

GEN  AI.

FORUM REPORT

YOUTH

PERSPEC-
TIVES

ON AI
& AGE

ASSURANCE



HALIFAX, 03.27.26 — 03.29.26

Youth voices,
AI futures

GEN Z AI.



"The internet is a vital fixture in how young Canadians live, learn, and connect. Yet as national calls for digital age assurance regulation on platforms and AI systems intensify, safeguarding youth online has become an urgent priority.

The final forum on AI and Age Assurance addressed this multifaceted subject by drawing on insights from previous forums. Participants explored the complex challenges of age assurance and new ways of protecting young Canadians' experiences online beyond restricting their access. This marked the end of the youth-led deliberative process of Gen(Z)AI."

-Nonso Morah

*Report Author and Lead Youth Fellow,
Gen(Z)AI Forum on AI & Age Assurance*



Centre for MEDIA,
TECHNOLOGY
and DEMOCRACY

The Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy is an interdisciplinary research organization housed at the Max Bell School of Public Policy at McGill University. Its work is dedicated to understanding and responding to the social, political, and policy challenges posed by the evolving information ecosystem and digital technologies.



DoT

Dialogue on Technology Project
SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue

The Dialogue on Technology Project (DoT) is the SFU Morris J. Wosk Centre for Dialogue's flagship initiative on technology and artificial intelligence. Drawing on the Centre's deep expertise in design, facilitation, consensus building, and conflict engagement, DoT brings together diverse stakeholders—community members, researchers, policymakers, industry, and civil society—to better understand and shape how AI and related technologies are transforming our lives and societies.

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FOREWORD

This report summarizes the fourth and final regional forum of Gen(Z)AI's national process, held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, on March 27–29, 2026. Focused on AI and age assurance, the forum invited young people to grapple with one of the most difficult emerging questions in digital governance: how to cultivate safer digital environments for children and young people while respecting privacy, autonomy and access to online participation. Participants articulated concern about the particular harms posed by AI platforms to children and young people, but also emphasized the risks of AI-enabled age assurance as a response to those digital harms.

In Halifax, participants expressed deep concern about the privacy implications of AI-enabled biometric age verification, and were especially attuned to the risks of normalizing surveillance-based approaches to online safety. They likewise challenged the assumption that restructuring access to social media is a sufficient substitute for building safer platforms, and raised urgent questions about the unintended harms of displacing young people to unmoderated or less-visible spaces. Throughout the process they held firm that online participation, at any age, should not come at the cost of personal agency and safety.

The recommendations that emerged from the Halifax Forum call for privacy-protective and design-centred approaches to age assurance that take their risks seriously. This view reflects those

of a generation that is neither naive about the harms that can occur in digital spaces, nor are willing to accept invasive or opaque governance as the only available response.

As with the rest of the Gen(Z)AI process, the insights developed in Halifax will not stand alone. As we write this, the policy recommendations drafted through this Forum are being shared with thousands of other young people around the country, via Make.org's civil dialogue platform, helping to test, refine, and build broad consensus around key questions in Canadian digital governance. On April 30, 2026, many of Gen(Z)AI's participants will reconvene in Ottawa to present their final recommendations to ministers, MPs, Senators, policymakers, and other key figures in Canada's AI policy landscape.

Across all four Forums, Gen(Z)AI has continually demonstrated that democratic innovation is possible when people are treated not as passive subjects of technological change, but as legitimate partners in shaping its governance. From chatbots to social media bans, young people are already living with the consequences of the decisions – and lack thereof – made about AI, platforms, and digital life. Their experiences, values and political judgement are essential to building governance frameworks that are credible, effective, and robust.

—Helen A. Hayes & Fergus Linley-Mota



EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Gen(Z)AI is a first-of-its-kind youth assembly that focuses on artificial intelligence (AI), bringing together 100 young Canadians aged 17–23 from across the country to contribute directly to discussions on the future of AI governance in Canada. The initiative is jointly organized by the [Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy](#) and the [Dialogue on Technology Project](#), in partnership with [Mila](#), Quebec’s AI Institute and Make.org.

This report outlines the purpose, methodology and key findings from the fourth and final Gen(Z)AI forum, held in Halifax and focused on AI and Age Assurance. The Halifax forum was one of four regional forums, alongside sessions on chatbots, information integrity, and data privacy. Over three days, participants engaged with expert speakers, took part in workshops, and deliberated on policy challenges and opportunities related to AI and Age Assurance. A consolidated final report, detailing the policy recommendations from all four regional forums, will be released on April 30, 2026 marking the conclusion of the project.

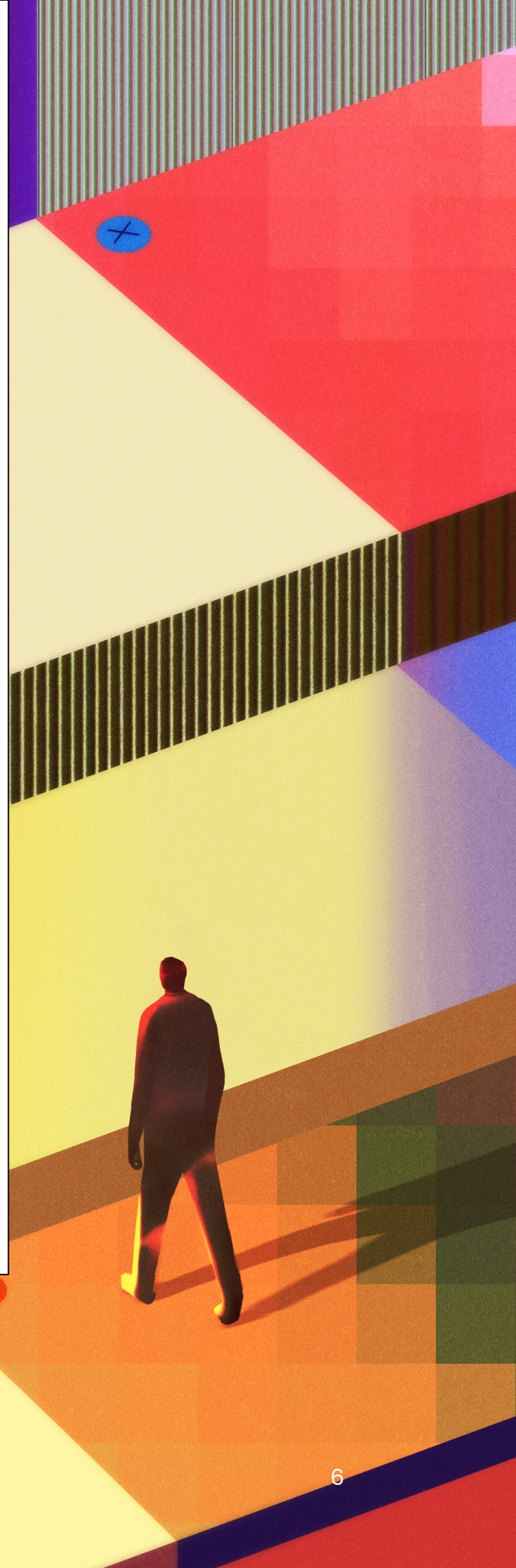
Forum Focus: AI & Age Assurance

The final forum of Gen(Z)AI examined the various approaches employed by online operators to verify the ages of their users. Debates around age assurance have been steadily moving to the forefront of Canada’s legislative agenda. These mechanisms seek to restrict younger users’ access to potentially explicit, harmful, and inappropriate content, often through AI-based age assessments conducted by third-party verification platforms (AVP). A [2024 consultation](#) by the Office of the Privacy Commission of Canada (OPC) found that the implementation of age assurance technologies necessitates clear commitments to proportionality, data minimization and safety-by-design standards.

Participants at the Halifax forum expressed dissatisfaction with the state of existing age assurance technologies and their impacts on privacy and anonymity. Throughout deliberations, several areas of concern were raised: an overreliance on restrictive measures rather than on addressing structural deficiencies; limited domestic enforcement standards; and insufficient transparency regarding how personal verification data is collected, stored,

and used. Notably, many participants raised strong objections to the normalization of invasive identification and personal data collection, even when well-intentioned. They felt that these practices set alarming precedents for how future generations are expected to engage online and that they reinforce harmful surveillance practices. Participants emphasized that the values they deemed important to their digital lives, including accountability, security, safety, service, well-being, and adaptability, affirming that online participation, at any age, should not come at the cost of personal agency and safety.

The final forum combined expert briefings, preparatory resources, interactive workshops and deliverable policymaking sessions. Participants were encouraged to develop a comprehensive and nuanced understanding of what age assurance entails. Perspectives on age verification practices, risk factors and global industry standards were shared as they deepened their comprehension and worked collaboratively to identify priority concerns and policy directives.



Participants identified two core issues of concern, captured in the following issue statements:

AI-enabled age assurance technologies undermine privacy and digital safety by exposing users to potentially harmful storage and use of their data.

The use of verification technologies to restrict young people's access to social media, AI platforms, and online community spaces increases the risk that restricted users could be displaced to unmoderated and dangerous platforms.

Generative AI platforms pose unique risks to children, including by increasing their access to harmful content and negatively impacting their cognitive and social development

In response, policy recommendations to address concerns related to AI and Age Assurance, fell into the following broad categories:

Reactive policy mechanisms: These include policy tools that mandate compliance measures and remedies for harms caused by opaque and unsafe biometric data standards.

Design and system-level mechanisms: These policies address harm before it emerges by enforcing age-appropriate online safeguards and adaptive features.

Participatory and literacy-building mechanisms: These include policies that leverage educational awareness, public campaigns and literacy-building initiatives.

This is the last forum of the Gen(Z)AI engagements. To conclude, youth-developed policy recommendations will be shared with thousands of other young Canadians through Make.org's civic dialogue platform to support broader deliberation and consensus-building. Participants will reconvene in a hybrid setting in Ottawa on April 30, 2026, to present their final recommendations to government officials, policymakers, civil society organizations, and other relevant stakeholders.

INTRODUCTION

Gen(Z)AI engages 100 young Canadians between the ages of 17 and 23 in a national program focused on artificial intelligence and its growing influence on Canada's social and democratic landscape. The program is jointly led by the [Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy](#) and the [Dialogue on Technology Project](#), in collaboration with [Mila, Quebec's AI Institute](#) and [Make.org](#).

Age assurance refers to the various approaches used by online operators to verify the ages of their users. These frameworks are broadly categorized as restrictive or design-based. Restrictive mechanisms, commonly referred to as age-gating, encompass three distinct approaches: age verification, age estimation and self-declaration. In contrast, design-based frameworks focus on platform architecture and specific product features, such as addictive algorithms and opaque opt-out mechanisms.

According to a [nationwide survey](#), 95% of young Canadians aged 13–17 actively use social media as their primary form of communication. Coupled with 72% of young users also [reporting](#) a reliance on AI chatbots for academic, personal productivity, and companionship, digital tools have permeated multiple dimensions of youth life. While convenient and highly

accessible, AI-powered tools and chatbots pose significant risks for younger users, particularly during their formative years. Exposure to harmful content, misinformation, synthetic media and exploitative algorithmic recommender systems can have adverse effects on users' cognitive, social, and physical health. Moreover, as generative AI features become integrated with traditional search engines and social media platforms, the capacity for critical digital literacy becomes an increasingly central policy consideration.

This raises fundamental questions about governance, including who should have access to social media and AI, and how governments might protect the most vulnerable users. Internationally, jurisdictions have adopted divergent age assurance frameworks. From comprehensive bans restricting access for minors (as seen in [Australia](#)) to child-centric design codes that assign greater responsibility on platform operators (as seen in the [EU](#), [UK](#) and [US](#)). These approaches reflect the absence of a globally accepted standard and identify a domestic regulatory gap. Despite growing public calls for a federal age assurance mandate, there is no consensus within Canada on the appropriate age threshold for

accessing social media platforms or AI-powered tools. This leaves an opportunity for legislators, as they deliberate on the validity of age-assurance technologies and AI-related restrictions, to centre the voices and perspectives of young Canadians existing at the digital frontline.

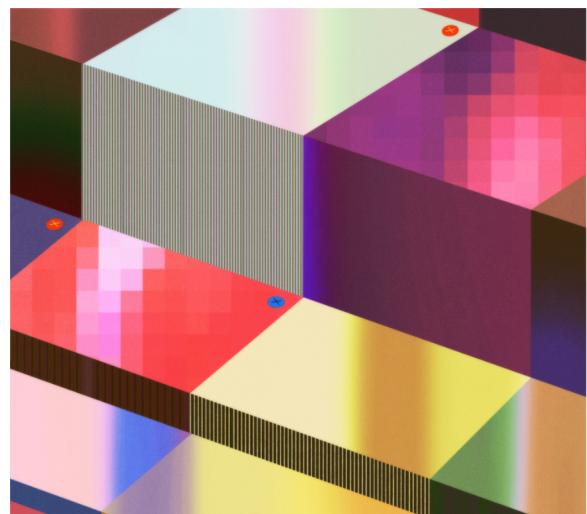
FORUM OBJECTIVES

The third Gen(Z)AI forum on data privacy aimed to:

1. Inform young Canadians on the nuances attached to age assurance as a policy mechanism;
2. Identify the issues and misconceptions held by young Canadians on age assurance technologies;
3. Empower youth to view their own experiences as useful lenses to engage in policymaking; and
4. Develop youth-driven recommendations on AI, both as a feature embedded within biometric age verification systems and as a tool that can potentially expose younger users to harm.

METHODOLOGY

To ensure participants entered the process with the foundational knowledge needed to engage meaningfully, they were provided with a policy package in advance of the forum. This included a logistics and welcome guide outlining how a citizen's assembly works and what to expect over the three-day forum, including how participant input would shape the final outcomes of the Gen(Z)AI project. Participants also received a resource pack containing a technical overview of the topic, a short literature review, a scan of the Canadian policy landscape and relevant international approaches, and an introduction to core policymaking concepts and policy tools. These materials were designed to be accessible and digestible, laying a shared foundation for learning and informed discussion.



As with all Gen(Z)AI forums, the fourth forum followed a hybrid participation model. On the first day, all 100 participants gathered virtually to hear from three expert speakers:

- **Emily Laidlaw**, Canada
Research Chair in Cybersecurity Law, University of Calgary Law
- **Michael Geist**, Canada
Research Chair in Internet and e-Commerce Law, University of Ottawa Law
- **Marie-Ève Nadeau**, Head of International Affairs, 5Rights Foundation

In combination, the three speakers offered a broad and balanced overview of different age assurance approaches, risks, and principles that have been considered, proposed, and implemented in Canada and by peer jurisdictions. This expert speaker day, combined with the accompanying resource package, provided participants with relevant background information to support informed discussion throughout the forum.

Emily Laidlaw defined how age assurance operates through a legal and ethical framework. Key takeaways included:

- Privacy-protective age assurance regulations cannot

rely solely on blocking mechanisms to safeguard children online.

- Accepting that there is no magic solution to implementing robust and accurate age assurance technologies can help policymakers properly evaluate which layered and proportional approach can create safer and more child-centric online spaces.
- There are several trade-offs and risks that come with every proposed method that must be accounted for. Age assurance must be understood holistically with established principles prioritizing privacy, standardization and proportionality.

Michael Geist explored the implications of restrictive mechanisms and contextualized Canada's political landscape. Key takeaways included:

- Understanding the risks associated with implementing broad and overarching age assurance legislation must be held as equal, if not more, important than developing policies to effectively safeguard user experiences.
- Personal data collected by biometric AI technologies and used by third-party verification providers is often complex and difficult to regulate, as it spans other national jurisdictions. This creates a significant regulatory gap and exposes Canadians to substantial security harm. Age estimation technologies are often prone to inaccuracies,

particularly when assessing users with dark skin tones, non-conforming facial features, and those who exist in the “grey zone” age range (2–3 years below legal age).

Marie-Ève Nadeau explored the approaches taken by international jurisdictions to protect minors online. Key takeaways include:

- Age assurance is not an end in itself and should not be considered a silver bullet to protecting minors online. Rather, it should be combined with platform-based, educational, and societal infrastructures.
- There are several notable legislations across the world, including the UK Age-Appropriate Design Code, the EU Digital Service Act, and Brazil’s Digital ECA, that have developed systematic regulatory protections for children online.
- Companies should be held responsible for safeguarding users’ digital freedom, particularly when they have reasonable grounds to believe children are using their services.

During the second and third days of the forum, the final cohort of Gen(Z)AI participants gathered at the MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance at Dalhousie University. These deliberations began with a range of engagement activities, such as values mapping,¹ Q&As,² breakout groups, and reflexive policy-

making exercises.³ All activities were facilitated by the Centre for Media, Technology and Democracy’s Youth Fellows and led by Gen(Z)AI co-leads, Helen Hayes and Fergus Linley-Mota.

On the third day, an additional 75 participants from across Canada joined through hybrid engagement sessions. Full-group discussions brought together all 100 participants and ensured that those joining remotely were included in key moments of the forum and able to engage meaningfully with their peers. In-person youth presented issue statements to online participants, ensuring they remained involved in the process. Youth Fellow-facilitated virtual breakout groups gave online participants space to review prioritized issues and recommendations, ask questions, and offer feedback. Remote participants were also given time to reflect independently and submit written input, ensuring that perspectives from those participating virtually were fully incorporated and considered.

Following the conclusion of this forum, the issue statements and policy recommendations developed by participants were shared with thousands of young people nationwide through Make.org’s civic dialogue platform, providing additional insights. This national engagement process will wrap up in April 2026, in preparation for the cumulative plenary.

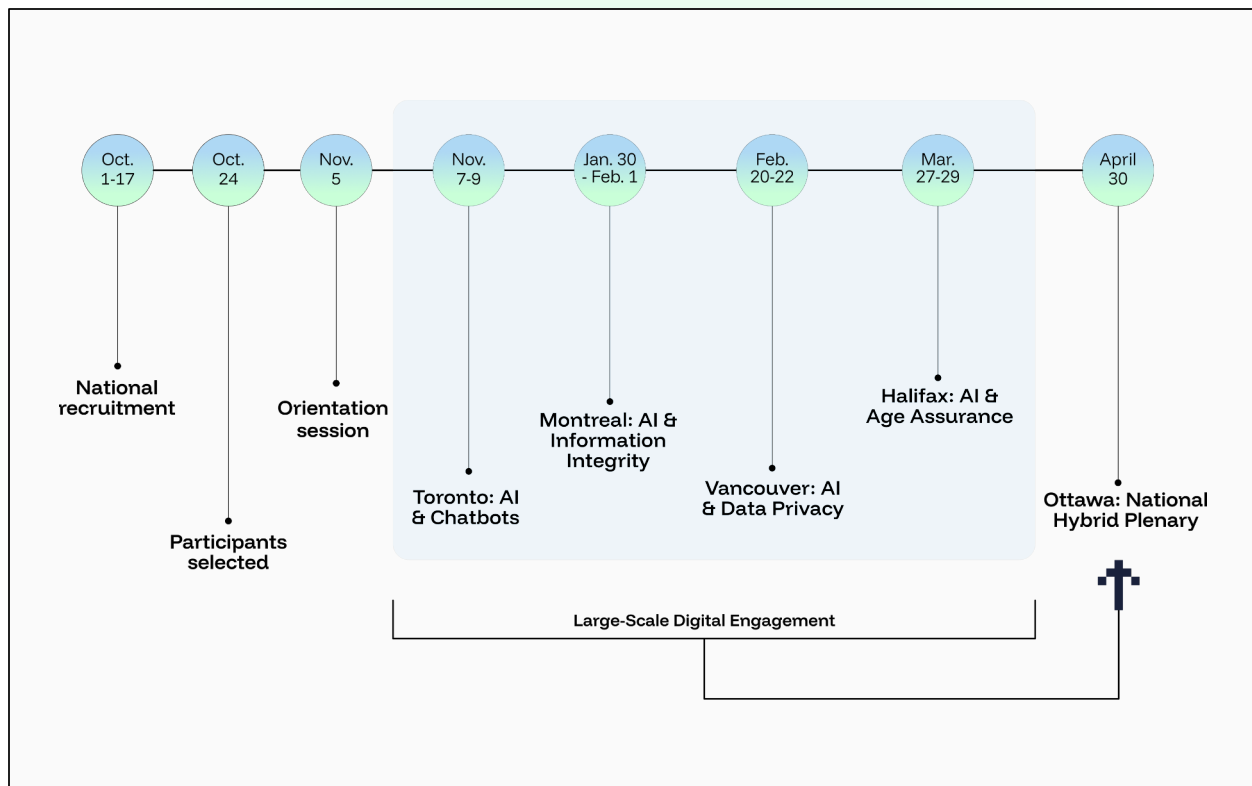


Image 1: An outline of the Gen(Z)AI process.

The Structure of a Regional Forum		
Day 1 (Remote)	Day 2 (In-person)	Day 3 (Hybrid)
Online Foundation Participants learn from subject-matter experts, practitioners, and advocates who introduce the Forum theme. - Build shared starting point - Level the playing field - Prime participants for deeper dialogue	In-person deliberation Participants engage in a full day of deliberative dialogue, drawing from Citizens' Assembly principles. - Orientation and framing - Facilitated small groups - Issue-mapping	Hybrid Recommendations Writing/Consensus Building Participants refine and formalize recommendations. - Recommendation drafting - Collective review and consensus building - Reflection and closing ceremony
Who? All 100 participants join remotely.	Who? 25 regional participants gather in-person. Everyone else gets this day off.	Who? All 100 participants join for a hybrid session.

Image 2: An outline of the structure that each of the four forums followed.

KEY FINDINGS

Many participants arrived with limited knowledge of age assurance and AI technicalities, relying solely on the provided preparatory resources. While some initially supported age-restricted social media and chatbot usage for children, they became more skeptical after learning of and discussing potential data risks. Others doubted the ability of specific verification methods, particularly biometric and AI-based software, to accurately differentiate ages. Participants mapped out several other concerns, which were summarized into the following issues.

The key issues identified by participants were:

- AI-enabled age assurance technologies undermine privacy and digital safety by exposing users to potentially harmful storage and use of their data.
- The use of verification technologies to restrict young people's access to social media, AI platforms, and online community spaces increases the risk that restricted users could be displaced to unmoderated and dangerous platforms.
- Generative AI platforms pose unique risks to children, including by increasing their access to harmful content and negatively impacting their cognitive and social development.



PRELIMINARY RECOMMENDATIONS

By identifying pressing AI and information integrity issues, participants were able to develop a set of policy recommendations to address them. These recommendations were created and deliberated on by all 100 participants and will be further considered and weighed by thousands of other young Canadians through Make.org's civic dialogue platform.

Participants' recommendations call for clearer design requirements, stronger safeguards and accountability when harms occur, and greater user agency, choice, and access to information to support informed decision-making.

The final recommendations from the forum will be shared publicly in April 2026. Participants will reconvene in a hybrid setting in Ottawa to present their final recommendations to government officials, policymakers, civil society organizations, and other relevant stakeholders.

Generally, the participants identified three types of policy mechanisms to address age assurance and AI concerns:

- **Reactive policy mechanisms:** These included policy tools that mandate compliance measures and remedies for harms caused by opaque and unsafe biometric data standards.
- **Design and system-level mechanisms:** These policies address harm before it emerges by enforcing age-appropriate online safeguards and adaptive features.
- **Participatory and literacy-building mechanisms:** These include policies that leverage educational awareness, public campaigns and literacy-building initiatives.



APPENDIX

Expert Speakers

Emily Laidlaw



Dr. Emily Laidlaw is a Canada Research Chair in cybersecurity law and Associate Professor in the Faculty of Law at the University of Calgary. She is a dedicated collaborator in both research and education. Currently, Dr. Laidlaw is the Rovinescu Visiting Scholar focused on anti-hate speech at the University of Ottawa, a senior fellow at the Centre for International Governance Innovation, and an Associate Member of the University of Ottawa's Centre for Law, Technology and Society. She is currently serving on the reconvened expert advisory group to the Federal Government on online harms.

Beyond academia, Dr. Laidlaw contributes her expertise on the boards of the National Cybersecurity Consortium and the Canadian Internet Society.

Her research centres on technology regulation, cybersecurity, and human rights, with particular emphasis on platform regulation, privacy, online harms, freedom of expression, and corporate governance. Dr. Laidlaw is the author of *Regulating Speech in Cyberspace: Gatekeepers, Human Rights and Corporate Responsibility* (Cambridge University Press, 2015) and co-editor, with Dr. Florian Martin-Bariteau, of *Security of Self: A Human-Centric Approach to Cybersecurity* (Ottawa University Press, 2025).

Michael Geist



Michael Geist is a law professor at the University of Ottawa where he holds the Canada Research Chair in Internet and E-commerce Law and is a member of the Centre for Law, Technology and Society. He has obtained a Bachelor of Laws (LL.B.) degree from Osgoode Hall Law School in Toronto, Master of Laws (LL.M.) degrees from Cambridge University in the UK and Columbia Law School in New York, and a Doctorate in Law (J.S.D.) from Columbia Law School.

Dr. Geist is the editor of several copyright books including *The Copyright Pentalogy: How the Supreme Court of Canada Shook the Foundations of Canadian Copyright Law* (2013, University of Ottawa Press), *From "Radical Extremism" to "Balanced Copyright": Canadian Copyright and the Digital Agenda* (2010, Irwin Law) and *In the Public Interest: The Future of Canadian Copyright Law* (2005, Irwin Law), the editor of several monthly technology law publications, the author of a popular blog on Internet and intellectual property law issues, and the creator of Law Bytes, one of Canada's leading technology law podcasts.

Marie-Ève Nadeau



Marie-Ève Nadeau is Head of International Affairs at the 5Rights Foundation, leading global efforts to embed children's rights, safety and privacy by design and default in technology governance. Based in Brussels, she has spent the last five years collaborating with governments, regulators, international institutions and civil society organizations to strengthen AI, data protection and online safety policy frameworks worldwide. She has a background in international law and human rights. Before joining 5Rights, she promoted human rights internationally through her work with the EU office of the International Federation for Human Rights (FIDH), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and Québec Without Borders in Peru.

'Ask Me Anything' Speakers

Michael Karanicolas



Michael Karanicolas is an Associate Professor of Law and the James S. Palmer Chair in Public Policy & Law at Dalhousie University. Previously, he served as the inaugural Executive Director of the UCLA Institute for Technology, Law & Policy and as the Wikimedia Fellow at Yale Information Society Project, where he remains an affiliated fellow. Prior to his academic career, Michael spent a decade as a human rights advocate, working to develop legal frameworks supporting foundational rights for democracy, including particularly deep engagement in Southeast Asia and the Middle East/North Africa. His research encompasses a number of thematic areas, but generally revolves around the application of constitutional and human rights principles to emerging technologies. Over the course of his academic career, Michael's work has been supported by a number of institutions, including the National Science Foundation, the International Development Research Council, the Administrative Conference of the United States, the Open Government Partnership, the Caswell Jin Foundation, and UNESCO.

Alex MacIsaac



Alex is the Research Manager in Democracy & Technology at the Samara Centre for Democracy. His work focuses on technology's influence on Canadian democracy and civic engagement, digital platform governance, prosocial design, mitigating digital information threats, and enhancing digital media literacy. He currently leads the Samara Centre's VERIFIED project, and previously led the SAMbot project from 2022-2025. He is also a research fellow at the MacEachen Institute for Public Policy and Governance. Alex is a graduate of McMaster University's Master of Public Policy in Digital Society program, where his research focused on digital privacy law, digital democracy, and the spread of dis- and misinformation online, all within a Canadian context. He also holds a Bachelor of Arts in Applied Communications, Leadership, and Culture from the University of Prince Edward Island. Beyond online discourse, Alex is passionate about issues surrounding equity within public education, digital literacy, and youth civic engagement.

Endnotes

¹ Youth participated in Brené Brown's [Dare to Lead List of Values Exercise](#). This allowed them to identify what mattered most to them and provide a starting point for their issue statements.

² Q&A sessions allowed the group a chance to ask any questions that may have emerged during workshops and table discussions. The sessions were led by Nonso Morah with the expertise of Dr. Michael Karanicolas, Associate Professor of Law at Dalhousie University and Alex MacIsaac, Research Manager at the Samara Centre for Democracy.

³ In-person participants drafted a suite of policy recommendations in breakout groups before undertaking a gallery walk exercise to identify the top priorities of the larger group. Recommendations were presented to the hybrid participants and refined as a collective.



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