledges the user-driven nature of the Internet which, unlike traditional communications mediums, has evolved not from the top down but through bottom-up, consensus-based decision-making. It is in this spirit that we are seeking to bring together a wide variety of stakeholders from various sectors to inform policy development.

As an invitee to the regional consultation in (City) we would like you to consider – professionally and personally – what are the burning issues that Canadian policy-makers need to consider relating to the Internet and the skills needed by Canadians to maximize its potential? This might include:

1. What are the skills that are needed in a digital society?
    - For the general public?
    - For children and youth?
    - For workers and learners?
    - For vulnerable populations?

2. What are the issues and barriers?
3. What is needed to ensure that all Canadians have opportunities to develop and apply digital skills?

    - What are the needs of various sectors, organizations, and stakeholders?
    - Who is responsible for digital literacy skills development?
    - What are the critical challenges?
    - How can these challenges be addressed?
    - What successful models might be implemented?

Digital Literacy and the Internet

We begin from the premise that the benefits of the Internet and digital technology touch every aspect of society and the economy, including the following:

- A digitally literate population is more innovative and creative.
- Digital literacy enhances opportunities for employment and productivity.
- Digital literacy promotes adoption and development.
- Digital literacy enables public participation.
- Digital literacy promotes economic and social inclusion.
- Digital literacy supports empowerment and engagement.
- Digital literacy helps mitigate online risk.

The Internet is radically changing traditional ways of life, culture and doing business. It is transforming how we work and learn, how we are entertained, how we communicate and connect, how we engage democratically, and how we access public services, information and opportunities.[1]

At the same time, the Internet is not without its challenges, as nations scramble to address issues relating to access and use, safety and security, commerce and culture, and research and innovation. Strategies to increase literacy levels must account for and address these different challenges. The open and accessible nature of the Internet has made it the incredible driver of creativity and innovation it is today. It is through increased literacy levels that trust in the Internet as a tool for business and social interaction is enhanced.

It is clearly understood that digitally literate populations will be a driving force in 21st century economies and societies. A fundamental question, then, is *what is digital literacy, and how best can it be developed and supported*?

Given the wide range of abilities that fall under the digital literacy umbrella, there is no single, universal definition. Digital literacy is a fairly new concept that merges capabilities

[1] OfCom (March 2009). *Report of the Digital Britain Media Literacy Working Group*, pg. 13. http://stakeholders.ofcom.org.uk/binaries/research/media-literacy/digitalbritain.pdf

relating not only to technological know-how and intellectual competencies, but also ethics and responsible citizenship.[2] Digital literacy is more than knowing how to use a computer—it is how people make, understand and share meaning in a digital context. As such, it incorporates a wide range of interrelated skills that traditionally fall under literacies such as computer or information and communications technologies (ICT) literacy, technological literacy, information literacy, media literacy, visual literacy, communication literacy, and moral and social literacies.[3]

Despite having no single, universal definition, the concept of digital literacy is generally built on three principles: *the skills and knowledge to* ***use*** a variety of digital media software applications and hardware devices*; the ability to critically* ***understand*** digital media content and applications; and *the knowledge and capacity to* ***create*** with digital technology.[4]

Use, understand and create are the three verbs that characterize the active competencies of a digitally literate individual.[5]

Use – represents the technical fluency needed to engage with computers and the Internet. This skill set forms the basis for deeper digital literacy development and is becoming increasingly important as media and communication platforms converge. Essential technical skills include the ability to use computer programs such as word processors, web browsers, e-mail, and other communication tools. In order to develop these skills, Canadians must have access to and be comfortable using equipment and knowledge resources such as broadband services, computers, software tools, Internet search engines, and online databases.

Understand – is the ability to comprehend, contextualize and evaluate digital media. It is the critical understanding that enables individuals to reap the benefits – *and* lessen the risks – of living in a digital age. This includes: understanding how to protect privacy online and authenticate Web sites and services; realizing how online content and applications can affect our perceptions, beliefs, and feelings about the world around us; and, appreciating one's rights and responsibilities in a digital society. This skill set also prepares us for a knowledge economy through development of skills for finding, assessing and effectively using online information to communicate, collaborate and problem-solve individually and collaboratively.

Create – is the ability to develop online content and effectively communicate using a variety of digital media tools. Creation with digital media means more than the ability to use a word processor or write an e-mail: it includes the ability to adapt communication to various contexts and audiences; to create and communicate using rich media such as images, video, and sound; and, to effectively and responsibly engage with interactive user-generated content such as blogs and discussion forums, video and photo sharing, social

[2] Tornero, José (2004). *Promoting Digital Literacy: Final Report.* European Commission for Education and Culture.
[3] Martin, Allan and Bawden, David (2008) in Lankshear, C., & Knobel, M. (Eds.), *Digital Literacies: Concepts, Policies and Practices*. Peter Lang: New York.
[4] National Broadband Plan Connecting America Section 9.3, Digital Britain Media Literacy Working Group Section 3.16, Australia's Digital Economy: Future Directions p. 44
[5] Definition provided © Media Awareness Network.

gaming, and other forms of social media. The ability to create with digital media ensures that Canadians are active contributors to the digital society.

In developing policy for digital literacy, consideration is given to the connected competencies for different segments of the population. This includes the digital life skills that are needed by everybody; the employment-related digital competencies that are needed by most citizens; and, the more advanced creative and technical abilities that are needed to fuel innovation.[6]

In particular, digital life skills are seen as being essential to inclusion in digital society. These are the foundational skills that build the confidence, motivation, and ability for safe and effective technology use.

Acquisition of digital literacy skills for all segments of the population is an ongoing process. Depending on the needs and situation of the individual, this learning can be developed through K-12 and post-secondary education, occupational training, self study and/or social interaction.

Evidence and best practice indicate that effective implementation of digital literacy programs should take place in four interlocking spheres of influence: Education, Job Training, Government, and Public Awareness and Community Programs.

- Education at all stages of life is central to any digital literacy strategy – especially for youth. This makes Canada's education system a primary location for giving young Canadians the critical and technological skills they need.
- When it comes to job training, even employees who are familiar with digital media technologies such as the Internet may not have appropriate skills for the workplace. For those who do, continual learning and re-learning must also be supported to keep pace with technology as it evolves.
- Federal, provincial, and territorial governments have a vested interest in supporting digital literacy. As public services and political dialogue continue to migrate online, citizens who don't have digital literacy skills are at risk of becoming disenfranchised and excluded.[7] As well, aside from the economic and social benefits of online government programs, the use of the Internet as a public safety tool is becoming central to our communications systems.
- Unlike schools-based programs, developing digital literacy initiatives for a diverse general public poses more challenges. This is why public and community-based initiatives are central in national digital strategies around the world.

If we are to develop comprehensive and effective programs, we need to hear from all stakeholders. We invite you to join us in defining the needs of Canadians in a digital society by helping us better understand the unique situations in which your organizations operate and your perspectives on how digital literacy should be addressed by policy makers.

[6] Morris, E. (2009) Independent Review of ICT User Skills. Department for Business, Innovation and Skills. Government of the UK.
http://www.dius.gov.uk/~/media/3F79A51589404CFDB62F3DA0DEBA69A1.ashx
[7] Report of the Digital Britain Media Literacy Working Group Section 2.6