

Fine Arts in a Digital Age

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Abstract

This article will summarize the research shared at The 10th European Conference on Arts & Humanities, 2022 hosted at Birkbeck, University of London, UK, including a discussion of the Canadian landscape of fine arts in an online environment, an exploration of the use of web technologies to promote diversity and equality through notable examples, and a discussion of effective presentations of culture and the arts in ways that address social issues and promote audience engagement.

Keywords: Fine Arts, Digital Communications, New Media

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Introduction

This research project explores the interaction between fine arts and digital media through a partial examination of the current online landscape. The research presented at The 10th European Conference on Arts & Humanities, 2022 hosted at Birkbeck, University of London, UK consisted of a summary of different vantages on the online landscape, with ideation around the possibilities and potentials of associated technologies and online approaches, as well as critical consideration of the limitations. Weblinks and references to specific online examples representative of web-based dynamics and socially relevant content, were cited, and a selection of these are included here. At present, this research shows that digital technologies are effective in some circumstances and in specific instances to promote culture, performance, and the fine arts, while engaging with respect for diversity and equitable access. The implication is that online outreach can be leveraged, though precariously, to further diverse representation and to strengthen marginalized voices in the field of arts and culture.

I have included a bibliography of articles that may be of interest to scholars studying the emergence of new media from its beginnings to its present state.

Canadian Landscape of Arts Online

This section will offer a brief discussion of Canadian arts organizations online, and some of the approaches to new media and the fine arts that have been attempted in the online landscape of Canadian art.

The issue of how to define web publishing, where not every website is a magazine with serial rights and subscribe-able monthly issues, though a considerable amount of cultural content is shared over the web in a format that does not easily adhere to expectations attributed to on-site art exhibits, has recently been resolved with the Canadian Artists Representation (CARFAC) Minimum Recommended Fee Schedule (www.carfac.ca). The CARFAC Minimum Recommended Fee Schedule sets the Canadian standard for artist fees, and in 2022, includes minimum payment for internet-based per-piece presentations of artwork (CARFAC, 2022b), as well as professional fees tailored specifically to works presented during the COVID-19 pandemic (CARFAC, 2022a). As a technical consideration, there is still not a clear line that distinguishes a website, from a web zine, from a web exhibit, but the recent changes to the CARFAC Fee Schedule introduce a standard of payment for fine art practices that are shared in the digital realm.

Several Canadian art institutions have leveraged the increase in public interest in online offerings from the fine arts, and strong explorations of online and digital media have resulted in creative new ways to share art with the public. The Art Institute Canada (AIC) (www.aci-iac.ca) has published a digital library of Canadian artist profiles, with profiles of a diverse range of Canadian artists throughout Canadian history. This site is an excellent gateway to learning about Canadian art, for anyone interested in quality information about high profile Canadian artists. (AIC, 2013)

Some arts organizations have experimented with virtual space as a means to continue to engage audiences throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. Since 2020, the Creating Virtual Spaces for Audience and Performers project at the Art Gallery of Guelph (AGG) (<https://artgalleryofguelph.ca>) has been using 360 degree digital technology to enable virtual visits to their exhibitions (Ford, 2022). At the beginning of 2020, a group exhibit of visual art

that I was invited to participate in was forced to hastily change its venue due to gathering restrictions. The *Igniting Hope* exhibit at the Port Moody Arts Centre Society (PoMoArts) (www.pomoarts.ca) shifted from an on-site installation to an online presentation. Artists received sharable promotional materials in the form of digital event cards sized to social media site posts, with images sized and formatted for webviewing on Facebook and Instagram, respectively. (PoMoArts, 2020) Lastly, this year's Juno awards were broadcast with online streaming through the Canada Broadcasting Company's net-television platform, CBC Gem, showing that streaming media can capture audiences far beyond the reach of the event attendance (Weaver, 2022). Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, online media has provided an avenue for cultural organizations and franchises to reach their audiences.

Web Diversity, Web Equality

So many aspects of our lives have become 'app-powered.' It is now possible to visit a restaurant where a QR code allows orders to be placed directly from a cell phones to the kitchen. This technology was used exclusively, as an alternative to table service at Ramen Isshin on Mont-Royal Ave. E., in Montréal, Quebec, Canada, who are found on Instagram @RAMENISSHINQC (Ramen Isshin staff, personal communication, May 7, 2022). Even more innovative, Robbie the robot waiter at The Mantra restaurant on Fort Street in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada (<https://mantrarestaurant.ca/>) serves customers their meals in a steady, smooth glide that ensures minimal chance of collision with human staff ('She Never,' 2021). If that is not enough, products ordered online are shipped to the doorstep, concert tickets can be photographed to a smartphone, and any number of transactions – purchase or business – can be made without leaving the wifi hotspot. If digital technologies are making the world a better place, as some anticipate(d) (Spar, 1999), this should entail opportunities for diverse and marginalized communities.

Equality in online communities has been a topic of conversation as far back as 1999, when it was noted that equality in the realm of online media was hampered by, "companies that control the rights to intellectual property, with implications for [...] social scientists eager to access formerly public data bases" (Lessig, 1999 as cited in DiMaggio et al., 2001). In a 2004 journal article, D. Perrons explains that, for social network business organizational structures, "while social networks exist, the competitive rationale remains paramount, countering some of the idealist visions of social solidarity in the social network approach" (p. 55), and in her studies, "some of the female respondents and the 'techies' (who were more involved in the programming end) felt excluded by what they referred to as either the 'blokism' or 'new media mofia,' respectively, in the social life of wine bars that are linked to the sector" (p. 52). In a 2007 journal article, W. L. Bennet and T. Lagos discuss the unequal stratification of social media messaging.

Social media companies enlist their audience to promote their platforms' credibility (Lefebvre, 2007). Most recently, some companies are becoming conscious of the value of diverse representation. An Indigenous woman from Treaty 1 Territory in Canada states, "I want to share my experiences of practicing my culture" (Rabbit, 2022) and she has discovered that the online real estate social media offers will allow her to do just this – according to an article on how social media creates new media opportunities for Indigenous Canadians. However, without evidence of actively applied strategies by social media companies to strengthen marginalized voices, it is not certain whether these examples of influencer success can be defined as representative, or as the exception. While it is possible to

find examples of successful social media influencers that represent diversity, alternate approaches to nurture true equality in online communities are still needed.

In an effort to generate a self-articulated online community, the First Peoples' Cultural Council (FPCC) has developed the First Peoples' Map of BC (<https://fpcc.ca>), an example of the way that custom web technologies are being developed to serve the Indigenous communities. The web-based interactive map includes information in Indigenous languages, with recordings of native speakers demonstrating accurate pronunciation of tribal and place names in Indigenous languages. Indigenous artists are virtually located on the map, and a healthy online community has emerged in the artist feed, where recent uploads of creative work appear in reverse chronological order. The content of the feed displays a welcome diversity of voices from within the Indigenous community, showing that online resources can promote cultural resilience for Indigenous peoples of Canada. (FPCC, 2022)

Overall, through the deliberate creation of pathways enabling online media to function in the interest of marginalized communities within the arts in Canada, these recent examples demonstrate standards and expectations of respect for diversity and equitable access that are shared with offline and on-site cultural institutions

Conclusion

A utopian portrait of the potential of online media and web communications to mediate inequity would detract from the immediate importance of monitoring usage trajectories of digital media in representing diversity and fostering equality. With this in consideration, online technologies as mechanisms of communication are capable of relaying important messages, of maintaining personal and business connections, and when grounded in an awareness of real-world impact, hold the potential to deliver to artists and arts organizations effective outreach options dedicated to cultural sharing, knowledge production, and cultivation of the arts in Canada.

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