



**Independent
Media Arts Alliance**
**Alliance des arts
médiatiques indépendants**

Submission to the Government of Canada's Digital Economy Consultation

Building a Digital Media Arts Culture for Canada

Submitted by:

Independent Media Arts Alliance – Alliance des arts médiatiques indépendants
(Montréal, QC)

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Discussion themes addressed:

- Canada's Digital Content (primary focus)
- Innovation Using Digital Content
- Building Digital Skills

I. Executive Summary:

The IMAA will address only the portions of this consultation that pertain to its expertise, which is the creation of independent media artworks by Canadian artists, who are supported by the nation-wide network of our members' media arts facilities and organizations. Our focus is on independent, artist-directed expression in media art, including film, video, sound and digital technologies.

We assert that independent artistic expression makes a crucial contribution to the diversity of Canadian voices and to the future evolution of Canadian digital content.

We propose the following policy and program areas for your consideration as part of a National Digital Strategy's focus on Canadian digital content, on innovation, and on skills development:

1. Art exists in the digital realm

The creation of digital media art and the support of artistic experimentation and exploration are important parts of a society's spectrum of "digital content." Canadian media artists, and the organizations that facilitate their work should be supported with investments that help them fully access and utilize the potential of contemporary digital tools and systems as part of their artistic creation, distribution and presentation process.

2. Digital culture has its own history and heritage

The documentation, preservation and continued accessibility of Canadian digital culture are not only pressing concerns today, but will become increasingly urgent as time passes. This requires a new, concerted national approach to Digital Heritage to enable strategic actions to be taken to ensure continued access to the emerging digital culture that Canadians are creating.

3. Promote artistic innovation in new contexts

Innovation and risk taking should be supported through programs and investments that help artists and industry creatively collaborate to leverage the contributions that the arts and artists can make to cultural research and development.

4. Expand access to digital skills development

The ongoing life-long learning that is an essential part of the adoption of digital tools and technologies requires a broadly based approach to the accessibility of training and education in communities across Canada. A variety of community-based organizations should be included in the delivery system for this training to complement the formal education system.

5. Digital culture across Canada

The emergence of a digital economy provides both opportunities and challenges for the development of regional, rural and remote communities. In designing policies and programs, every effort should be made to creatively partner with and expand on existing local networks and organizational resources to increase their capacity to educate and retain talented Canadian creators in their localities.

II. Building A Digital Media Arts Culture for Canada: Discussion

Founded in 1980, the Independent Media Arts Alliance is a national association of non-profit, artist-run media arts centres. The 80 organizations that make up our Alliance include production facilities for film, video, sound and electronic media, distribution organizations, and exhibitors such as film and digital media festivals. Our members are located across the country, assisting a community of over 12,000 artists to create, distribute and exhibit their independently produced media art works to public audiences.

We appreciate the opportunity to share our ideas and perspectives on a strategy for the evolution of a digital economy in Canada through this consultation process. Our comments will focus on the theme of Canadian digital content, with additional attention to the themes of innovation using digital technology, and building digital skills.

1. Art exists in the digital realm

The creation of digital media art and the support of artistic experimentation and exploration are important parts of a society's spectrum of "digital content." Canadian media artists, and the organizations that facilitate their work should be supported with investments that help them fully access and utilize the potential of contemporary digital tools and systems as part of their artistic creation, distribution and presentation process.

Art exists both in traditional forms (like painting), in transitional media (film, video, sound) and in digital forms (networked experiences, interactive environments) that are mediums of artistic expression in their own right. There are advanced artistic practices in digital and time-based media; Canadian artists working in these forms have achieved international recognition for their achievements.

Artists and the institutions that support their work have a unique role to play in interpreting Canadian society as it undergoes a profound shift in ways of viewing and experiencing the world. A national digital strategy for Canadian culture should take account of the full range of artistic and creative practices.

Media art and digital culture have a complex ecology. There is a spectrum of practices from mass-market commercial production, niche market production, exploratory and experimental research and user-based public participation. The larger cultural matrix encompasses the public gallery system, film festivals, and numerous non-profit production facilities, distribution organizations and exhibitors. For four decades the independent media arts sector that our organization represents has been an important pathway for Canadians to learn about, adopt and create artistic productions in the time-based media (film, video, sound and digital technologies). Our members help Canadians discover the possibilities of creation in contemporary media, emerge as independent artists and creators, and share their ideas, innovations and original perspectives with

their fellow citizens in all regions of the country. Our milieu has strength, commitment and community support, but needs additional capacity and assistance to leverage the next level of the emerging digital transformation.

How can government policies help?

As government supports the capacity of business and industry to adapt to and adopt transformative digital technologies it is encouraging to read (on page 26 of the “Improving Canada’s Digital Advantage” Consultation Paper) of a focus on the cultural industries. Yet the industries and models referred to there are only one part of the larger matrix for the creation and transmission of Canadian culture.

The non-profit cultural sector is a remarkably efficient economic generator in its own right. It should be the target of government investment priorities, policy orientation and program development at a level comparable to those being contemplated to assist the private sector in transitioning to new operational models based in digital technology.

The specifically artistic aspect of digital media should be acknowledged and supported both for its economic impact and for its transformative cultural content. Government investment in the cultural sector had a strong track record of return. It will be increasingly strategic in a creative knowledge economy where innovation often comes from the edges.

Besides targeted investments, and reinforcement of programs for arts organizations in the Department of Canadian Heritage, support for the creation of art in emerging digital forms can be provided through existing federal mechanisms for arms-length arts funding. This will allow national agencies such as the Canada Council to develop their own self-determined strategic responses.

2. Digital culture has its own history and heritage

The documentation, preservation and continued accessibility of Canadian digital culture are not only pressing concerns today, but will become increasingly urgent as time passes. This requires a new, concerted national approach to Digital Heritage to enable strategic actions to be taken to ensure continued access to the emerging digital culture that Canadians are creating.

A culture of digital media cannot be based solely on innovation in a vacuum – Canadians need to be able to access, refer to, understand and learn from the media and art that have been produced in the past and that are being produced today. There is an urgent requirement for a national digital heritage strategy for the documentation, preservation and long-term accessibility of the culture Canadians are creating in media and digital forms.

We propose the question of heritage is central to the ability of culture of understand itself. Societies that cannot preserve their culture in the present, and transmit it into the future have no way to communicate with generations to come. In a context of changing technology, cultural heritage includes both the products of digital media and the other media such as film and video that have laid the groundwork for them.

As culture is transforming itself through technology, we propose that at least some of this transformation should be documented and preserved – and much more than is being done currently. Digital media already has a history and it is important that this period receive attention in preservation – or we will have no memories of this time. In a universe of media and images, authentic documents of the cultural diversity of Canada’s media and digital past and present have an immeasurable value for the future.

This principle is well recognized in other areas of culture (for example, historic preservation of buildings). Preservation has created important by-products in both cultural and economic domains. In the mid-twentieth-century, the heyday of demolition of historic buildings, it was little realized that the urban heritage districts that were able to be preserved would turn out today to be engines of economic growth, regional branding and tourism development that shape cities as attractors of investment and innovation.

It will be a tragic, and still avoidable, mistake for the efforts of Canadian creators to simply vanish due to technological compatibility, decay and obsolescence.

Obviously not everything can be preserved. This would not be desirable even if it were possible. Some products of culture are ephemeral. But we cannot take the attitude that all Canadian media art production of the last 5 decades - the collective expression of Canadians as creators - and its current digital development should automatically be consigned to oblivion simply due to a lack of awareness.

It is crucial to understand that a vast part of Canada’s emerging media arts and digital heritage is not all concentrated in large national institutions (such as, for example, the National Film Board, Library and Archives Canada or the National Gallery of Canada) but exists all across the country in small museums, arts galleries, film and video production cooperatives, independent distributors, collectives and other community organizations. Many of these organizations are small and do not have the capacity to initiate, much less carry out, preservation projects. These organizations, including the few that have been able to develop their own media preservation infrastructure, need support to expand the capacity of the cultural sector to creatively address the question of preservation and future access of the analog and digital content that Canadians have created.

How can government policies help?

We propose that a nationally accessible program of support for digital media heritage initiatives be established, perhaps through the Department of Canadian Heritage.

A clear national Digital Heritage strategy should be articulated and supported to help organizations holding digital culture assets at the local level. The successful and respected Canadian Cultural Spaces Fund helps arts and cultural institutions in Canadian communities build and improve physical facilities to more effectively deliver their programming and projects. A similarly effective Digital Heritage strategy and program would give organizations and communities across the country access to the capacity to meaningfully address their heritage and conservation challenges for the preservation and future accessibility of their analog and digital media.

Most importantly, such a program would not simply provide passive preservation, but make the appropriate, and on-going on-line accessibility of the preserved content a central focus.

3. Promote artistic innovation in new contexts

Innovation and risk taking should be supported through programs and investments that help artists and industry creatively collaborate to leverage the contributions that the arts and artists can make to cultural research and development.

Some artistic practices are frankly exploratory yet their effects yield unexpected benefits in unexpected contexts. On the other hand some artists' work lends itself better for development into more broadly commercial media for mass audiences. This principle has similarities to the long-established distinction between basic science and applied research in other fields. In the cultural sector, which an emerging consensus is identifying as central to the evolution of knowledge-based economies both ends of this spectrum are important to innovation.

How can government policies help?

On the model of basic research, create incentives that encourage developers of technologies to involve artists and digital creators as collaborators and co-researchers.

On the model of commercialization and market development, provide investments and supports to stimulate not only broader marketing of media artists' work, but new forms and models of commercial distribution that allow artists to develop new models and concepts of commercialization. This strategic direction also provides an opportunity to improve access by the independent milieu and innovative independent creators to commercial support programs such as the Canada Media Fund.

4. Expand access to digital skills development

The ongoing life-long learning that is an essential part of the adoption of digital tools and technologies requires a broadly based approach to the accessibility of training and education in communities across Canada. A variety of community-based organizations should be included in the delivery system for this training alongside the formal education system.

In the realm of digital skills development, learning happens through creating, through participation and through knowledge sharing between peers and collaborators. Learning by doing, and being included in networks of sharing their technical and creative problems and solutions are key to remaining engaged with the flow of new technologies.

These ways of learning abound in the independent media arts sector, where for decades, Canadians of a broad range of ages and backgrounds have come together to acquire and share skills, techniques and knowledge in creating media art. Many of Canada's leading media artists got their first exposure to tools and techniques through this sector.

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Community-based non-profit media arts organizations deliver informal, yet targeted and effective workshops and professional development media production and digital creation. Our network of member organizations provides an effective example of alternative digital skills delivery in, for example, high-definition video, creative sound production, web authoring, experimental electronics. Their programs and facilities provide a solid basis for artists and emerging digital creators to learn by doing.

This well-established, but flexible and innovative educational resource is ideally suited to complement the more formal educational system and should be recognized along with other community organizations and initiatives as a key partner in diversifying and promoting the acquisition of digital skills by Canadian creators of digital media art. With additional resources these organizations can be even more effective in helping their participants learn and grow as digital creators.

How can government policies help?

Community-based, non-profit media arts organizations with experience and clientele, are eager to partner with resources and institutions that will expand their capacity to help their local constituencies improve their skills and professional capabilities as creators of digital content. These organizations should be given access to resources for training and skills development that will help them expand their capacity to deliver workshops, develop educational and creative programs and engage both communities of participants and skilled professional instructors.

Aboriginal media arts organizations are important vehicles for connecting creativity in indigenous communities with digital technology. Specific programs should enhance the capacity of these organizations to deliver relevant programs that will engage Indigenous artists and emerging creators to acquire skills and opportunities for creating digital media.

There are other initiatives that contribute to the diversification of access points for digital creation training across the country. The Independent Media Arts Alliance supported a proposal by the Canadian Association of Community Television Users and Stations to the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission for a revitalized community-broadcasting sector including a new model of community multi-media access centres. If implemented, this proposal would complement and expand the IMAA member network with additional capacity and a broader public access focus. This would be a logical component of a national digital strategy that valued the flexible acquisition of digital creation skills in Canadian communities.

5. Digital culture across Canada

The emergence of a digital economy provides both opportunities and challenges for the development of regional, rural and remote communities. In designing policies and programs, every effort should be made to creatively partner with and expand on existing local networks and organizational resources to increase their capacity to educate and retain talented Canadian creators in their localities.

Even as modern media culture puts and accent on the urban concentration, digital networks have the potential to help Canadians overcome distance and isolation.

The need for access to affordable broadband networks in underserved Canadian regions has been highlighted. This investment should be continued, but also supplemented by investment in the capacity of local media arts organizations to act as a focus for creativity, digital expression and community building in their localities.

Investment in, and support of, human capital reinforces the unique engagement that local institutions provide their participants. Investment in regional institutions contributes to the strength, diversity and attractiveness of regional communities to emerging generations of creators. Canada should take steps to ensure that these communities remain vibrant and dynamic locales, and that opportunities to emerge as a creator of digital media remain open and accessible locally. If there are innovation clusters contemplated, this can be reflected in the cultural domain also.

How can government policies help?

Investments in extending affordable broadband networks to regional communities should be maintained and developed.

Media arts organizations in these areas should be recognized for the value they add to their communities in providing opportunities for residents to develop as digital creators and find opportunities to practice locally, and offered strategic support to enhance this capacity, offsetting regional disparities in resources.

III. Conclusion and Recommendations:

1. Make non-profit arts and culture organizations eligible for the same level of support and investments offered to the for-profit private sector for expanding digital capacity and adaptation.
2. Ensure the capacity and expansion of existing federal arts funding programs.
3. Establish a national Digital Heritage initiative for preserving Canada's media arts and digital culture and making it accessible into the future.
4. Support and leverage existing networks of non-profit, community based organizations as effective vehicles of life-long learning, creative work and professional development in the use of digital tools and techniques.
5. Invest in the capacity of regionally based arts organizations to retain creators locally.

The Independent Media Arts Alliance also supports the recommendations made by the Canadian Conference for the Arts and the RCAAQ in their respective submissions.

Thank you for the opportunity to present these perspectives, ideas, and recommendations.