

From Videotape Exchange Networks to On-Demand Streaming Platforms: The Circulation of Independent Canadian Film and Video in the Digital Era

Introduction

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic digital technologies are, more than ever, part of almost every aspect of our lives. Our routine engagements with audiovisual content on the Internet testify to how access to cultural goods and services is now entwined with digital technologies. Effectively, the Internet has become a primary channel for the **circulation** – the distribution and exhibition – of moving images, from high-value professional media to low-resolution user-generated content. In the era of participatory digital culture (Sterne et al. 2016), many readers will identify as both consumers and producers of digital content, via an array of online platforms, social media channels, and interactive apps. In an already-digitized media environment, it may be difficult to imagine the workings of distribution networks for **analogue media** – non-digital technologies that encode data on a physical support. But, as will be explained below, pre-digital distribution structures like **mail-based videotape exchange networks** – community-driven systems that enabled film and video makers to share their work with peers by swapping film reels and magnetic tapes encoded with audiovisual content – are not so far removed from the media distribution multiverse that we know today (Canada Media Fund 2019). Arguably, early videotape exchange networks represent analogue versions of the peer-to-peer (P2P) audiovisual distribution that emerged with the Internet and that manifests today in myriad of commercial and non-commercial **on-demand** and **livestreaming** digital broadcasting initiatives (Crisp 2015).

Building on the ideas outlined above, this chapter discusses the adoption of digital circulation practices by the Canadian independent media arts community. **Independent media arts** refer to time-based or interactive works – e.g., films, videos, sound art, multi-media performances, virtual and augmented reality works, etc. – created primarily for purposes of artistic expression and with the creator having complete artistic control (IMAA n.d.). The text positions digital modes of media circulation in continuity with the grassroots videotape

exchange networks that were developed by community-thirsty media artists and activists in the late 1960s and 1970s. After discussing this significant moment in media art history, the text explores how the Canadian independent media arts network has historically operated, and continues to operate, in parallel to commercial media production and distribution networks. An outline of how this ethos manifests in various online distribution and exhibition models is provided and paired with a discussion of key policy issues related to digital audiovisual circulation.

The Early Canadian Independent Media Arts Sector and Videotape Exchange Networks

Video had a magnetic importance. We all know the importance of seeing ourselves. In 1971, A Space started its video programme with Lisa Steele and Tom Sherman. In 1972, Video Inn opened its doors in Vancouver. In 1973, the Canada Council started video funding. In 1974, Art Metropole began video distribution. And then suddenly everyone everywhere in Canada was making video and this was a Canadian thing. (Bronson 1983, 35)

In the quote above, General Idea member A.A. Bronson describes the euphoric beginnings of the Canadian independent media arts network. The artist refers to the community of practice that arose out of developments in image-making technologies in the late 1960s and early 1970s – notably the advent of portable video systems like the Portapak, which gave artists access to video as a new creative medium (Hencz n.d.). Video's immediacy and television-like characteristics fostered socially engaged, experimental, and critical arts practices across Canada and internationally (Baert 1987). Financial support from the Canada Council for the Arts further enabled the development of video and film collectives across the country, which soon formed a constellation of cooperative spaces where media arts communities could pool their technical resources and expertise (Murphy 2006). These artist-run centres – spaces run by and for artists – have historically played an important role in democratizing access to media production equipment and supporting the work of alternative media producers and grassroots activists, including feminist, LGBTQ2S+, Indigenous, and racialized communities (see for example Bociurkiw 2016).

[Insert image before or after this paragraph if possible] Members of early film and video cooperatives soon realized the need to develop structures to circulate the works being produced through their emergent organizations. Some centres acquired significant collections of media works produced by artists, activists, and community groups and developed mail-exchange networks within Canadian and international media arts communities. For example, between 1971 and 1981, the Satellite Video Exchange Society in Vancouver (now known as VIVO Media Arts Centre) produced eight editions of the *Video Exchange Directory/Bottin Video International*, a print publication that shared the contact information and tape exchange preferences of alternative media producers from around the world. To be included in the directory, individuals mailed in a postcard with their contact information and interests. Members of this analogue peer-to-peer exchange network were encouraged to contact each other and share copies of their work (see VIVO Media Arts Centre n.d. for more information). Across Canada, artist-run centres also operated media libraries and distributed film and video works in various formats – from Super 8 film to Betacam tape – to local and international networks alike (Baert 1987). In a pre-Internet age, this type of grassroots exchange network, akin to user-driven modes of digital distribution, helped to foster the development of the Canadian independent media arts sector and connect it to the global alternative media community.

Notes on the Circulation of Independent Media Arts

Ramon Lobato (2012) defines distribution as: “the movement of media through space and time” (2). This is a broad definition, but it usefully emphasizes the circulation of media, without tying it to a specific technology or medium. Focusing on the movement involved in the act of distribution, we can establish continuity in the constantly evolving technological landscape that enables the reproduction and transmission of audiovisual materials. In this way, while they are separated by great technological gaps, the workings of mail-in tape exchange networks can be connected to the mechanisms that enable artists to self-distribute their work via user-generated platforms (e.g., YouTube, Vimeo, social media). There are several differences

between these media circulation systems, but it is striking that in essence, both enable producers to connect with a community of peers and help their works reach a public. In both cases, there is an effort to make one's work "discoverable," i.e., able to reach and be viewed by an audience. Discoverability has become a key issue in the digital attention economy (McKelvey and Hunt 2019) but the quest for eyeballs has been central to the politics of media circulation both pre- and post-Internet.

Because of their inherent reproducibility, mediums such as film and video – analogue or digital – problematize the question of rarity as an economic necessity of distribution. The moving image is ontologically tied to the idea of reproduction and circulates through the copy. This logic opposes that of the unique work of art and prioritises the multiple over the singular. In the history of film and video, this has manifested through practices opposing the sanctity of the authentic work of art and the authority of the television broadcast. The distribution of moving images thus consists in a negotiation between reproduction and rarity, and between access and control (Hilderbrand 2012). Technological developments in the history of moving images have exacerbated the tensions at the heart of the circulation of film and video, with means of reproducing and sharing copies of media becoming increasingly accessible and simple. Whether in analogue or digital form, distribution should be understood as a mechanism that grants or denies access to media. Moreover, the channels through which moving images circulate are embedded in social, economic, and political structures (see Balsom 2017, Crisp 2015, and Crisp and Menotti 2015). Accordingly, any intervention in the circulation modes of film and video can therefore adopt a political character. As Erika Balsom (2017) suggests, "distribution can be a site of advocacy and a way of remedying a lack of visibility" (8). The various distribution networks that the independent Canadian film and video community has fostered over the last 50 years align with this vision of the circulation of moving images as a political act.

These practices can be characterized as "informal," according to Lobato's (2012) concept of different distribution modalities. He writes: "formality refers to the degree to which industries are regulated, measured, and governed by state and corporate institutions. Informal

distributors are those which operate outside this sphere” (4). It can be argued that independent media art centres, from their inception, have consciously operated in a space of informality and have developed alternative communities and publics for media artworks in this space. Coming out of the artist-run centre movement, which developed “parallel” art galleries to commercial and mainstream museum institutions, these structures have supported artists and activists working in the margins of mainstream media. Lucas Hilderbrand (2012) notes: “our written histories of video art’s first decade suggest a proliferation of collectively produced video projects that strove to decentralize the media industry by giving voice to an idealistic notion of the people, rather than the privileged few with access to the airwaves” (12). From the get-go, alternative film and video circulation has sought to create a counter-space to that of formal (or institutionalized) distribution. Michael Goldberg (2000), a founding member of the Satellite Video Exchange Society, explains: “that’s why we decided our core service would be a non-commercial video library, where the public could choose from a wide variety of themes and genres largely ignored by the mass media” (37). This ethos remains in the makeup of today’s independent media arts network, which is dedicated to supporting the production and circulation of non-commercial media arts.

The Canadian Independent Media Arts Sector Today and Online Circulation Practices

Today, Canada boasts hundreds of media arts centres, festivals, and collectives that support the production, exhibition, and distribution of media artworks in mediums ranging from analogue film and digital video, to sound art and new media, to augmented and virtual reality (AR and VR). The Canadian independent media arts community is vibrant and diversified, with a variety of organizational models – from DIY initiatives to international showcases – that share a commitment to supporting various forms of experimental and non-commercial production, centred on artists’ creative visions. Several organizations within the network also have the mandate to support Indigenous and equity-seeking communities, including LGBTQ2S+ communities, women, racialized people, and persons who are D/deaf and disabled. The digital distribution and exhibition activities of the Canadian independent media arts community are

continuous with prior and ongoing offline endeavours. Accordingly, these practices reimagine media distribution models driven by the platform economy and transpose the counter-political spirit of alternative media online. They use media circulation as a political tool, as suggested by Balsom quoted above. In this sense, digital editions of festivals such as the St. John's International Women's Film festival, Reel Asian International Film Festival, Rendezvous with Madness Festival, or the Vancouver Queer Arts Festival, to name a few, carve out spaces for the voices of media creators whose works sit in the margins of the mainstream. Similarly, subscription or transactional video-on-demand (SVOD and TVOD) platforms such as VUCAVU, Vithèque, or tēnk, provide specialized-content alternatives to commercial VOD distribution, with content ranging from historical Canadian experimental video to contemporary media-performance, and from multi-channel installation to socially engaged documentary film. Finally, various digitally transmitted curated programs, available on-demand or livestreamed, expand the activities of media arts exhibitors into the online sphere – i.e., online exhibitions, screenings, performances, talks, AR apps, and VR experiences. Much like Video Exchange Directories discussed above, these endeavours create new ways for media artists to share their work, reach an expanded audience, and sustain a community of practice.

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the turn to digital modes of presentation and distribution in the independent media arts community, but the digitization of these practices was well underway before the global sanitary crisis forced cultural spaces to reinvent themselves through online activities. For example, VUCAVU.com was launched in 2016 as an online distribution platform for film, video, and experimental media. VUCAVU now operates as a bilingual pay-per-view distribution platform and **online presentation** space for freely accessible curated media programs. By partnering with media arts exhibitors such as galleries and festivals, VUCAVU activates its digital platform as a space for visibility through different modes of media circulation. Grouping a large spectrum of works made available through a variety of organizational sources, the platform also serves as a connective mechanism across media genres and generations of artists. In a similar fashion, several media arts centres have used digitization and online exhibition possibilities as tools to reactivate and recirculate their

archival analogue collections. For instance, through the Digital Museums Canada initiative, VIVO Media Arts Centre developed an online exhibition with digitized footage of Vancouver's *Celebration '90 Gay Games III & Cultural Festival*, a milestone event in the history of Canadian LGBTQ2S+ communities (VIVO Media Arts Centre 2019). This type of initiative enables viewers from across Canada and internationally to have access to significant historical material maintained by a local community-driven archive.

The examples above point to how online environments offer innovative exhibition models through on-demand (asynchronous), livestreamed (synchronous), or hybrid presentation modes. Pleasure Dome's *Digital Magazine* series presents curated on-demand playlists of audiovisual works accompanied by critical writing. These programs are available for a limited time, and are often accompanied by livestreamed artists' talks. Through its *Cinematheque at Home* program, the Winnipeg Film Group also offers on-demand content for a limited time, mimicking the temporal aspect of the in-theatre experience. To the contrary, several distributors provide a continuous offer of titles available for rental but with a limited viewing window after content activation (e.g., VUCAVU, Spira, F3M). For their part, festivals have adopted different models of online presentation. Some, like Images Festival, have presented entirely livestreamed digital editions to replicate the in-person festival experience. Others, like imagineNATIVE, program a mix of on-demand and livestreamed content, which is made accessible through an online festival platform.

Conclusion: The Policy Challenges of Online Media Circulation

The mass adoption of online circulation practices by the independent media arts community due to the COVID-19 pandemic revealed several gaps in existing policies and best-practices for online presentation. Notably, the independent media arts community has only recently adopted standards for the remuneration of artists for online presentation activities (see the IMAA Fee Schedule for 2022). Similarly, the use of various online presentation platforms and tools brings up questions about content accessibility, data security, technological compatibility, and protection of intellectual property rights (see resources developed through IMAA 2022

Online Media Arts Presentation Standards). While they may be accustomed to dealing with these questions for in-person presentation environments, media arts presenters have had to rethink their operations for online spaces. For example, technologies that restrict access to content based on users' Internet Protocol (IP) addresses (i.e., geo-blocking), that put digital "locks" on content through the use of digital rights management tools, and that limit the number of views through audience capping methods bring up different ethical questions. Do presenters have an obligation to geo-block political content that may be ill-perceived in certain countries, potentially leading to harm for the artist? Are presenters liable for copyright infringement if works presented on their platforms are pirated? Are the artists' best interests served if there are limitations put on content accessibility? Are distributors exposing artists to risks of censorship and copyright infringement when relying on a third-party online presentation platform? Given that digital technologies and online platforms are in constant evolution, the development of best practices for the sector is an important challenge. Much like in its burgeoning years, the independent media arts community faces an exciting time in its history. Media arts presenters across the country have embraced the possibilities of online circulation practices and it will be interesting to witness how the legacy of early videotape exchange networks continues to develop and innovate in the digital era.

Critical Thinking Questions

1. While they are very different from a technology standpoint, analogue and digital modes of circulation used by the independent media arts community also share many similarities. How might we conceive of today's online circulation practices as being in continuity with early mail-in videotape exchange networks?
2. Online distribution and presentation practices provide new ways to exhibit and distribute media artworks and for these works to reach expanded audiences. What are some of the opportunities and challenges associated with the circulation of media artworks online?
3. How do the circulation activities of the Canadian independent media arts community differ from those of mainstream media distribution? What is the value of alternative media production and distribution?

Key Terms

Independent media arts

Time-based or interactive media works – e.g., films, videos, sound art, multi-media performances, virtual and augmented reality works, etc. – created primarily for purposes of artistic expression and with the creator having complete artistic control (IMAA n.d.).

Circulation or distribution of media

Circulation is the process through which media finds its way from the creator to the viewer. This process encompasses distribution, which Ramon Lobato (2012) defines as “the movement of media through space and time” (2), and, in an arts context, presentation. Presentation, also referred to as exhibition, is the process through which artworks are programmed and showcased for public viewing.

Mail-based videotape exchange networks

Community-driven exchange networks that enabled film and video makers to share their work with peers by swapping film reels and magnetic tapes encoded with audiovisual content by mail.

Online presentation

“Online programs and events are presented via websites, digital platforms, or social media channels. Viewers access these programs and events remotely through a device connected to the Internet (e.g., personal computer, phone, tablet, etc.). Online presentation can be livestreamed (synchronous presentation mode) or on-demand (asynchronous presentation mode)” (IMAA 2021, Definitions and Types of Fees).

Livestreamed presentation (synchronous presentation mode):

“Livestreamed programs and events are presented at a determined date and time via a presenter's website, digital platform, or social media channels. This presentation mode is like a broadcast in the sense that once the livestream has started, viewers who tune in part way through will have missed the beginning” (IMAA 2021, Definitions and Types of Fees).

On-demand presentation (asynchronous presentation mode):

“On-demand programs and contents are accessible at the viewer's convenience via the presenter's website, digital platform, or social media channels. On-demand programs may be freely accessible to anyone with an Internet connection” (IMAA 2021, Definitions and Types of Fees).

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