Regulating the internet – What role the humanities? – Kelly O-Neill

On March 31, the Max Bell Foundation will host the Right Honourable Beverly McLaughlin, McGill's Beaverbrook Chair in Media, Ethics & Communications-- Taylor Owen, and journalist Andrew Coyne to discuss whether the government should regulate the internet. **"Can Democracy Survive Big Tech?"** is an important question: "The rise of mis-and dis-information, the deepening of political polarization, and the amplification of extremist content and incitements to violence, have spurred governments around the world to explore legislative action to regulate online platforms and the internet more broadly".

As an educator, I'll listen to the conversation wondering, *what are the skillsets that equip policy makers to make these kinds of decisions?* Clearly digital literacy has not permeated our broader society. In 2018, 57% of Canadian internet users reported experiencing a cyber security incident. An incident means the service provider had inadequate privacy/protection; the user lacked the skills to navigate transactions safely; or both. How do we skill up an entire society?

Since 2018 the Government of Canada has offered courses out of its Digital Academy for federal public servants that "introduce foundational digital mindsets, skills & tools to help public servants succeed". This is good for the public servants – how does it parlay into public *service?* The open data movement and the feds' commitment to Canadians' equitable access to high speed internet are gestures that can improve our knowledges and understandings. On the flip side we see the destructive, reductionist power of data when used against democratic ideals, like the Chinese social credit score system.

The threat of tech to democracy becomes more real, the further decision makers are from the very things they're deciding. The panels of experts advising on these issues will often be from academe. But from where exactly?

Plato said that one of the penalties for refusing to participate in politics is that you end up being governed by your inferiors. The threat in this case is that technocrats and business moguls are controlling the narrative, because our humanists lack the vocabulary. Now is the time for the creatives: the arts, the humanities – to quit the in-fighting around the evolution of the digital humanities and to embrace the role that is rightly theirs.

While the discipline is contentious within university politics for a number of legitimate reasons, the outputs of the digital humanities are incredible contributions to social progress and our understanding of the worlds we inhabit. One of the original projects, Old Bailey, is a fully searchable edition of the largest body of texts detailing the lives of non-elite people ever published. It contains transcripts from 197,745 criminal trials held at London's central criminal court and has created an unparalleled resource for those in justice studies, criminology, historians, and genealogists, including people tracing their family's lineage. Applying tech to scholarly activities inherently requires an interdisciplinarity that employers and community partners want from university graduates. It future-proofs those in less vocational-specific

programs while still promoting education that develops characters and feeds souls. It generates graduates who can contribute to these important dialogues from a humane perspective, and technological understanding.

Here in Canada, the UofA, UVic, Ryerson, Guelph, UofT, Carleton, Brock and Western are all working on important projects in the digital humanities. Whether or not these skunkworks-like units will gather steam, or even want to integrate this learning into a general education, is yet to be seen. In a COVID-19 era it's in vogue to talk about graduating students with digital fluency. Let's see if our professoriate can be brave enough to go first.