

## **How to Strengthen Canadian Democracy and Our Cultural Identity**

Canada's cultural well-being, and co-creating a stronger democracy, require all of the following: government actions in funding and updating legislation to address the flaws regarding imbedded inequities in digital technologies; the transformation of our institutions, particularly in education, as per restoring respect for copyright; and the willingness of fellow citizens to support proactively cultural production – that means, financially pay the original creators of cultural productions across artistic forms. Fourth, journalism, most recently seems to have fallen between the cracks as per the types of literary works that Canada Council will fund in future, at the same time that journalism is in crisis in Canada. The latter is a reality that requires serious, and overdue, attention by government, if we authentically wish to uphold freedom of expression which I witness as under threat for several reasons.

I offer this contribution as a writer, documentary filmmaker, and educator, who worked fulltime through many years as a freelance journalist until, in the mid-1990s, I no longer could pay subsistence level living expenses. That strike upon independent journalists was just the first among a series of attacks upon Canadian journalism as media corporations swallowed up most independent newspapers across Canada – the most aggressive being Post Media, Inc. – after which several waves of staff journalists as well have lost their jobs. Journalism today in Canada is a shadow of its former existence, and that is one of the more insidious causes undermining the health of our democracy. A public who is not well-informed – because intelligent awareness requires accessible exposure to a range of points of view – feeds into the demise of democracy and, subsequently, feeds prejudice, the latter, moreover, a global concern.

Digital technology, sadly, feeds into – and, worse, caters to - human nature's lowest common denominator, which is to take the path of least resistance. In other words, in a North American society that systemically reifies individualism - hence undermining communal values that hold humanity together – people will seek out information, based on convenience and whatever will bring them comfort, as individuals. Most unfortunate of all, too many people tend to seek out views that fit their own rather than expand their consciousness by reaching out to learn from a range of perspectives.

A further problem, embedded in the increasing use of social media, is the expectation from users that information – the preliminary stage of imparting actual knowledge and deeper insight – must be communicated as briefly as possible to be digested, in turn, as quickly as possible. I suggest that that regressive expectation is a tendency that sorely decreases not just our intelligence yet, moreover, disconnects us from a fuller human awareness about the fundamental ways we are interconnected as a human family and, furthermore, how we are energetically interrelated with all forms of planetary life.

In other words, I consider the progression to date of digital technologies - in regard to how they tend to be used - as an indication of the reductionism of a North American society that has succumbed to a flatland of gross materialism. As true throughout

history, the problem resides not within the latest technology embraced enthusiastically but, instead, in how some people will exploit it in self-serving ways that undermine the higher purposes that are preferable, such as forging the inclusiveness of the human family rather than cause divisiveness. More specifically to the well-being of Canadian culture here, updated digital regulations as well as public education, are needed to help achieve more equity in the benefits of the internet for both creators and consumers. As the situation stands, creators are financially exploited mercilessly from digital aggregators to a growing number of consumers/citizens who are being socialized through digital media that everything that exists on the internet is free.

That assumption, as well, regrettably now appears to be embraced by educators who, in recent years have become much more aggressive in refusing to acknowledge copyright and, equally destructive, actively contribute to the misguided thinking among younger generations that they have the right to be given, and have access to, all curriculum resource materials, at no cost. That practice is outrageous! Speaking as a creative professional who may be a senior citizen – yet still is an intellectually active writer on upcoming books based on her life's work – my royalties both as a writer and also as a documentary filmmaker in recent years have been reduced to less than a \$100 a year. Meanwhile, I dedicated my entire professional life to fighting for social and environmental justice, and continue to do so, through upcoming works that will deserve payment, as well as grassroots efforts as a citizen activist concerned about the children yet unborn, fighting against industrial projects that will contaminate our water, if allowed to proceed. Meanwhile, I subsist on a poverty-level pension.

The educational sector - previous to the onset of the digital era through the earlier decades of my lifetime - once was understood as essential to the ability of small and independent investigative writers and documentary filmmakers to be able to have even a partial livelihood. For even in the earlier decades, such committed "truth tellers" also had to seek out part-time teaching and/or do intermittent hired work for industry or government, to survive. That reality was understood. Nevertheless, our investigative professional work was respected, and more cultural grants existed too, to help us unveil the causes of human and planetary suffering and raise awareness to address injustices. As a student up to, and including the completion of a doctorate, I understood payment for educational resource materials to be a given, and had respect for the knowledge and skills of, for example, the writers who produced various forms of written cultural production. Who will produce meaningful, insightful knowledge in the spirit of transforming human consciousness, if the professional creators are no longer paid???

Indeed, for even educators to fight today so egregiously against the copyright of existing creators is incredulous. I implore the federal government (and also provincial ministries of education, and all sectors) to regain an appreciation, and take actions, to turn around this deplorable dilemma. The fact is, not just the creators but also the students and, indeed, our entire society, will pay the price of ignorance, unless the professional creators who produce our stories again can be compensated fairly for their respective cultural productions. My concern is not limited to my generation who have a

lot of experience, and at least a wee bit of wisdom, still to offer and much-needed in a troubled world. My concern also embraces the younger generations of struggling, and emerging, creators.

The life of an artist does not have a historic record of ever being easily accomplished, with the exception of a chosen few “celebrities” (using the contemporary vernacular), although even the most famous among history’s great artists, in fact, acquired fame through not altogether happy circumstances within their lifetime, and sometimes not until after their earthly life span ended. Every era, and every generation, it appears has to fight for freedom of expression and the right to an artistic livelihood. Only the circumstances, and specifics, change.

I recall my beginning years as a journalist, in the early 1980s, in which freelance writers were fighting Revenue Canada to be recognized as professionals rather than be viewed as mere hobbyists. Today, once again, after more than 30 years in a national writers’ organization, this year I witnessed newer less experienced writers now being reduced to bidding on internet writing gigs - a circumstance which is disgraceful yet which sadly mirrors how the profession of writing, yet again, has been diminished as having value.

Another worrisome trend impacts documentary filmmakers, because increasingly TV broadcasters want to support film stories that will be more guaranteed to get audience ratings and to attract advertisers, in a media world that has its priorities focused first and foremost on profits. This circumstance similarly mirrors what I refer to as a flatland of materialism that has displaced our moral radar to focus on the larger good. The ethos of documentary storytelling, similar to the ethos of any authentic, investigative storytelling in any artistic medium, has a calling higher than to be reduced to mere entertainment and to ensure profits, the latter usually for everyone except the original creators of the stories.

Earlier, when I identified my interwoven professions as writer, documentary filmmaker and educator - aside from occasional part-time teaching - my foremost contribution in previous years was doing conference workshops around North America as a ‘media educator,’ to awaken people why, how, and for whom all forms of media construct reality from contemporary news and popular culture to written histories and, ultimately, all forms of cultural production through time. Always, I am first and foremost a storyteller – refusing and rejecting the reductionist term ‘content provider’ – who continues to tell stories in the hope and aspiration to transform consciousness.

In closing, one concern about future Canada Council funding is to raise the question, how do you define “risk-taking from creators” as stated in your Principle #3. I sincerely hope you intend that it means more than technological experimentation but, more importantly, it is directed to supporting artistic truth tellers who take risks to challenge the status quo in the spirit of supporting the larger good of who we can be, together.

Thank you for this opportunity to speak from the heart, Sandy Greer

