

Public Policy Forum: A policy challenge for the 21st century

At this week's Public Policy Forum dinner, event honouree, OpenCanada founder Taylor Owen, challenges institutions and think tanks to evolve and innovate, or risk irrelevance.

By: [Taylor Owen](#)/ April 8, 2016



Taylor Owen speaks at the 2016 Public Policy Forum Testimonial Dinner. Martin Lipman/PPF

Canada's [Public Policy Forum](#) hosted its 29th annual Testimonial Dinner and Awards Thursday evening in Toronto, bringing together more than 1,000 people from the country's business and political communities "to pay tribute to distinguished leaders who have made outstanding contributions to the quality of public policy and good governance."

This year's [honourees](#) included CBC's Peter Mansbridge, recipient of the Hyman Solomon Award for Excellence in Public Policy Journalism, and OpenCanada's founder and editor-in-chief (and UBC professor) Taylor Owen.

Upon receiving the award, presented by the chair of this year's event, PEI Premier Wade MacLauchlan, Owen addressed the crowd. The transcript of his speech is published below.

Thank you Premier MacLauchlan. It is an honour to receive this recognition from the Forum, and to be included amongst colleagues and friends who have received this award in the past. And I feel privileged to address this – somewhat intimidating – room.

I am particularly excited to be presented this honour from the acting and newly minted presidents of the Forum, my friends and mentors Larry Murray and Ed Greenspon. Over the years I have had the tremendous fortune to learn a great deal from them both.

The challenge I'm facing tonight, (they might say irony), is that as I have told them both many times I believe that our industrial-era institutions (our universities, governments, media organizations and think tanks – the places they have spent their remarkable careers running) are increasingly ill equipped for the 21st century.

It is this moment of transition, from what I would characterize as the analog world to a digital one, from a world of hierarchies to one of decentralized networks, an industrial era to a post-industrial age, that I want to spend a few minutes speaking about.

I have spent the past decade studying how digital technologies are transforming the worlds of journalism, international affairs and public policy.

I would suggest that each of these once distinct spaces and communities of practice are now faced with a radically different operating environment.

One where power is shifting from large organizations to individuals and groups and where participation and authority are moving from the few to the many. A world ruled by information abundance rather than scarcity and where our public discourses are mitigated by Silicon Valley platforms rather than the traditional media. Where gatekeepers to power, influence and audience are dissolving (or being replaced by algorithms).

A policy space in which increasingly complex challenges are deliberated in an ever more fragmented and fluid media space. And where the practices, norms and cultures of journalism, scholarship and policy are blurring.

I would argue that this is an uncomfortable world for industrial-era institutions that were purpose-built to provide stability, certainty and continuity.

The reality is that command and control bureaucracies are just no longer needed to make large numbers of people do things. These institutions have simply lost their monopoly on collective action.

What's more, individuals and groups that are successful in this new environment are empowered in ways that sit outside of, and in many ways challenge, the very legitimacy and relevance of our 20th century hierarchical organizations.

Even more problematic, efforts to enforce control and order in the digital space risk either failing (think paywalls), or worse, breaking the network itself.

For example, many of the things states are doing to stop what they perceive as negative actors online, also undermine the free expression and commerce that make the internet so beneficial.

It is a very difficult world for control freaks.

And herein lies the policy challenge, because it is in these legacy institutions that we as a society have embedded our social, ethical and political values.

So as these organizations evolve, decline, or in many cases just go bankrupt, a central governance challenge we face is how to transition the societal values they enabled into this new and evolving space.

And it is here that I want to suggest is the opportunity for think tanks such as CIGI and the CIC, where I am engaged, and indeed for the Public Policy Forum. We desperately need a new generation of think tanks that can serve at this intersection of technology, civil society and governance.

But in this current environment, a failure to adapt and innovate is leading many legacy think tanks to a fate worse than their death: their irrelevance. The days of back room briefings, printed reports and closed workshops are as obsolete as print newspapers.

New communication technologies and platforms, such as the one that I run, OpenCanada, play a role in this transition, but I want to propose that the need for change goes far deeper. The lesson of the digital age is that successful organizations actually structure themselves, and the ways in which knowledge is produced, disseminated and implemented, *differently*.

So as Ed takes over this institution, an organization which I say with the utmost respect, was built for the policy world of the **20th** century, I think there is a tremendous opportunity to experiment confidently in this complex nexus of media, policy, scholarship, activism and governance, and to help us transition as a society to the **21st**.

Thank you again for this honour.