

Creative Canada: Content vs Culture in a Changing Digital Landscape

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Introduction

Pack it up Massey, there's a new cultural policy in town. Creative Canada is Heritage Canada's answer to the digital takeover of the creative industries. In the past, Canadian cultural policy has been to the tune of the betterment of the people. Creative Canada is singing a different song, one that fully acknowledges the creation of culture as an economic driving force. This new policy framework also works to enhance recognition for local artists on a global scale, a stark change in direction from past policy initiatives. Is this change to be seen as a disservice to the Canadian people and their cultivation of culture or is it a chance at launching Canada into a new age of digital innovation and creativity? How does this new framework effect book publishers and authors and how will a renewed focus on a digital future implicate the printed word? In this paper I will discuss the possible answers to these questions by first providing a brief history of past cultural policies, the opportunities and limitations that a digital ecosystem brings, as well as discuss the relationship between production of culture and Canada's political economy. Canada's cultural narrative has been shaped by post-colonial policies that have placed the onus on Canadian publishers to establish and promote Canadian culture; that Canadian books should be for cultivating better citizens and reflect the qualities and values that make up our society. Creative Canada aims to disrupt that narrative into one that is centered around technology, creative entrepreneurs, and partnerships with foreign entities.

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History

To understand the implications of Creative Canada's policy framework on Canadian culture we must first outline the structures that are currently in place and how they came to be. The Massey Commission (also known as the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters & Sciences), laid the policy groundwork for the Canadian intellectual and cultural institutions that we know today, such as the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (Wells, 2017). The commission did not hold specific book publishing policy but established that Canadian culture was of the utmost importance and that it was:

“Nothing less than the spiritual foundations of our national life. Canadian achievement in every field depends mainly on the quality of the Canadian mind and spirit. This quality is determined by what Canadians think and think about; by the books they read, the pictures they see and the programmes they hear.” (Introduction, 1949, p. 271)

Massey's take on culture feels, at times, a little excessive in its influence on the Canadian narrative. It is hard to put that amount of stock in an identity that, to this day, has never been clearly defined. The nebulous nature of 'being Canadian' does not lend itself to commercialization and perhaps this is why our publishing industry has always struggled to rake in revenue.

The Ontario Royal Commission on Book Publishing (1970) goes on to introduce government funding in support of arts and culture. It stipulates that foreign buyers in the sales of book publishers was “forbidden”, and that book publishing “contributed to the articulation of culture by providing Canadian authors with access to Canadian audiences” (Lorimer, 2012, p. 79). This commission reasserts the importance of Canadian culture existing outside of the marketplace as it is the only way to mitigate foreign entities infringing upon the Canadian narrative. Beginning in 1980 and through to the 90s, the Association of Canadian Publishers held policy forums that aimed for the government to create a “benign rather than hostile business environment”, and essentially asked for “secure firm financial footings” for publishers (Lorimer, 2012, p.101). The Baie-

Comeau Agreement (1985) reinstates that foreign buyers were “forbidden” within the industry, almost in defiance of the free trade agreements and notions of globalization that were prominent at the time (Lorimer, 2012, p.106). These fiercely protectionist commissions and agreements are what the Canadian publishing industry is built upon. The fear of foreign ownership and its threat of compromising our identity can be seen in the makeup of all Canada’s cultural industries but none quite as prevalent as in book publishing.

Creative Canada is Heritage Canada’s new policy framework that was announced earlier this Fall. It takes a startling new approach that exalts ‘content creators’, partnerships with American tech giants, and the export of cultural goods on a global scale. This switch to culture as a means of economic growth and competitive advantage holds various outcomes, both positive and negative, for our cultural narrative.

Switching Gears

The Creative Canada framework places the nation’s creative industries “at the center of [Canada]’s future economy” (Creative Canada, 2017). The three pillars that Creative Canada propose our digital future will be supported by are:

1. “Investing in our creators and cultural entrepreneurs: all of the professionals who contribute to the creation and production of work, from artists to writers, producers and directors and their stories.
2. Promoting discovery and distribution of Canadian content at home and abroad.
3. Strengthening public broadcasting and support local news.”
(Creative Canada, 2017).

The first two pillars are pertinent to book publishing and propose an interesting emphasis on creative professionals as entrepreneurs. The discourse surrounding our protectionist policies and national identity seems to have shifted away from culture as a “spiritual foundation” to one that is led by economic growth and global recognition. The transition from print to digital also raises the concern that

stories will be diluted down to produce “snack ble” or “trending” content to drive up ad revenues (Wells, 2017). Updates to the Canada Book Fund will be made to reflect the changing industry and a 35 million dollar investment fund will support the participation of Canadian artists and creators in foreign cultural and outreach events (Creative Canada, 2017). Modernizing our cultural policies and programs around the nation’s cultural industries is definitely needed, but steps should also be taken to ensure that the digital divide does not widen and that citizens are not alienated.

Exacerbating the Divide

To develop the Creative Canada policy framework, the Ministry of Canadian Heritage consulted a diverse array of communities and facilitators with the major consensus being that the digital age has changed how cultural content is created and consumed and that the Canadian government should invest and support in those working in “emerging digital media” fields and those in diverse communities (Creative Canada, 2017). While this is a pertinent request, it fails to recognize the social, economic, and technological divide that hinders many of the diverse communities they speak of. Multicultural and Indigenous voices are at risk of being under represented further with the implementation of this new policy framework. Studies have shown that digital inequalities, including access to a broadband connection, digital literacy, and use of social networking sites are influenced by “demographic factors that mirror current inequalities in our society” (Haight, Quan-Haase & Corbett, 2014, p. 503). A lack of interest in internet use is directly associated with one’s income as “non-internet users in the 41,000-65,000 and 65,000-100,000 income categories were significantly more likely to report ‘no need or interest’ as one of the reasons why they did not use the internet (Haight et al, 2014, p. 516). If Creative Canada is to highlight digital innovators going forward, they must first put policies in place that combat socio-economic barriers that are limiting digital access and literacy.

With the digital divide comes also the participation divide; the discrepancies in which internet users are engaging in the creation and sharing of content. Creative activity online is also influenced by a socioeconomic status and while

digital media “[levels the playing field] when it comes to exposure to content, engaging in creative pursuits remains unequally distributed by social background” (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008, p. 252). Furthermore, studies show that women are less likely to post their creative content online, though when controlling for web skills there is no longer a difference in posting between genders (Hargittai & Walejko, 2008, p. 245). This highlights the underrepresentation of women in technical fields; if women were encouraged to enter into STEM, specifically STEM in relation to creative fields, then there would be more women participating in creative online exchanges.

Section 1.1 of Creative Canada’s framework states that by “2021 Canada Council for the Arts will triple its investment in Indigenous Arts” and that they will implement a new Digital Strategy Fund that will support “Canadian artists, groups, and arts organizations in scaling up their practical engagement with digital technologies and and solutions (2017). While providing funding is a step in the right direction, special attention should be given to ensure that government investment combats systemic socio-economic barriers to technology and the opportunities it offers. Digital publishing has the potential to open up multiple channels for conversation and cultivate a responsive, user centered, community orientated medium. It is clear that a digital future comes with numerous opportunities and should be used to accommodate and include those who are underserved rather than continue to uphold the elitist tendencies Canadian publishing embodies.

Creatives as Entrepreneurs

Canadian publishing has never been seen as a source of financial capital but has established itself as an indispensable source of cultural capital. The government’s support of the industry is indicative of the value that is placed upon access to and cultivation of a Canadian cultural identity. Placing the publishing industry into Creative Canada’s framework could have negative implications for communities whose values exists outside of late capitalism. Publishing practices have operated on the dissemination of an authentic national identity as its bottom line, but under Creative Canada, this line is at risk of adapting to the whims of a capitalist

market. This would be problematic on a number of levels; for example, Indigenous creators (including publishers and writers), working within a “predatory economy is entirely at odds with the deep reciprocity that forms the cultural core of many Indigenous peoples’ relationship with the land... [and] to supply raw materials to foreign industry ... requires that Indigenous people actively participate in their own exploitation” (Coulthard 2014, 171).

Compromising Indigenous voices and values is not a new issue and Creative Canada has the potential to further marginalize their voices by further integrating colonial economic processes into their communities. On the other hand, digital strategies have the potential to “revitalize Indigenous values and practices” by providing a foundation for “non-colonial, alternative ways of being [where] participatory, consensus-based decision-making processes” are used to create economies that are compatible with Indigenous values (Alcantara & Dick, 2017, P. 23). To recreate these sustainable economies, they must operate without the “sanction, permission or engagement of the Canadian state” (Alcantara & Dick, 2017, P. 17). Technology enables the development of potential alternative economies but these currently do not have a place within our nation’s cultural policies. Publisher and editor agency underneath an entrepreneurial restructuring of the industry may be diminished and misconstrued.

Creative Canada attempts to frame capitalist values as purveyors of cultural values and that one will help the other and thus better Canadian society through the capitalization of its own culture. This automatically compromises the Canadian identity as it becomes explicitly attached to a free market and more susceptible to foreign influence, specifically from the United States. Creative Canada wishes to partner with global internet companies such as Facebook and Netflix to help reach growth, distribution and production objectives (2017). Canada’s reliance on external giants to help ‘reach objectives’ contradicts past policies and blatantly acknowledges that the Canadian narrative is not it’s own. Therefore, Canadian publishers, editors, and authors should be wary of new cultural policies that open the doors to corporate, foreign influence and should be mindful of not placing economic gains over cultural consciousness.

The Political Economy of Culture

Cultural policy regulates the publishing industry and in turn Canadian readers. Canada's cultural industries and political economy will always be intertwined, but none so much as the Canadian retail book market (Wershler, 2016, p, 227). The echelons within the publishing industry are mediated by government funding and through that mediation, literary value is decided upon via publishers and the state by association. Under Creative Canada, this perceived value has the potential to shift towards more accessible and digestible stories that fare well on digital platforms. For publishing practices to assimilate and thrive in a digital ecosystem must it compromise its content to cater to analytics and algorithms? Or will it provide a platform that eliminates cultural gatekeeping and fosters a grassroots approach to literary production and dissemination? Creative Canada assumes that digitizing our creative industries is necessary in order for Canada to be economically successful and to have its cultural exports be recognized on a global scale. This assumption alludes to more state sanctioned regulation online and digital policy initiatives. As society increasingly exists and creates on digital platforms, it is inevitable that corporate and state sanctioned control will increase online as well. Wershler discusses the concept of 'ethical incompleteness'; the process of "self-examination that defines our relationship to the state" and the ideologies and institutions that shape Canadian citizens under the guise of culture (2016, p. 229). This ethical limbo will be not solved through the online integration of Canada's publishing industry, in fact it may further illuminate Canada's cultural narrative as a product of the marketplace. The digital future has the potential to be liberating and democratic but within the Creative Canada framework, with the globalized cultural entrepreneur at center stage, freedom and agency do not appear to be in the cards.

Conclusion

The Canadian publishing industry is in the midst of navigating a new technology fueled frontier. Updated policies to reflect these changes are necessary to move forward and maintain good economic and cultural standing, however, Creative Canada as a solution to cementing Canadian culture in a digital ecosystem has

possible negative implications to the nation's cultural narrative. Inequalities surrounding digital literacy and access to new digital technologies are a stumbling block that this new policy framework will come across. Positioning artists, authors, and creators as entrepreneurs in a global economy blatantly reveals that Canadian culture is now primarily geared towards economic gains, which makes it increasingly vulnerable to foreign influence. As well, the literary value of published content is at risk of becoming diluted to appeal to web based readers. Creative Canada is evidence that the protectionist policies of the past are over and that a new era of collaborative, entrepreneurial, digital innovation has taken its place. While the opportunities for growth under this new framework are numerous, Canada can hardly claim culture being produced in this context as authentically its own.

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