

A Path Forward:
Supporting & Developing the Indigenous
Screen-based Media Industry in Canada

Prepared for the CMF
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Introduction

Between May and November 2016, the CMF convened a multi-stakeholder engagement process involving Indigenous writers, directors, and producers, along with broadcasters and funders to develop a strategy to better support the Indigenous screen-based media sector, including film, television and digital media. If there is an overarching purpose to the strategy, it is to ensure a vibrant, independent Indigenous screen-based industry. Objectives of this strategy include:

- Achieving equity for Indigenous creators and producers in the industry;
- Ensuring Indigenous people are in charge of telling stories about Indigenous people, as custodians of Indigenous narrative;
- Meeting federal broadcast objectives and United Nations commitments;
- Increasing awareness of Indigenous realities;
- And, perhaps most importantly, empowering Indigenous people to engage in and self-determine their own cultural reproduction, dialogues and processes.

The engagement process reiterated that Indigenous screen-based storytellers face a number of systemic barriers in getting their stories made and seen, including:

- An uneven playing field.
- Fragmented and inadequate funding.
- Difficulty in accessing distribution.
- Barriers to production (funding, capacity, diversity of Indigenous languages, cost of travel rural, remote and northern travel, ghettoization of Indigenous content, etc).
- Lack of Indigenous representation in decision-making positions.
- Professional development and capacity building.

The strategy includes interim measures that a number of players can begin to implement in the short term, as well as some possible solutions that will take longer to implement. Some recommendations are geared towards specific entities, while others are action items that could be addressed with multiple partners. While the overarching strategy document identifies numerous barriers and recommendations, key next steps and priorities in implementing the strategy are summarized below.

Participants acknowledged that the entire industry is risk adverse, centralizing into Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, and constantly challenged by the tension between art and commerce. More importantly however, there is movement afoot requiring maintained momentum – Indigenous writers, directors and producers are coming together to advocate for change, funders are open to dialogue and solutions, and broadcasters are facing a changing environment and are interested in diversifying content. In the face of recent federal commitments pertaining both to Indigenous peoples and the arts, all of the stakeholders have indicated willingness to move forward and recognize the importance and timeliness of the strategy, as well as the significant changes in policy, programs and approaches that are required if Canada is aiming for a vibrant, independent Indigenous screen-based industry. Some of the issues discussed and presented have been the topic of discussion for 15 years; new solutions are required to achieve different results, as the status quo is no longer acceptable. The industry needs to respond to and reflect the growth, changes and successes that have occurred in the Indigenous screen-based media sector.

1. Ongoing Discussions

Overall, all participants interviewed were pleased that the CMF has provided a forum for this conversation. Participants agreed that in an attempt to maintain momentum in a rapidly changing environment, key stakeholders and partners should continue to have dialogues amongst themselves and with Indigenous filmmakers to further the development and implementation of the recommendations. Strategizing solutions for moving forward should involve Indigenous storytellers and content creators in a leadership role.

Ongoing collaborative discussions will ensure that organizations are not working at cross-purposes and are moving forward in an open and coordinated fashion. In addition to the changes that individual organizations implement, joint discussions could achieve some consensus or shared practice on a number of cross-industry matters (the starting points for which are in the strategy), such as:

- the definition of Indigenous content and production
- creative control and treatment of intellectual property
- collecting and sharing more robust industry information
- consistent and broader measurement of audience
- mapping of funding and training opportunities.

Stakeholders need to determine who else needs to be at the table moving forward, broadening the group to ensure inclusiveness, and beginning with the Canada Council and Canadian Heritage. The Minister of Heritage's current consultation process on the future of Canadian content in a digital world provides leverage for engaging the department of Canadian Heritage in the process moving forward.

Indigenous creators recommended the CMF reconvene the key stakeholders such as screen-based media sector funders, broadcasters and distributors and Indigenous storytellers to continue the dialogue on how the industry can fulfill the mandate of the *Broadcasting Act* and reflect the role of Indigenous people as a founding nation in Canada. A summit or gathering could actually achieve a number of things – particularly, vetting where all of the stakeholders are at (say a year from now), and using the forum to engage on and validate changes and directions. Both industry representatives and Indigenous content creators expressed a desire to further develop relationships, and would like to see more opportunities to do so in the future.

Ongoing efforts are also required on the part of Indigenous creators and community to continue to advocate for change - this advocacy has proven to be critical to the changes being contemplated by Telefilm - and on the part of Indigenous producers to determine the best way to work together moving forward.

2. Create an Indigenous Screen Office

“The creation of an Indigenous film office is a crucial step towards a long-term strategy to better reflect and invest in Indigenous stories on screen — as these narratives shape our cultural landscape, reflect the richness and diversity of the country and are fundamental to our identity as a nation.” Danis Goulet

The primary recommendation to emerge from the literature review, interviews and focus groups was to establish an Indigenous Screen Office. An Indigenous-run screen office would support the development, production and marketing of Indigenous features, short films, television and digital media content. A successful Indigenous Screen Office would ideally involve a partnership with the CMF, Telefilm, NFB, CBC and APTN and other key players/stakeholders that could contribute to a long-term mandate to develop Indigenous writers, directors and producers.

There were several recommendations around the roles and responsibilities of a dedicated, Indigenous-run Screen office that could work within the current broadcasting industry and across all the organizations to foster both production and career development. The Indigenous screen office could serve to develop and implement a long-term strategy supporting all levels of talent development, including script development; provide hands-on training; administer substantial project financing and; broker relationships with broadcasters, distributors and federal funders. The emerging vision is for a screen office that is a sustainable, government funded body with dedicated office space – perhaps centrally and eventually regionally - an operational budget and staff capacity to fulfill a number of roles. Many Indigenous governance structures are also founded on the principles of autonomy, ownership and control.

Initial next steps, to be developed and vetted with Indigenous content creators, include:

- Investigating and iterating the benefits of dedicated Indigenous screen offices, beginning with Screen Australia, which is widely regarded to be one of the greatest models for success. The Screen Australia Indigenous Department successfully scouts talent, builds careers over a long-term period, and creates initiatives that provide training to filmmakers as well as project financing with broadcasters already attached.
- Creating a formal agreement / partnership amongst the partners committing to create an Indigenous Screen Office which defines the structure, terms of reference, implementation strategy and evaluation mechanisms.
- Establishing a governance structure for the Screen Office that includes:
 - an open and fair recruitment process
 - regional parity and generational representation
 - office process guidelines that are in keeping with Indigenous values
 - oversight mechanisms and an evaluation framework
 - defining the roles and responsibilities of the Office.

3. Increase Indigenous Representation in Decision-Making Roles

Indigenous people are grossly underrepresented in decision-making roles within the funding agencies and the mainstream industry. As a result, Indigenous writers, directors and producers have had to navigate a 'culture gap' with both industry and the funders. Achieving Indigenous representation within funding agencies, broadcasting agencies, distributors and training institutions includes:

- making funding decisions through Indigenous panels / juries / readers,
- hiring of Indigenous staff to administer programs,
- appointing Indigenous persons to the Boards of organizations.

Having Indigenous people in key roles in industry and within funding agencies fosters an environment in which Indigenous cultural context is understood and helps attract new Indigenous creators and producers to participate in the industry. For example, when the Toronto Arts Council created its Indigenous position, program participation by Indigenous people increased by 70%. This pattern is seen in other successful programs in Australia, New Zealand and the United States.

4. Organizational Review

Participants in these discussions identified a number of specific issues and actions targeted to funders and broadcasters, which are summarized in Appendix A of the strategy. There have been indications from the CMF, Telefilm, CBC, the NFB and CIPA that there are already changes afoot that may serve to address some of the issues identified within their organizations. All entities implicated in the strategy should review their existing funding, governance and accountability structures with a view to investing in increasing access for Indigenous people to industry fundamentals, including:

- Expansion of program carriage. Review programming approaches to better represent the diversity of Indigenous perspectives and experiences throughout the country and meet the requirements of the Broadcasting Act by broadcasting Indigenous content on par with the proportion of the Indigenous population in Canada.
- Expansion of funding for Indigenous screen based media to reflect the population size and role of Indigenous nations as a founding nation of the country. Review of funding models to investigate options to maximize funding available to Indigenous screen-based media and redesign existing processes to lower barriers for Indigenous participation in the industry.
- Enhancement of the rural, remote and northern aspects of existing and emerging programs.
- Ensuring staff cultural competency training and attendance at Indigenous cultural events where appropriate.
- Incentivizing licensing agreements for other broadcasters to show Indigenous-created programming to encourage broadcasters and other distributors to increase their distribution of projects created by Indigenous and other diverse storytellers. Tax credits were suggested to also incentivized hiring from within the Indigenous community to work on mainstream productions.

5. Training & Professional Development

Capacity building is about more than training. It is also the broader culture and economy of innovation and excellence. This is achieved through fostering talent, validating social and cultural values that support creativity and innovation and development of structures and processes to support this innovation. The shortcomings of existing training programs highlighted by Indigenous storytellers are outlined in the Strategy and can be addressed by existing institutions. Training is a large gap in the mandate of the various participating organizations, significant gap in funding training initiatives. Federal role?

Funders should invest in closing the gaps Indigenous creators and producers face in the industry by increasing support for training in these specific areas:

- Developing producers' skills (business, legal, financing)
- Story and script development
- Forums for mid-career creators
- Northern-specific training

Shadowing / mentoring opportunities with mainstream broadcasters or on mainstream productions are also considered critical to the development of Indigenous talent. The CMPA indicated that this is an area where they can serve in Strategy implementation – through the brokering of these opportunities. This may also be a role for a new Indigenous Screen Office.

6. Explore Models of Alternative Distribution

Mainstream broadcasters and distributors are not showing Indigenous screen-based content at equitable levels, yet at the same time there is a real appetite for Indigenous content throughout the world. Viewing habits are changing, with more and more people moving away from the traditional broadcast spectrum to a multi-tiered, multi device approach to viewing. Digital distribution is an emerging platform for the distribution of screen-based media, and with the growth of digital distribution to global audiences, there are greater opportunities to access niche markets of Indigenous and non-Indigenous audience who want to watch Indigenous content. A new distribution platform would create a more balanced competitive environment for producers frustrated by the monopoly held by our indigenous broadcaster. Further, writers and directors would like to be able to transition to digital storytelling, increasing the need for capacity building in Indigenous digital production. For these reasons, alternative models of distribution should be explored, and options to be considered include:

- moving away from the conventional TV model and replacing it with digital showcase(s) similar to ISUMA TV;
- diversifying distribution platforms for Indigenous programming, particularly at the regional level;
- creating an additional Indigenous network, potentially web-based, which would be collectively owned and operated by Indigenous people;

- increasing funding for Indigenous-language interactive digital media productions and to help build capacity in digital media production;
- using education settings as a distribution platform for Indigenous storytellers to share their work and transform Indigenous realities and mainstream cultural realities.

More specifically, CMF, the Bell Fund and APTN could organize funding clinics for Indigenous producers who would like support for to grow their capacity and success in digital media. There was also a call for Telefilm to reinstate funding for independent alternate distribution and other marketing subsidies, and for the CMF to tap into the Experimental program to help finance the development of such a concept. Indigenous producers were hopeful that access to subsidies similar to the mainstream would result in the development this sector into a robust multi-lingual, multi disciplinary and inclusive alternate distribution system.

A concerted effort to get the partners at the table will maintain momentum and grow relationships, thereby growing the Indigenous screen based industry. Formalized and concerted efforts to bring decision makers to the table are considered a best practice in achieving the goals of any strategy. The CMF is committed to ensuring these efforts are made moving forward.