My #DigiCanCon Thoughts: Audience, Data & Diversity

The federal consultations on Canadian content in the digital world (#DigiCanCon) are winding down, and I have been very interested in the discussions happening across the country. I have found them both frustrating and inspiring and feel driven to add my thoughts to this important conversation. Here are some of the questions and answers I have been mulling over:

First of all, how could my input help?

I have been lucky enough to work with many Canadian and international content creators of film, television, web series, narrative apps, transmedia experiences and games. I have developed and been involved with the implementation of digital marketing and audience engagement strategies for many of these projects and have researched the online space and consumer behaviour from this perspective extensively. It has given me insights that could be invaluable as the Canadian government tries to figure out how to "strengthen the creation, discovery and export of Canadian content in a digital world." I have some definite arguments about what makes CanCon viable, the value of audience, how niche global strategies are key to the future, and how Canada, perhaps more than any country in the world, has everything it needs to take advantage of these digital opportunities.

First real question, what the heck is VIABLE Canadian content?

The word "viable" has come up in the documentation provided by the government as well as in the online conversations around #DigiCanCon, although I would argue not as often as it should. What *is* viable Canadian content or, for that matter, a viable creative economy, business model or career? The answer to this question or questions is far from simple.

However, at its core, the answer to the viability question for every CanCon creator is that they need to have an audience for their work and that hopefully they can make a living from their creations (for which an audience is key). In our government-subsidized content ecosystem, the revenue model for

creators has often had more to do with triggering public money than about finding an audience or generating revenue directly from growing that audience. While we should be grateful to have this kind of public support for creative work, it has insulated our creators from current market realities significantly.

Our existing funding system for media incentivizes plugging into the old model of broadcast television, theatrical distribution and film festivals, a model that is out of touch with the way most consumers demand their content in the digital world. The reality is, the audience has never been more empowered and creators, funders and traditional gatekeepers need to understand them better than ever or risk becoming obsolete. The digital audience holds the key to the future and there is lots of opportunity for those who understand their digital audience best.

OK, so what do we need to know about the digital audience?

Here is a re-iteration and update of some of the [observations I have made in the past about the digitally empowered audience:](#)

- *Audiences are the new gatekeepers*. We are living in an age of content abundance, and there is no putting that genie back in the bottle. But while the amount of content continues to grow, there are still only 24 hours in each day. The one thing, perhaps the only thing, that is in short supply is audience attention. Content consumers are unbelievably empowered in the digital world by the amount of choices they have for their free time and their control over their attention. For this reason, every marketing and engagement strategy needs to be led by deep knowledge of its target audience(s) and there is no one-size-fits-all.

- *Audiences are VERY impatient*. We live in an age of instant gratification. We have forgotten how to wait for things, mostly because we don't have to. This impatience contributes to [online piracy](#) and is something that creators should be taking into account when it comes to marketing and distribution of their content. Once the awareness and demand is created, people will want it NOW. They don't want to wait for six months, one month or even a week. The old media business model is based on scarcity of content and access, with geographic territories and release windows maximizing sales. This methodology no longer fits with how consumers DEMAND content. They don't care about the revenue model or technology limitations or IP ownership. They want what they want, when and how they want it and that is not likely to change.

- *Audiences want more*. When people love a story they often can't get enough. MORE can mean behind-the-scenes tidbits, additional story conveyed through different media, opportunities for fans to participate in conversations, the ability to act inspired by the story, and so on. A single linear storytelling medium like a movie is often not enough to feed an insatiable fandom. Content creators should figure out ways to create stories that stir up these kinds of passions, and to fulfill that desire across not just one installment but an entire body of work. Content creators also have to become more comfortable with the [audience taking more ownership](#) of beloved characters and storyworlds and even find ways to [collaborate](#) and

participate in the [fan creations](). It is also tapping into this kind of passion that leads to [successful crowdfunding]() or [micropatronage campaigns]().

- **Audiences are fragmented.** Because we have so many choices when it comes to content, audiences are very fragmented. This means content creators outside of the mass mediaverse (aka Hollywood in the North American context) do not have a chance of reaching EVERYONE, or even a demographic slice that includes, say, all women between 18-34. The road to success for most content lies in leveraging niche appeal wherever possible. Speaking to the hearts of a relevant niche about themes and issues that mean a lot to them, can stir up those passions I mentioned above. And once the right niches are engaged they will amplify and spread the word for you ([because every audience member has an audience]() now). Luckily, identifying, understanding and reaching niche audiences has never been easier because of the opportunities created by the digital world.

So how do we make the powerful, impatient, ravenous and fragmented digital audience work for viable CanCon?

Bottom line, public funders need to help content creators better understand and work WITH digital audience behaviour instead of working against it. We need to build a system that rewards and incentivizes a wider definition of success, and help creators include their audience in every step of their creative journey. Here are some of the things that could help establish and support a viable DigiCanCon ecosystem:

- **Get out of the mass media business.** We live next door to the huge Hollywood machine and do not have the money to effectively compete for the attention of the masses, especially on purely Canadian funded English language projects. When looking at the traditional model of broadcast television (which is driven by subscription and ad dollars that are [declining]()), conventional theatrical distribution (where even [blockbusters]() let alone indie films [struggle]()), we have not had many recent [Canadian financial success stories](). The business models based on (pre)selling into geographic territories and/or reaching a mass global audience is in great jeopardy and does not favour the smaller players (as can be seen in the [heated discussions around the single EU digital market]()). Canada IS a smaller player and should look for more strategic opportunities based on its own cultural assets. Mass media should not be the goal for Canadian content.

- **Embrace Canada's diversity & niche appeal.** We are one of the few countries in the world that has been built, for better or for worse, on mass immigration over the last 150+ years. It has left us with a very diverse population who have many unique stories to tell. Unlike the American melting pot, we have talked the talk of embracing the diverse mosaic of Canadian citizens. Our media, however, has been slow to reflect this multiplicity, being primarily driven by investment in stories mainly championed by straight, white men. While they are an important part of the Canadian story, it is only one part. Increasing public funding and support for diverse voices and stories dovetails beautifully with the fragmentation opportunity. In the digital world, creators can find deep and passionate niche audiences across the world who can create community and conversation around their content, which can become a path to a viable business model.

- ***Invest in and incentivize strategic experimentation & early development that is audience driven.*** In the new digital paradigm, there is a lot more that could be included in development beyond scripts and prototypes. I would argue, in fact, that a story or project without an audience is not viable CanCon and that the two should be explored together. For instance, early development deliverables should not just include the delivery of a treatment or early concept, but also proof of audience & interest (through identification of target niches, influencers, online conversations and a demonstration by the content creator that they understand who their audience is and how this project/story will resonate with them). As script and concept development progresses, so should a more fully realized plan for audience development and engagement, perhaps with some early focus group testing and experimentation to further hone the strategy. Special provisions and support should also be provided for those without a track record in the funding system so that more diverse storytellers are encouraged to apply and are on-ramped into the public system.

- ***Invest in and share content/audience data with creators & MAKE IT EASY.*** In the old media content model, there was very little data available to content creators. While there are still black holes in the digital dataverse (hello Netflix!), there is more data available than ever before. Data is the story of your audience, the one they tell with every action they take online. Data can make creators very powerful if they listen and respond. Giving creators access to tools they wouldn't otherwise be able to afford and training to maximize this opportunity will be key for success in the digital world.

  Besides data on their own projects, it would also be great to get anonymized data from across Canada that could be sampled by different criteria (i.e. content type, genre, content length, etc). This information could provide important intelligence so creators can understand what has gone before so every project can start ahead of the game, set realistic goals and refine their strategies based on relative market intelligence. Every CanCon creator who gets public money should be required to contribute to this collective knowledge base. No data sharing should mean no money.

- ***Incentivize & invest in audience development & engagement.*** Tools like [Telefilm's Success Index](#) incentivize participation by creators in the old content business model, and keep diverse and innovative creators out who have not been a part of the public system in the past 5 years. No value is currently given to any metrics in the digital world. This needs to change if the government truly wants to get serious about DigiCanCon. Proof of a digitally engaged audience must be part of such criteria.

  Serious money also needs to be invested in the content creator taking ownership of growing this audience. I would suggest the equivalent of **at least 10%** of the production budget should be allocated for digital marketing and audience development by the CanCon creator. This audience should be a long-term asset that follows the creator throughout their body of work increasing the viability of their content and careers.

Some final thoughts…

Canada has everything it needs to help our content creators be successful in the digital world. We are lucky enough to have public money to invest in the creative economy, but we need to acknowledge the most powerful force in this context is the digital audience and leverage that knowledge as much as possible. A path to DigiCanCon success means we should:

1. Embrace our digital superpower, which is our nation of diverse voices, and get out of the mass media business.
2. Weave audience development into every part of CanCon financing.
3. Incentivize data sharing by our content creators and pay for access to data tools and training they couldn't otherwise afford.
4. Ensure there is significant budget set aside on every project for digital marketing and audience engagement by content creators.
5. Incentivize better participation in the digital world with a new Success Index that includes key digital audience engagement metrics.
6. And, finally, leverage the brand of Canada outside of the country by curating Canadian content on a digital hub, that itself actively cultivates and engages with key niche audiences around the world (walking the digital walk and setting an example for content creators).

Thank you for this opportunity to contribute to this inquiry, both the online conversation and this platform. I am sure there are many great ideas pouring in, and that a focus on audience, data and diverse niche content will help set Canada up for great digital success in the future.

This submission is also available online at: http://www.veria.ca/digicancon-audience-data-diversity

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