

SUMMARY REPORT OF #CSocD59 SIDE-EVENT

"Behind the Screen: Grassroots Experiences Accessing Social Services and Education in a Digital World"

Monday, February 15th, 2021 - 1.15pm - 2.30pm EST

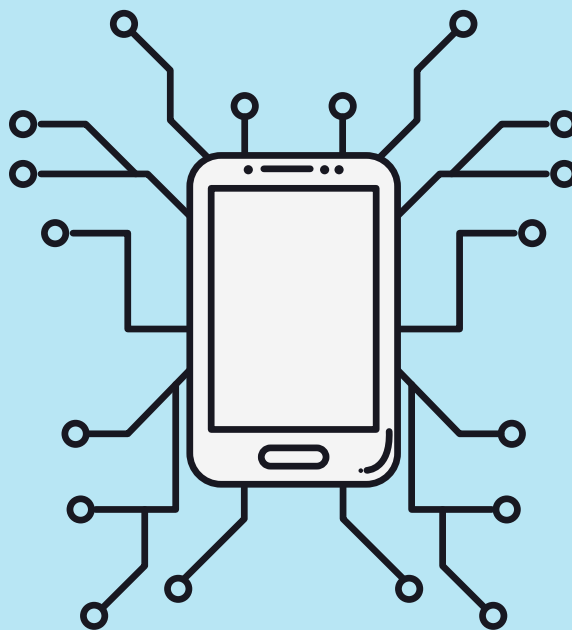


Tammy Mayes
Parent activist with
ATD Fourth World in the UK

A Panel Discussion Featuring:



Christiaan van Veen
Director of the Digital Welfare State
and Human Rights Project at the Center
for Human Rights and Global Justice at
NYU School of Law



Joongil Shin
Second Secretary of the
Permanent Mission of the
Republic of Korea to the United
Nations



Esther Rodriguez
Activist from the Apache
Nation in New Mexico, ATD
Fourth World USA



Moderator: Virginia Eubanks
Associate Professor of Political Science at SUNY
Author of "Automating Inequality: How High-
Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor"

OPENING REMARKS

Moderator, Virginia Eubanks

Associate Professor of Political Science at SUNY; Author of "Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools, Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor"



Following an introduction by ATD's Suraiya Foss-Phillips, moderator Virginia Eubanks expanded upon her work at the intersection of digital technology and social well-being.

In addition to her work as a Professor of Political Science at SUNY, Virginia Eubanks has authored two books on this topic: "Digital Dead End: Fighting for Social Justice in the Information Age" and "Automating Inequality: How High-Tech Tools Profile, Police, and Punish the Poor". Among her research findings, she discovered two primary challenges, a lack of access to digital tools and an over-accessing of personal information by digital technology, especially in the welfare and criminal justice systems.

Virginia noted that as governments digitize services, intending to increase efficiency and reduce bias, discrimination and dehumanization often ensue. The panel brought forward perspectives of different stakeholders involved and/or impacted by the digitization of government services, sharing best practices, insights, and the impacts on human rights and dignity.

FAMILY TIES WILL OVERCOME THE OBSTACLES OF ONLINE LEARNING

Esther Rodriquez

Activist from the Apache Nation in New Mexico,
ATD Fourth World USA



"My grandchildren all know that I have their back. I think family ties are helping them to get through their challenges"

Through a video intervention, activist Esther Rodriquez shared her experience of supporting her three grandchildren navigate the challenges of online learning due to the Covid-19 pandemic. After the school provided devices to the children, the cost of wifi access still posed a barrier. Esther reached out, and the elementary school gave her a hotspot, lowering their bill.

Despite technology enabling her grandchildren to continue school, online learning still lacks the personalized attention students need, such as a Special Education curriculum for one granddaughter, a faster-paced class for the other, and college counseling and scholarship resources for her twelfth-grade grandson. In addition to technical difficulties with the internet and online platforms, Esther noticed how the lack of individual attention made it more difficult for students to stay engaged and motivated to continue school.

However, Esther remains resilient and proudly continues to support her grandchildren and her community.

BRINGING HUMANITY BACK TO THE CENTER OF FAMILY SERVICES

Tammy Mayes

Parent Activist with ATD Fourth World UK



“How can they make decisions during lockdown about where a child lives? Some parents didn’t even know who was on the call due to having such a small screen...In one case, the internet kept cutting out, and the judge didn’t know who was on the call!”

Activist Tammy Mayes delivered a critical message when speaking about the realities parents endure with the online UK Family Court System—instated due to Covid-19 measures. With the experience of the in-person system herself and working with the Parents Families and Allies Network (PFAN), Tammy’s words served as a poignant reminder of the inhumane treatment families face.

Recently the Nuffield Family Justice Observatory consulted PFAN to work with a group of families, interviewing them and synthesizing the challenges of the online system. As one of the PFAN parent activists carrying out the research, Tammy shared some of these stories. Many families felt their hearings were unjust, lacking the personal and humane connection essential to such intimate proceedings.

Many parents did not have adequate digital literacy skills let alone an appropriate device to attend their hearings. The price of internet access and devices are substantial barriers, further compounded by concerns of protecting families’ privacy and children that may be listening in the home. Tammy made a strong case for hearings to be moved offline except in situations demanding swift action and posing extreme danger to the child.

GOVERNMENTS AND AGENCIES SHOULD INVESTIGATE AND IMPROVE DIGITIZED SERVICES TO ENSURE THAT INDIVIDUALS IN POVERTY BENEFIT AS WELL

Christiaan van Veen

Director of the Digital Welfare State and Human Rights Project
at the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at NYU
School of Law



"[We need to] get serious about investigating how poor people can benefit from the digital world and potential risks that involve their lives."

Echoing the experiences of Esther and Tammy, Christiaan van Veen delved into the findings of his work both as Director of the Digital Welfare State and Human Rights Project at NYU and his prior experiences in the field.

Christiaan noted the confines of much existing digital rights work, which often focuses on the impacts of these technologies on the middle class. The effects of digitalizing the welfare state on individuals in poverty are overlooked. If an earnest attempt to learn how these citizens are affected isn't made, then impoverished groups will not see any of the intended benefits of the services. This lack of interest by the state leads to grievous design flaws in the systems, neglecting the lived experiences of system users.

Christiaan insisted that governments abandon the mindset that everything digital is better and instead adopt a holistic approach that places the human experience—particularly that of the most vulnerable groups—at the forefront of the design process.

ACCESSIBILITY AND DIGITAL LITERACY, TWO KEYS TO BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

Mr. Joongil Shin

**Second Secretary to the Permanent Mission of the Republic of
Korea to the United Nations**



Mr. Joongil Shin presented the cornerstones of South Korea's decades-long vision and successes in bridging the digital divide, accessibility, and digital literacy.

Through personal experiences working in Timor-Leste, Mr. Shin witnessed the potential that extensive broadband infrastructure holds to unite a nation and overcome numerous societal challenges. South Korea—a nation with a 96% internet penetration rate—is a testament to this. In 1984, the South Korean government created ICT (information and communications technology) citizen education centers. The government established that nationwide broadband is a government responsibility and set out to extend broadband connection and ICT services to the most rural and vulnerable groups. A series of initiatives over the past three decades, “Cyber Korea 21”, “e-Korea Vision”, and the “Broadband Convergence Network”, to name a few, succeeded in bringing internet access to 91.7% of Koreans in vulnerable groups by 2019.

Mr. Shin noted that these advances were achieved with strong citizen collaboration and private-public partnerships, enabling the expansion of services such as e-learning platforms, including accommodations and support for those with disabilities. Additionally, the government has employed an essential tool, the Digital Divide Index (DDI), to measure the progress and outcomes of policies to improve them and ensure optimal benefit to all citizens.

"Technology without digital literacy is meaningless. We need partnerships to commit to empowering citizens to access services online for a more inclusive society."



Q&A AND CHAT DISCUSSION HIGHLIGHTS

- "To be able to take advantage of digital technology and receive important emails coming from the job center or other public agencies, you must not be cut off the electricity or telephone or internet access (...) How to make Governments understand that changing technologies do not happen without us living in poverty?"
- "Digital technology is a tool for humans. It does not replace humans. We should not abandon the human interactive ways of solving complex problems. (...) We need to build a relation with social workers coming to your home."
- "The use of algorithm to make social decisions most likely will be biased and determinist, as the algorithm is built on data collected with usual bias."
- "All the well-meaning policies in the world when imposed on people, won't address the real issues."
- "Nothing About Us Without Us - the narrative on 'experts' needs to be rewritten."
- "I believe parent advocacy is the way forward. Parents have been through the system. (...) Professionals are considered to know everything, and families don't. But it's the families that are living with the children 24/7, staying up all night".
- "How do we make these new technological tools a means of liberation for the poorest as well and especially for their children?"

