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# MEDIA IMPACT: THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN INDIGENOUS FILMMAKING AND DIGITAL MEDIA

Posted by Katie O'Connor | November 1, 2015 |  
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Indigenous filmmaking exists within a vibrant, lively expression of cultural traditions and new methods of storytelling and narratives. In Canada, indigenous filmmakers inhabit a niche market of film culture and are often only recognized and praised at national and international film festivals. An audience seeking this genre would be searching far and wide throughout independent and revue cinemas, which screen these films only occasionally.

New media and easily accessible technologies are impacting all forms of filmmaking and, therefore, the way culture is produced. However, to say these technologies are responsible for these shifts would be limiting the social and cultural aspects that must be considered when looking at why these changes are occurring. It's true: technology has become more accessible to everyone — filmmakers and non-filmmakers alike — increasing the number of films made each year. Much can be said about the access and distribution of indigenous films, but what about the production? Has digital media's

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ubiquity altered the way indigenous filmmakers create their efforts?

**“It’s great that we’re out there making our movies for less money, and the DIY spirit is fantastic, but I worry that it creates a situation where only people who have money can afford to be feature filmmakers.”**

Adam Garnet Jones is a Cree and Métis filmmaker who has directed short films **Cloudbreaker** (which premiered at the 2006 Toronto International Film Festival), **A Small Thing**, **Wave a Red Flag** and **Liar**. At 2015’s Toronto International Film Festival, Jones premiered his first feature-length debut, **Fire Song**, which also screened at this year’s imagineNATIVE. As a filmmaker, he believes the access to digital technology everyone has signifies a progression in media accessibly and a step in the right direction for filmmaking. In spite of the positives, he does

recognize the drawbacks. “Gear is less expensive and more accessible than ever, but this has also created an [economy] where people are expected to work for less as well.” Jones adds, “It’s great that we’re out there making our movies for less money, and the DIY spirit is fantastic, but I worry that it creates a situation where only people who have money can afford to be feature filmmakers.”

Jones notes that he’s not a very technologically minded filmmaker, but he recognizes the shift taking place with digital media and within the indigenous filmmaking community. “There has been an explosion of filmmakers in our communities — accessible technologies are part of it, but we’re seeing indigenous people rising in all professions,” Jones says. “I think it’s evidence of a wider societal shift, where indigenous people are getting out there, making things happen and supporting each other. Indigenous filmmakers are going to keep pushing the boundaries of what’s happening in media; I have no doubt about that.”

Audiences creating their own content or films demonstrate the do-it-yourself spirit Jones refers to. This has occurred for just about anyone with access to the technology to create videos, shorts and even feature-length

films, forming a type of participatory culture never previously seen.

Filmmaker/producer Alexandra Lazarowich is a Cree filmmaker who has made short films using easily accessible digital technologies. As a filmmaker, she explores film as a medium, making movies that view the effects of colonization on Aboriginal peoples and their culture. She is the director of video short **Fighting Chance** (2012) and documentary short **Alvaro** (2014, which screened at last year's imagineNATIVE). Lazarowich describes how she defines her role as a filmmaker within the indigenous filmmaking community. "I am always looking to tell unique, interesting and often untold stories," she says. "We need heroes; we need characters; we need laughter; we need culture; and we need people who look like us reflected back, so that we know we matter." Lazarowich notes she enjoys mixing analog and digital filmmaking, and admits to embracing new technology in her work as another way to convey emotion to her audience. For documentary film **Alvaro**, she credits her use of a borrowed Canon DSLR and portable sound recorders with making a zero budget project possible. "We found a way to tell a really beautiful and poignant story about an elderly man's love for street cats," she says. "Without the ability to basically

‘point and shoot,’ following Alvaro’s every move and getting to know him extremely well during the process, we probably couldn’t have made this film a reality.”

**“The accessibility of being able to grab a good, inexpensive camera and shoot a film creates a space for women to make successful independent work. We can use this technological shift to our advantage, and we don’t have to ask anyone for permission to make a film.”**

Like Jones, Lazarowich praises the advent of participatory culture in filmmaking as “the revolution indigenous people from around the world have been waiting for.” She further expresses how easily accessible media not only benefits the indigenous filmmaking community, “but any minority or people who are oppressed.” As a female filmmaker, she has

an interesting insight on the need to bring more minority filmmakers into the spotlight. “We still have a ways to go,” she says. “But women — especially minority women — need a voice in the industry. The accessibility of being able to grab a good, inexpensive camera and shoot a film creates a space for women to make successful independent work. We can use this technological shift to our advantage, and we don’t have to ask anyone for permission to make a film.” These standpoints propose an engaging and dynamic way of thinking about participatory culture and who has access to the technologies and who does not.

Both Jones and Lazarowich agree that the DIY method has created the opportunity for exceptional and never before told stories to be presented to audiences in various walks of life, especially those of the indigenous community. But what does this mean for the future of filmmaking and the ways in which films will be created and distributed? This is, of course, not an immediate or easy question to answer, considering the rapidly shifting pace of digital technology and how each filmmaker has a distinct and imaginative way of capturing their visions.

It’s obvious that the technological move to digital storytelling is another way indigenous and First Nations communities can express

their identities, which contributes to the cultural landscape of filmmaking in Canada, as well as South America, Australia and New Zealand. Films made and produced by indigenous and First Nations filmmakers expose audiences to new realities, embracing a dynamic cinematic experience. Viewers are also celebrating and supporting the talent in front of, and behind, the camera, which allows indigenous filmmaking to thrive, be acknowledged and be successful in unique forms of storytelling and filmmaking.

*Featured Image: Alexandra Lazarowich*

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Katie is a cinephile, aspiring cat lady and has a weakness for anything Jarmusch. She is a MA Candidate in the Joint Graduate Communication and Culture Program at York and Ryerson Universities where she is researching serial killer culture.



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