

Following a survey aimed at clarifying the needs of Canadian film festivals in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, Telefilm Canada took the initiative to bring together festival directors from across the country to share online experiences and solutions available in this time of crisis.

The resulting webinar sessions are also aligned with Telefilm's positioning as a "partner of choice," and its desire to foster greater collaboration within the film festival community in Quebec across Canada. On April 30th Telefilm held a webinar for the French-language festivals followed by a similar event for English-language festivals held on May 1st.

## **ENGLISH VIRTUAL ROUND TABLE**

### Summary

There were 64 webinar participants. Denise Jamieson of Telefilm's Promotion and Communications Team gave a welcome and introduction and Francesca Accinelli Telefilm's Director, Promotion and Communications, moderated the session. Francesca explained Telefilm's position was to facilitate the conversations and information sharing among festivals, while remaining neutral in terms of recommendations for various online solutions or processes., Francesca also acknowledged participants requests to organize future collaboration among the festivals and suggested bringing in distributors and broadcasters in future conversations. One participant commented that there could be an opportunity for festivals to engage in some form of collaboration to leverage a collective clout with distributors or establish guidelines on geo limiting and number of viewers limiting, as festivals may choose to have an online presence or that crowd gatherings may be still be restricted.

#### **Presentations were made in the following order:**

- Samuel La France (Images Festival)
- Brett Hendrie (Hot Docs)
- Tara Taylor (Emerging Lens Cultural Film Festival)
- Bern Euler (Canadian Film Fest)
- Aaron Zeghers (Gimli Film Festival)
- Guy Lavallée (NorthwestFest)
- Wendy Donnan (Oakville Film Festival)
- Philippe del Drago (FIFA)

## PLANNING

Some festivals, such as Gimli and FIFA, had been considering an online presence, but for most this was a first. They were confronted with an abrupt cancellation after a year long planning, with almost all programming in place. Keeping it simple was key. It took between 10 days to three weeks of work to get ready to start announcing the changes to this year's events. Technical staff was quickly reassigned to operating video conferencing application and uploading films on streaming platforms. FIFA was able to pivot in 4 days and maintain their original festival dates having collaborated in past years with Vimeo. An OTT solution would have not been possible in such a short time.

## CHOICE OF PLATFORM

There are two fundamental options: live streaming or VOD. Live streaming is closer to the live festival experience. On-demand is easier to execute and curate. There are quite a few options such as Shift 72, CineSend, Eventive, Vimeo live or Twitch, each with a different price tag and its pros and cons. Eventive has a great donation function which may help free events pay for some of the cost. It's great to have the time to do the evaluation of all the various options to select the one that best supports the functionality and films of the festivals. The Independent Media Arts Alliance(IMAA) is a great resource center for the non-profit community and to connect with other festivals moving online. They have compiled information and done some great research and Aaron Zeghers of the Gimli Festival offered to share with the organizations on the call.

DRM Encryption and geo-blocking are key considerations, especially when dealing with major distributors. Festival directors were very much concerned about the user experience, audience engagement through seamless interaction, simplicity and accessibility, aware that most viewers may not be tech savvy. Hot Docs assigned staff to man the email inbox, making it possible to assist the audience with technical issues in close to real time.

The Images Festival decided to use Vimeo Live that has its own player embedded. Other technologies used were PlaybackPro and Zoom. The pay per session not being easy with Vimeo Live, the festival decided to offer screenings for free. It hosted content on its own server and took charge of captioning. The technical setup required five computers: one for content – trailers and film, a second for live Zoom Q&A sessions – considered a priority to engage with audiences, a third encoder to switch between elements, a network server and a fifth for live stream monitoring. They were really pleased to be able to keep full control of their artistic intent.

Hot Docs has chosen the CineSend VOD platform with whom they had prior experience. With customization, it can tie in nicely with their box office and membership processes. Hot Docs' Brett Hendrie explained that festivals require the assistance of the company to customize their online solutions to their needs for this type of integration. The shop is quite small, which may be an issue, but overall the experience has been good so far. Hot Docs partnered with CBC and CBC Gem for broadcast and online premieres and with Crave, Rogers, and other for VOD access to films of past editions. Viewership numbers across these initiatives are doing well.

The Oakville Film Festival used Zoom webinar for a sold-out (free of charge) online screening on National Canadian Film Day. The platform offered more options and was easier to use than Gem. Each viewer received a private link with password. This first experience is helping them with the planning for their upcoming online festival in June.

## **PARTNERSHIPS**

The Halifax based Emerging Lens Festival partnered with CBC Gem for its National Canadian Film Day screening, using Zoom with password for Q&As sessions. Their greatest challenge was a Zoom bomb, an intruder disrupting the discussion 5 minutes into the session. This is not uncommon but has apparently been solved by Zoom in recent weeks. The Canadian Film Center did a great job at promoting the Festival's NCFD's Watch Party, which brought the added benefit of interacting virtually with audiences who don't normally attend the Halifax based festival. The Festival is considering having a presence online since their live event scheduled for April was postponed (online festival dates tbd). They are hoping to make arrangements with directors so that films could be available for screening for a few days.

The Canadian Film Festival partnered with Super Channel after exploratory discussions with Amazon Prime, Crave and CBC. It was a natural fit. Broadcast deals were offered to every feature, under the same terms as a standard contract which was great for the filmmakers, particularly emerging ones. Many of the films got sold. Super Channel has been a great partner and is ensuring close-captioning and descriptive viewing regulatory obligations are met for all the films being screened. To maintain audience engagement, one feature will be aired every day, Thursday to Sunday for three 3-week blocks, in the same order as in the festival's program (one short, one long; two shorts). Everything else will be online (industry meetings, Q&As, Facebook Live sessions). Films will also run on the YouTube channels of both partners.

Partnering with a broadcaster requires that films be CAVCO certified, which is costly. A majority of independent filmmakers are self-represented.

## **PROGRAMMING**

NorthwestFest is working to replicate online the festival's experience. Films will be available on the same dates as the scheduled live festival (May 8-17, 2020). Advance tickets purchases will be available, with a selection of films available for screening without restrictions for the whole duration of the festival. A few will have a limited 48-hour screening window after ticket purchase. And the number of views will be capped. Multiple discounts are available, especially for family viewing.

Images Festival also chose to stick to the festival dates and adhered to the original live festival's schedule and dates instead of going for a Netflix style on-demand experience. Overall this led to a higher audience engagement and reach outside the Toronto area where the festival takes place.

Hot Docs is running its Industry program online for the same 10-day period as the festival, while the public festival will be May 28 – June 6, with over 150 films only available during that time, while 85% or so those will remain available during a three-week extended period or until they meet their screening cap. Viewing is counted on a pay-per-view basis at any time of the day. Hot Docs will honour previously 10 and 20 packs, and sell new 5 packs. Screenings are geo-blocked to Ontario.

## **RIGHTS CLEARANCE**

Determining the value of the rights to be paid is not a simple thing. How to be fair should the number of online views surpass normal theatre attendance, and establish the right precedent, in profit sharing for instance, should the festival choose in future to have an extended online presence through a VOD model for instance. Gimli Film Festival is in the process of sorting this out for their online festival scheduled for July.



Images Festival sought the agreement of film directors with whom it has close contacts and whose films are not widely distributed to not geo-block their online programme. As a result, the online festival found a significant audience and the international reach was a great success.

It was also considered important for the Images Festival to reassure creators that their films would be protected from piracy as much as possible. This led the Festival to host films on its own server, with a password protection even though this did not eliminate the risk of download. The CineSend VOD platform chosen by Hot Docs includes DRM, geo-blocking (which they set to Ontario) and a cap on the number of participants and views. Hot Doc still hasn't resolved rights issues and compensation to creators.

The NorthwestFest online footprint extended beyond Edmonton to all of Alberta. It chose to present only a selection of films for the online event, and to keep most for a live festival planned in the fall. Most directors agreed to have their films presented online, with a few exceptions due to pre-existing broadcast deals.

FIFA reached out with great success to new audiences in the Vancouver and Toronto area it had targeted with online advertising. Online platforms provide great audience statistics, but don't necessarily handle well all transactional issues such as regional tax collection and reporting. FIFA has been approached by some 30 festivals in Canada, Europe and even in the Middle East that are seeking its expertise.

The Oakville Film Festival is exploring geo-blocking to either Ontario or Canada, keeping in mind its main goal it to showcase and promote local and regional filmmakers to the community. As some platform make it possible to be event-based, possibly it may be best to have no restrictions.

## **AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT**

The on-demand approach makes Q&A sessions impossible. Pre-recorded intros to films by their directors can give viewers a more personal experience than on commercial VOD platforms. The audience is encouraged to interact with film directors via social media. FIFA has had great success with this, with hundreds of messages forwarded to creators who were quite happy to receive them.

The Canadian Film Festival is taking great effort to maintain audience engagement. It is seeking to ensure consistency in branding throughout, and a smooth and slick looking transition between the screening and the scheduled Q&A sessions. Zoom sessions will be moderated by two staff, so that questions can be fed to the person moderating live. Collaborating with a broadcaster, the festival's aim is to have the whole experience to be broadcast worthy which involves numerous technical rehearsals in the preceding days leading up to the live sessions.

The Oakville Film Festival is planning to follow a similar path, making sure the screenings and following Q&A's would take place in a three-hour window to encourage the audience to attend the Q&A immediately following the screenings.

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## **BUSINESS TO BUSINESS**

Hot Docs is continually adapting its strategy as it learns on the go. Zoom is being used for pitching sessions. As in previous years, buyers and programmers have access to the Doc Shop digital marketplace. The online version of the festival will offer a mix of live and pre-recorded events, panels, keynotes and a selection of films for programmers and buyers. 1,200 participants have registered, which is half normal attendance, but with the mix of producers and buyers actually being better than ever, as there are new buyers from parts of the world that might have not attended previously are registering for the online event. The registration fee for the online sessions has been reduced to \$250.

## **SPONSORS**

The Canadian Film Fest has only lost one sponsor. Arrangements were made with in-kind sponsors for contributions to be used in the future. Efforts were made to give confirmed sponsors a little extra visibility and adapt to the online experience.

The Oakville Film Festival lost many local sponsors hit hard by the lockdown. Some that remained are excited and plan to get more involved. The festival is still figuring out how to give sponsors visibility on the VOD platform, having their logos on trailers and pre-rolls are ideas being considered.



## QUESTIONS AND ANSWERS FOLLOWUP

### IMAGES FESTIVAL

#### Michael Howell

I'm interested in the ramifications of distributors and sales agents Geo-blocking - If our audiences cannot travel to our fest (in Nova Scotia) but want to dial in virtually and distributors are strict about geo-blocking this will be very problematic. How are festivals negotiating screening rights with this in mind?

Images Festival was lucky to have the consent of all our artists to present their work without geoblocking. That being said, sales agents and distributors do have the agency to ask that their films be geoblocked. Hot Docs' announcement that the festival will only be available for streaming within Ontario demonstrates that distributors/sales agents will likely look to limit audiences regionally, provincially, or nationally. I assume that many festivals running during the pandemic will adhere to these conditions as best as possible. If your audiences are unable to access your events due to travel restrictions and geoblocking, it may be helpful to see where they live and try to direct them to other, similar events/festivals in their region.

### HOT DOCS

#### Shauna Hardy Mishaw

Are you using Eventive and Eventival?

Our box office system is Agile, and it handles the payment processing and 'virtual ticketing', Cinesent then provides the video hosting. This was a custom integration.

#### Shauna Hardy Mishaw

What compensation are you offering the filmmakers and distributors for this model?

We are sharing revenue with the rightsholders.

#### Q. From Tonya Williams :

If Super Channel and CBC Gem both want to stream your festival - should a festival partner with both -and give the filmmakers the option? in case they already have licensing with one of them?And is it a good idea to have a broadcast stream and a bio block private festival stream together? Basically do we need to limit ourselves to anything exclusive.

#### **Response submitted by Tara Taylor, Emerging Lens Cultural Film Festival (following the webinar Tara forwarded a discussion with a filmmaker regarding online distribution).**

Moving film festivals online due to the coronavirus situation raises some complex issues for all involved. In many instances there are not yet clear answers to some of the questions raised. For films which have a Canadian distributor which holds the Canadian broadcast rights (including SVOD) to the film if their Canadian broadcast rights are not exclusive that the film's participation in the "online festival" likely does not raise any issues from the distributor's point of view.

What does raise an issue, however, is the fact that the film is still within the two-year window of eligibility for film festivals. Most, if not all, festivals disqualify films which have been broadcast in the region of the festival or sometimes, anywhere in the world. There is certainly an argument to be made that making a film available online as part of an "online film festival" is tantamount to a broadcast thus triggering the disqualification. The issue is certainly not clear cut and I don't think there is a definitive answer to the question.



There is likely also an argument to be made that these extraordinary times require flexibility in the determination of what constitutes a “broadcast” in order to facilitate films participating in “online film festivals”.

Some filmmakers/distributors would likely need comfort before agreeing to participate in an “online festival” with knowing that the film would be time-limited (say 72 hours) and geographically-limited (Canada only).

### **Brenda Lieberman, Calgary Underground Film Festival (submitted via email following the webinar)**

The percentage of pre-invited/booked films that will translate to online is much much less for festivals who program distributor heavy content, or narrative heavy content (as well not being a launch pad festival). I am finding the easiest films to accept online are shorts, documentaries and smaller independent features with smaller distribution or no distribution yet (even some are still worried). Both our festival, and others I spoke with, who have similar content are only getting about 40-50% yes (some even less 30%), and the rest we are needing to re-program/start over. My recommendation would be for any festivals looking to go online, is to save yourselves the struggle later, and when inviting a film/negotiating the fee's, to include online as an option right up front even if you are uncertain on your direction yet. Too, bigger festivals who are launch pads, will have more success on certain titles, than smaller to medium sized festivals, as many films/ distributors do want to wait this out.

The costs of going online, should not be underestimated. We originally thought this would cost much less than it does. Depending on your needs/ and what you want in your online festival (live vs VOD style, app vs browser etc.) the costs can range from \$5,000 to \$20,000 easily. We are looking at transferring our venue rental line item, to this expenses, but then that poses additional challenges without budget. Even Canadian companies are quoting in USD too, and our dollar is in bad shape right now. This also depends on the number of films you have, and your ticketing company.

With the high costs for screening fee's still in place, streaming platforms expenses, and technical costs, plus the risk of less paid attendees, it's important for us to consider all this in our budget.

For us we need to go online, instead of cancel, for various reasons, but now need to look at this as a long term investment and while we don't want online/ VOD to replace the festival, we may need to continue to offer some elements in future to make up for this year's expenses on the platforms.

## **ONLINE COMMENTS DURING THE WEBINAR**

### **Samuel La France - Images Festival**

Thanks for the great recommendations on other options, Aaron! One heads up to everyone re: Twitch--there's a weird clause in their fineprint that states they take ownership of any live-streamed content that are streamed on their site (!), so we steered well clear of that : )

### **Aaron Zeghers - Gimli Film Festival**

I should have mentioned this Wendy but the Gimli Film Festival will be having our online, on-demand platform that passholders and individual ticket buyers will have, but we will ALSO have a GFF Live Stream on our website that is completely free and runs throughout the Festival with film screenings, filmmaker Q&As and panel discussions, etc.

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### **Guy Lavallee**

If you have any further questions, particularly if you're interested in hearing a post-mortem after our event concludes on May 17, feel free to email me at [guy@northwestfest.ca](mailto:guy@northwestfest.ca)!

### **Andrew Connors**

Available Light already pays for Vimeo Pro account and could host films through our Vimeo Account.

### **Steve Shroeder (Calgary int. Festival)**

I agree with our colleague in Gimli that we have an opportunity to leverage our collective clout to see if we can work out consistent, mutually beneficial terms with distributors. It would also be in everyone's best interests to work out general guidelines around geo-limiting and window-limiting, so that we are not hurting each others' programming options and local/regional markets. This may be complex but it's important to look at this, because there's a possibility we may be in this boat for more than just this year; and some of us may decide to stay in the digital space even after the crisis is over.

