

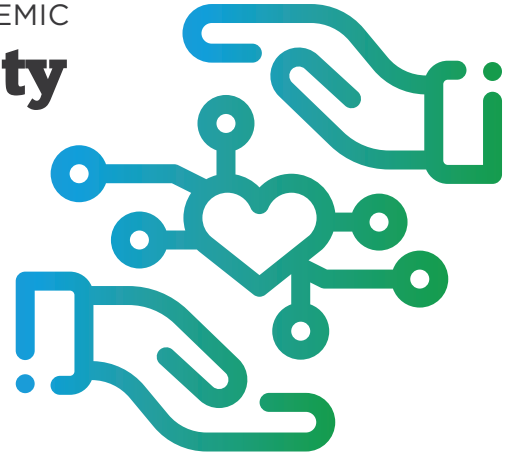
CALL TO ACTION IN RESPONSE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

# Reducing Digital Inequality

## #DigitalCloseness Campaign During a Time of Social Distancing

[#DigitalCloseness](#)

[WWW.MEDIAETHICS.CA/DIGITALCLOSENESS](http://WWW.MEDIAETHICS.CA/DIGITALCLOSENESS)



In response to the **#COVID19** pandemic, we all have the responsibility to ensure everyone in our communities can connect to the Internet. Facing the social consequences of the coronavirus outbreak requires acknowledging digital inequality and building bridges to overcome barriers to digital inclusion.

In 2011, the United Nations' Human Rights Council defined the internet as an indispensable tool for realizing a range of human rights, and recommended that Internet access should be a priority for all States.

**While facing this global emergency, Internet access must be conceived as a basic human right, necessary to the quality of life, – everyone is entitled to access to it.**

It is our view at the University of Toronto's Media Ethics Lab at St. Michael's College that nobody should be left behind.

In a state of emergency and self-isolation, we all can do our part to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, both in cities and remote areas, have access to the Internet to thrive.

**While practicing #SocialDistancing, we need to balance this isolation with #DigitalCloseness – for everyone.**

This **#CallToAction** aims to accelerate progress towards **#DigitalInclusion** and foster a coordinated effort across all sectors. Public institutions and public health are *de facto*, but we believe that the Private Sector, organizations of the Civil Society, and Private Citizens can do more toward reducing digital inequality amid the coronavirus pandemic. Discover how!



**Private Sector**



**Civil Society**



**Private Citizens**



# Private Sector

The state of emergency due to COVID-19 has led to significant impacts on businesses and industries globally. While many are despairing the return of a bear market, and a possible recession, businesses are also poised for action, change, and opportunity. In our plan to reinvigorate efforts around digital inequality, we're considering private businesses as primary agents of change in this time of crisis. The sector can have a profound impact in advancing connectivity and below we've mapped out several possibilities to consider.



## Telecom companies waiving overage fees on residential and mobile Internet.

Social distancing may create a significant jump in the digital bandwidth consumers use. Telecoms can help ease this shift by temporarily waiving overage fees on residential and mobile Internet plans.



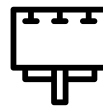
## Grocery delivery businesses accepting orders via phone.

Grocery deliveries, beneficial in the way they minimize person-to-person contact (and hence the likelihood of spreading the coronavirus), may be inaccessible to many elderly customers, unaccustomed to the service. Businesses in the industry could consider launching and promoting a new telephone hotline (an ordering assistant), coupled with discounts to attract and serve new elderly customers.



## Telecom companies forgiving late payments and keeping customers connected.

Maintaining connectivity is essential for many to continue work and social lives in these extraordinary times. Telecoms can consider forgiving late payments in order to support customers in staying active online.



## Billboard companies repurposing public billboards for the public good.

Billboard companies could increase free access for public good campaigns (i.e. non-commercial and non-political) related to the coronavirus: spreading awareness of local options for digital access, transmitting pertinent info about COVID-19, and broadcasting positive messages to reinforce feelings of hope. It's the information revolution we need: implemented on a large scale, especially focusing on low-income neighborhoods, and remote and isolated communities.



## Small, centrally-located businesses extending Internet access via free Wi-Fi hotspots.

With restaurants, bars, and coffee shops closing in many towns and cities, millions who depend on remote access are left without those all-important WiFi signals. In response, small, local businesses could consider advertising and delivering free WiFi access to those without it.



## Major banks promoting telephone banking for those encumbered by (or without access to) digital banking tools.

While banks provide numerous financial tools via online banking, this is unfortunately not a blanket solution for customers in self-isolation due to the coronavirus; many simply don't have the means to check their balances online. Major banks could consider promoting telephone banking assistants to ensure all users (irrespective of Internet access) have connectivity with the banking tools they need.



## Online news publishers suspending paywalls on COVID19-related stories.

While good journalism can be a powerful tool in dampening the spread of the coronavirus, exposure to misinformation, mock science, fear-mongering, or worse, the Goldilocks view "that everything will be okay," are dangerous distractions. Reputable online news sources can consider opening up all stories about COVID-19 for all readers, in order to promote efforts to "flatten the curve".





# Civil Society Organizations

In a state of emergency due to the spread to coronavirus, civil society organizations – community-based groups, not-for-profit and charitable organizations, and professional associations – have the power to raise awareness about digital inclusion, to ensure that the rights and interests of the full breadth of communities are included and have their voices heard and opinions equally valued.



## Community groups can assist in filling connectivity gaps affecting the overall responses to COVID-19, through:

- Setting up and facilitating call centers to assist elderly, low income, and homeless individuals in seeking out essential goods and services.
- Maintaining digital and phone-accessible directories, including live updates for local service openings and closures, news, and public service announcements.
- Channel the most up-to-date information on coronavirus protection, from government, public health, and other science-based sources.



## Charitable and not-for-profit organizations can assist in empowering marginalized groups, through:

- Recognizing and responding to the spillover effects resulting from library closures, such as lack of digital connectivity during working hours, reduced access to stacks, media, and knowledgeable librarians, and lack of printing or other services.
- Introducing free WiFi hotspots in appropriate public spaces (responding to reductions in connectivity).
- Assisting in facilitating/advocating for a technology loaning program, offering laptops or portable devices (responding to the absence of PCs in public libraries).
- Encouraging donations of functional spare tablets/laptops that can be given to individuals or families during this time of need.



## Cultural and artistic organizations and institutions can assist in providing free and accessible digital resources to keep everyone busy at home while practicing social distancing, through:

- Opening up digital archives, organizing virtual tours and virtual exhibits.
- Posting free online courses, and sharing meaningful, creative, entertaining and educational alike.



## Civil Society Organizations can assist in fostering awareness of alternative food deliveries, i.e. via social, non-profit organizations.

While food delivery is a booming business (and rapidly growing with the COVID-19 outbreak), several user groups may be hesitant to sign up for various reasons, despite the inherent benefits of the delivery model for minimizing transmissions of the virus. Barriers to using traditional food delivery services may be financial, or simply lack of awareness.

- To overcome lack of awareness, non-profit food delivery organizations can increase marketing to new customer segments (i.e. those in need of help), while those already participating in alternative food delivery networks are encouraged to share their stories via social media and encourage friends and neighbors to join.
- Additional efforts to increase awareness could be led by tech-savvy individuals, through creating online directories, websites and phone services aimed at linking disadvantaged groups to local community food options.



## Professional associations, scholarly societies, groups of artists or activists, social justice organizations can assist in raising awareness and encouraging actions tackling digital inequality, through:

- Generating a buzz on social media.
- Challenging digital ubiquity as an operating assumption.
- Continuing to advocate for leadership in the effort toward ensuring everyone can be enabled by digital connectivity.





# Private Citizens

While facing this global emergency, Internet access must be conceived as a basic human right, necessary to the quality of life — everyone is entitled to access to it. We all can do our part to ensure that all individuals and communities, including the most disadvantaged, have access to the internet, for education, work, personal health, as well as for pleasure — nobody should be left behind. While keeping social distancing in mind, good digital citizens can be allies with elderly, disabled, underprivileged neighbors.



## Open WiFi

Have an unlimited full-speed data plan? Consider sharing your WiFi connection with your close neighbors, if they don't have one.



## Device Lending

Have an extra device like a tablet? Consider lending it to your neighbor. Kids are at home, they may need it for their homework.



## Order Placement

To place an online order for grocery or pharmacy delivery can be very difficult for non-tech-savvy people. Consider helping others do online shopping or place an order for the necessary goods.



## Neighbourhood Network

Want to feel more locally connected? Consider building a neighborhood network to foster supportive digital relationships with others, so that nobody is left behind — elderly people will feel less lonely.



## Share and Spread Awareness

And finally, share this Call to Action and spread awareness about how to overcome barriers to digital inclusion

[#DigitalCloseness](#) [#DigitalInclusion](#) [#DigitalInequality](#) [#DigitalJustice](#) [#COVID19](#)

[WWW.MEDIAETHICS.CA/DIGITALCLOSENESS](http://www.mediaethics.ca/digitalcloseness)

## A message to our readers, friends and community

We created the Media Ethics Lab with the hope of encouraging ongoing discussions about media ecosystem and human impact. In theory, the two are inseparable. But it's also impossible to move forward without lived experience, new ideas, and actively shining a light on possible roads ahead. As news of the COVID-19 continues to break, we're staying on the lookout for bright ideas and opportunities for advancing digital inclusion. While safely practicing the recommended social distancing, we're going to continue posting updates on the issue.

If you'd like to share a thought or something interesting you read/watched/dreamed-up recently, please drop us a line via [info@mediaethics.ca](mailto:info@mediaethics.ca)



Established in 2019 at St. Michael's College in the University of Toronto, the Media Ethics Lab is a research hub that studies the ways that digital media practices and emerging technologies are marked by ethical issues and decisive political, societal and cultural questions. Serving as a focal point for information related to academic programs, research, and public policy initiatives in the field, the Media Ethics Lab fosters open research, integrated learning, and civic engagement, to explore the potential that information and communication technologies hold for enacting positive social change.

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