

## **On greening film festivals: The environmental impact of film festivals and their future design and operation**

Marijke de Valck and Ger Zielinski, in conversation with Rachel Dodds, Laura U. Marks, Fabienne Merlet and Amaia Serrulla

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### **Abstract**

This roundtable brings together several film festival organisers and scholars to compare notes on the general impact of film festivals on the environment and to anticipate future directions for greening the sector. The event was hosted by The Creative School Catalyst, Toronto Metropolitan University. This is an edited transcript of the roundtable that took place on 13 January 2022 via Zoom.

**Keywords:** sustainability, greening, film festivals, slow mobility, offsetting, partnerships, carbon footprint, eco-materialism

As the effects of global warming become more pressing each industry, all social domains, every political party, and all individuals need to contribute efforts to bend environmental hazardous developments and reduce the impacts of climate change. As academics specialising in film festivals, we initiated a roundtable to bring together several film festival organisers and scholars to compare notes on the general impact of film festivals on the environment and to anticipate future directions for greening the sector. The event was hosted by The Creative School Catalyst, Toronto Metropolitan University. We also wish to acknowledge the generous support from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC), the Film Festival Research Seminar, and the Toronto Film Festivals Research Group. This is an edited transcript of the roundtable that took place on 13 January 2022 via Zoom.[1]

The roundtable begins with opening statements by the invited participants. Amaia Serrulla from San Sebastian International Film Festival and Fabienne Merlet from Locarno Film Festival give accounts of the sustainability measures at these A-list film festivals. Rachel Dodds and Laura Marks introduce their initiatives for greening the sector of festivals through consulting and the Small File Media Festival project respectively. The issue of film festival sustainability is gaining traction and the experiences of forerunners like San Sebastian and Locarno are fast-becoming models for future action on the part of festivals, the communities they serve, as well as their funding agencies and sponsors.

Ger Zielinski addresses the academic question of broadened disciplinarity and the use of environmental media studies as a way forward in integrating the question of the carbon footprint of festivals into research and individual festival design. Marijke de Valck explores ways of rethinking festivals in environmental terms from the position afforded by the global pandemic as a crisis point. Tactics discussed throughout include slow mobility over fast mobility (e.g. trains, public transit, bicycles over airplane travel, single ride automobiles), offsetting (paying fees for excess emissions), incentives for greener options (cleaner energy sources, recycling waste materials, choosing reusable items over disposable items), and teaming up in green partnerships with other organisations and companies with common environmental interests. Based on her in-depth study of digital streaming and its global environmental impact, Marks asks us to stream less, be aware of the platforms that we use and the quality of the energy sources used to keep their respective cloud servers going 24/7. Altogether this roundtable and its open-access publication in edited form is in part an act of strategic recounting and sharing of current pressing issues at the intersection of festival design and operation and environmentalism. Let us all continue this important work!

**Amaia Serrulla:** We are in the first stage of our transition to a more sustainable festival. This year we talked about the future of festivals in general and the future of our festival in particular. We have been thinking about how sustainable a nine-day event can be in the future, because we have a whole crew working for a nine-day event. We knew that we are no climate scientists and don't really know which

changes we need to make. We know that we contaminate because we are an international film festival, and we bring a lot of people to San Sebastian, but we didn't really know what our environmental footprint was exactly, so that's why we started a conversation with different private companies to make an environmental diagnosis. In June [2021], we shared our first live results and we made the report public in December.

**Fabienne Merlet:** To us [the Locarno Film Festival] sustainability in a broader sense has always been part of the values of the festival and its development is a very important, integral part of our present and future strategy. Over the years we have entered into several partnerships. Now there are almost thirteen partnerships that are primarily aimed at encouraging a series of changes, from slow mobility to raising awareness on the importance of good consciousness behaviour. Generally, we take the environmental aspect into account during the design phase of each project we start. Because of this we have obtained a certification as a 'climate neutral' event. We have had the certification since 2010 and it is renewed from year to year. Climate neutral means that all the emissions that we produce are offset. We cannot avoid emissions entirely, because Locarno is a very small city that for eleven days becomes a location for international cinema.

Last year [2021] we tried to translate all of our measures into a sustainability report; we follow part of the standards that are dictated by the global reporting initiative, the GRI. We are one of the first film festivals to follow this approach, which usually is used by bigger companies. The motivation behind this choice is quite simple, because if we are able to measure our impact by using standards and protocols that are internationally recognised by big companies, this really allows us to create a transparent dialogue with all stakeholders to set sustainable goals that we can measure from year to year and compare from edition to edition. It was, maybe we will speak later about this as well, a challenging task because the reality of a film festival is quite complex and there are still many standards missing to measure the environmental impact of an organisation like ours. I think it is crucial to address sustainable development through the entire management cycle of the event.

**Rachel Dodds:** I work at Toronto Metropolitan University, formerly known as Ryerson University. I also do a lot of consulting and I have been working on festivals for a while. I have published articles, but I also ran a non-profit for a while that was working on greening of festivals, and then I also have done some consulting projects and some government projects.

I agree with the two other speakers that it is very much about the holistic capacity. Even my grad student has been looking at transportation impacts and modes of choice, because that's often the thing that's ignored at festivals. Often only the things we do internally are focused on scope 3 emissions[2] – we forget about everyone who comes from all over the world to visit our festival, and that has the biggest carbon impact. The green festival website I created, and then gave to Festival and Events Ontario, contains everything from waste diversion to equity and inclusion and everything in between.

Regarding my experience, I have done strategies for festivals on how to be greener, everything from benchmarking them from where they are to doing their waste audits. Picking through people's garbage is oddly very satisfying when you can reduce landfill! For example, the Mariposa Folk Festival, which is located in Ontario, now has a 95-92% waste diversion. No festival can ever be 100%, 95% is about as high as you can get. But that's pretty impressive, that they have gone that high. I have also written a Green Guide a long time ago and it is very old now; it was just a guide for festivals done through the Icarus Foundation, an NGO. I have also done a lot of consumer research in terms of what motivates people to make greener choices. We've done experiments on procurement festivals, for example, t-shirts that people buy at festivals and whether or not they'll buy organic Fairtrade cotton versus just locally made.

I have also worked as a consultant for some festivals. For example, we wrote TIFF a corporate social responsibility plan. This also is quite a long time ago. A lot of strategies include best practices for different festivals and, I think it doesn't matter if you're a film festival or a music festival or a food festival, or even a local community festival, a lot of the challenges that festivals face are the same. For example, the t-shirt research we did on consumer behaviour, which found that people will

pay more, was then tested the following year and people did actually pay more. This then changed the procurement of the festival moving forward.

A big thing for festivals is to actually see what they can do. Because a lot of times there's very few full-time employees at a festival and to try and do everything, as well as manage volunteers, is huge and complicated. Trying to outline things to do to one or two people or a group of volunteers is not quite the same as having a corporate team that you have all year round. Your staffing changes throughout the year, so having the ability and actually putting out a report is something that is really impressive, because it takes a lot of time and you don't always have that much time when you're working on a festival.

I think festivals are like making a cake. We have to have the right ingredients to make sure that we have success. If one ingredient is off then it is going to affect everything else, and so, for me, these are what I consider the ingredients: waste diversion, energy reduction, water reduction, food and beverage: inclusion of organic/fair trade/vegetarian food, transport, procurement, volunteer engagement, communication. To help us move forward, we need to benchmark where we are and then determine a strategy. The implementation and the tactics part is always the tough bit – coming back to the cake analogy, it is getting the baking temperature exactly right, which is the tough part.

**Laura U. Marks:** I founded the Small File Media Festival in 2020. My research group of colleagues in ICT engineering and media studies did a year-long study on the carbon footprint of streaming media. We found that streaming media does indeed have a significant carbon footprint. For ICT as a whole the carbon footprint is somewhere between 3% and 4% of the global total. That is surprisingly high and it is rising, because people are doing more and more activities online and relying on streaming media, the Internet of Things, as well as using more cryptocurrency and artificial intelligence.

And yet the materiality of streaming is still fairly invisible to most people. The ICT infrastructure of data centers, networks, and devices consumes a great deal of electricity, both in their production and in their use. In particular, for our devices,

(computers, phones, televisions, etc.), about 85 to 90% of their electricity consumption occurs in their production. When you receive your phone or your computer its carbon footprint is already quite substantial. The carbon footprint of streaming is difficult to measure in terms of individual streams, because the infrastructure is always operating, comparable to how airplanes are always flying regardless of the number of passengers. The networks and data centres that support streaming as well as all the other information communications technology activity are operating 24/7, although large volumes of streaming put additional pressure on the networks. So, it is probably going to be impossible to decrease the carbon footprint of streaming media, but I think it is of crucial importance to prevent an increase of that carbon footprint.

Raising awareness is one factor, and decreasing the amount of high resolution streaming that individuals do is another. Ultimately government regulation is going to be important, but I founded the Small File Media Festival in 2020 to draw attention to the carbon footprint of streaming media and to encourage artistic solutions. We decided that we would limit the file size of the movies in our festival to five megabytes, which is extremely tiny, and also to five minutes in length. It just happened that we had intended to show the festival live but because of the pandemic, we had to show it exclusively online. And this was not a problem at all with the carbon footprint, because the movies are so tiny. So we have a lot of exemplary practices that other festivals can follow when they intend to show all or some of their festival online. Each year we've shown about 100 movies from a larger number of submitted movies, and each year we've had contributors from about sixteen or seventeen countries. There are many different creative solutions that artists have to make movies that look and sound really good even though they are only five megabytes in size. One of those is creative uses of compression. Another useful strategy for filmmakers is to produce their work with two intended outputs: one is high definition work for live exhibition, and the other is a small file work for streaming.

**Ger Zielinski:** I am not coming from the position of a festival organiser but rather as a scholar who is trying to study festivals. The prospect of integrating environmental media studies into the study of film festivals seems an important addition

at this point in history. Well before the current pandemic I had been slowly pondering how to bring such an approach into my own research, but the remarkable changes in modes of delivery of film festivals over the pandemic, particularly their digitisation and virtualisation, created a context that prompted me to act. At the 2020 Contours conference I made a valiant first effort to argue the case for the interdisciplinarity of the study of film festivals. At the heart of the paper was the concern for bringing environmental media studies approaches, somehow, into the fold. An expanded version of 'new materialism' might offer some possibilities. The launch of the two journals *Environment+Media* and *The Journal of Environmental Media* a few years ago demonstrate, arguably, a growing interest in the subfield. This is all still in process, and I address it in a chapter in the forthcoming Contours book (AUP).

The pandemic compelled festivals to discover alternatives in order to continue, and this brought impressive experimentation with digital delivery or virtualisation. Interviews, events, and the films themselves were streamed, synchronously or asynchronously. The unprecedented use and reliance on online platforms posed questions regarding energy use, as the work of Allison Carruth and Laura Marks have detailed. So, the questions present themselves, among others: How will such cloud use and video streaming figure into the calculations of the greening assessment? How does the measure of the cloud and other online services compare to the overall carbon footprint of the festival?

**Marijke de Valck:** I have been working on and thinking about festivals for quite a while, but the topic of festival sustainability is relatively new to me. For me, it was tied up with a book project that Antoine Damiens and I were starting on film festivals and their responses to the pandemic. Thinking about the health crisis and how it was impacting film festivals worldwide, it became apparent to me that I wanted to seize this opportunity of the global crisis to look forward and see how it might enable film festivals to also tackle other crises that were ongoing, and then of course the environmental crisis is one of the most pressing ones that we're currently facing. I was really struck by the extraordinary situation in which the film festival world came to a standstill, a real physical standstill because these events were not taking place and all the people that were normally flying to film festivals

were staying at home. Thinking from the perspective of sustainability, film festivals' carbon footprint is really tied up with their role as an international meeting place. This is also one of the points that was mentioned in the San Sebastian Environmental Diagnosis, that it is in fact 75% of the carbon footprint of the festival that is tied to mobility, and then within that a large part is taken up by the international guests visiting the festival.

So my entry point into this discussion was seizing this crisis as an opportunity to rethink film festivals and also, maybe even more importantly, how the system of film festivals works. For example, there is a certain logic at work at film festivals that uses a model of abundance. It is always about too many films that you can't actually watch and it is also about inviting many, many guests. And I think it is not the fault of the festival organisations themselves, but maybe more due to the governmental neoliberal system that we have been in in the past two decades that there is real pressure on cultural organisations to show their success in terms of growth – it is a sign of success if a festival grows, if there are more people attending the festival, if there are more films, if there are more international guests. And then, this critical idea that there is an end to a logic of growth is something that has been dealt with in detail in all these environmental studies and reports, and this is something that I would like to work with and adapt in a way that matches with the interest and aims of the festivals themselves.

**Merlet:** I just want to get back to what Laura was saying, which I found very interesting. I think that this hybrid model allows for more experimentation, as you said. You can reach a wider audience that otherwise wouldn't be able to travel to festivals. Locarno, for instance is a small city, so to find accommodation in August is not only really expensive, but can also be difficult. As film festivals, we also have a responsibility to the film industry as a whole. So to forego the physical festival and what happens when a premiere is presented would hurt filmmakers and their work, because their film wouldn't have the chance, in the end, to be distributed. Festivals are vital in the life cycle of a film. At the same time, we do not only have a responsibility towards the environment, but we also have a very important responsibility in terms of social responsibility. The physical event remains irreplaceable, and not only for the film industry, but also because it is the moment where



people come together, where there is an exchange and if I may use the term, where really the magic happens. Because it is still a quite different experience to watch a film together with others, for instance 8,000 people in the case of the Piazza Grande [in Locarno], and to share your thoughts about it afterwards, or just to watch it on your own on the phone. Of course, it is clear, that it is not sustainable anymore to be an institution that is only active for a few days or weeks a year and I think all festivals, including ours, they are moving towards the direction of being active all year round, through different kinds of initiatives. And we have to understand how to make the physical event more sustainable, but still, I wouldn't want to imagine a future without the physical part of the festival, as well as for all the stakeholders, for the audience, for the industry, and also for us that work for it all year.

**Marks:** To speak to this, if I may, I completely agree with Fabienne. The physical festival is really important. The intensity and the value of that experience really is incomparable. I don't think that the many online festivals that have proliferated in the last two years have given people the cinematic experience that they get at a real festival. My pitch is actually for us to have less media and to enjoy it more, instead of having so much streaming media. Online festivals can give people a kind of muddy and unsatisfying and aesthetically poor experience. I think gathering in person at a festival or at a local theatre and watching a film together, especially if the means by which people travel to the event are relatively sustainable, it is just a healthier way for people to experience cinema. And this is why I advocate that if people do work online, they don't try to replace the festival experience but to find a very modest way with a relatively low carbon footprint. I know that mine is a very unpopular solution, but it's what I advocate for.

**Serrulla:** I don't think it is unpopular, I think it may be the right thing to do, but I think you have to find the balance between these and being a first-class festival, which means you have to fulfil some things, like you have to bring a certain amount of industry people, media, guests. You were saying how for a long time it was all about growth, in industry people, in films, in guests, in everything, and San Sebastian is a really tiny city, and you cannot make it bigger or anything like that. So you have to stick to what you have, and then you have to find the balance. I think that

the balance between everything is really complicated and the mobility thing is an issue, because you have to bring in people and you cannot tell someone not to come because their footprint is big.

**de Valck:** I think it is really important that people continue to meet and really important that the festival remains the space for these international gatherings; that is a big added value. At the same time, I think we're now at a point where festivals can also look critically at what they can actually do, because I looked up some numbers for the Cannes Film Festival and the number of physical visitors has doubled from 20,000 in 2004 to 40,000 in 2019; that's a doubling in only fifteen years. And I do think this specific moment is right to rethink some of these things; maybe we don't always need to show more films, we don't always need to have more guests. That it should be more about the quality of what people are doing rather than the quantity. Of course, that is definitely not only in the hands of film festivals themselves. They probably also feel like they are in a straitjacket being forced by their sponsors into this system.

**Zielinski:** In the festival reports they use the wonderful phrase 'slow mobility': coming to the festival by train, using public transportation or even bicycles. But, yes, when 75% of the carbon footprint, if I understand the situation at San Sebastian, is from international travel, that is incredible. It is a significant amount that needs to be somehow reduced. What other approaches are there, perhaps lobbying governments or airline industries? When you book flights now, at least, we are informed of the carbon expenditures, so a changed flight might mean a different carbon footprint. Another step in an interesting direction is with the local energy sources, such as in Locarno, which is carbon neutral.

**Merlet:** Only for the main venues, I would like to underline. Not for all the infrastructure.

**Zielinski:** Well, it is promising. When you study, for example, streaming and cloud services, you realise that servers keep the clouds afloat wherever and whenever we access them. So, the amount and source of energy as well as our own reduction

in consumption, all work together. We need to take care in what we put online in terms of file size and where online (which cloud and server).

**Marks:** Absolutely, yes, we need to get off fossil fuels as soon as possible. That's the most important solution, but unfortunately that's not going to happen quickly enough, certainly not quickly enough to bring global warming down and bring carbon emissions down to 2016 levels by 2030, as we are still trying to do, while countries are trying to get off fossil fuels with horribly distant deadlines. It is really important to curb demand, and pointing to the energy footprint of activities, especially activities that seemed to be immaterial like streaming is important, but yeah, super unpopular, especially with some young people who have grown up with these media. Also, there's the problem of the Jevons paradox or the rebound effect, where greater efficiencies result in greater consumption. So as soon as those networks and data centers were installed in anticipation of future growth, there is a huge push by telecoms, network companies, and device manufacturers to encourage people to consume more and more. This rise in consumption, in turn, drives infrastructure corporations to expand networks and more data centers and encourage us to buy more devices. It's a deadly vicious circle. Unpopular as it is, it is really important to draw attention to the materiality of streaming. Sometimes gathering in person at a live event is better for people and better for the planet than people streaming on devices in isolation and getting in the habit of streaming all the time and in ever higher definition.

**de Valck:** What about the role that film festivals might have in stimulating the film industry or filmmakers to produce in a more environmentally friendly way?

**Merlet:** I must say that we noticed that the younger generations of filmmakers are generally more conscious about this aspect, on the content side as well as the production side. There are several green film funding sources that are being established. We are also in the final stage of establishing one. And when people start understanding that if they work in a sustainable way, they also get funds to accomplish a film, it changes their perspective. A good example is the Trentino Film Commission in Italy, which is quite a forerunner in protocols for filmmaking. They have a policy and regulation that only films that follow this protocol are eligible for

funding. In this way, the whole industry may start to change. It would be nice if we could work in the direction of a protocol for Europe or even worldwide. This is still quite utopic, since it involves politics or regulations that are specific for each country, as well as cultural aspects, but I think that could truly change the industry.

**Serrulla:** I think festivals should be the place where that could be discussed. It should be a meeting point for a green industry, where everyone could chat and talk about things. I think green productions are going to be mandatory in a few years and that [in the future] if you are doing a green production it will be easier for you to get funding.

**Merlet:** Yes, I agree with you, but I think we should also not forget the impact that the festival has. Now, of course, we talked more about the operational side of it, but there's also the films themselves. Also, through our collateral initiative, we really have the chance to – I wouldn't say shape minds, because that would give it too much impact – but really questioning the viewers in making them attentive to different realities. It goes without saying that there are films that tackle environmental issues. In the broader sense, for us as a festival to give a platform for making these kinds of films and issues visible is quite a responsibility, even though we are not a thematic festival.

**de Valck:** I would like to ask something to Rachel that maybe ties into what you, Amaia, were saying, that film festivals have a big challenge at their hands, which is to work on the year-round sustainability of their own event. You, Rachel, have been working on different types of festivals. Do you see differences there, maybe that music festivals are further along in these things or not? Or are there other branches that film festivals can look at, to make sure that this challenge that they have is going smoothly?

**Dodds:** There's a lot of questions in there. The sustainability of the festival itself, right, in terms of transportation is the big one. For a second and third scope from a carbon emissions point of view, but then there's also the operations in general; it is location and it is waste management and it is employee management and all

those kinds of things. Then you've got the production of who's coming, so for example, a film festival is no different than a music festival. You don't have control over any of your artists and what they're doing and how they're getting there and how they're producing and what they're doing. For example, a music festival I worked at was doing amazing things. But then one of their star artists came and they just dropped water bottles all over the stage and they ran their diesel generator, which was originally supposed to be solar-powered, and it completely diffused the whole greening event. It was their star person, they weren't about to say 'get out' or that kind of thing. Therefore, the only thing you can do is to put measures in place for your vendors for priority access or you can give incentives and things like that. Somebody made a comment about sponsorship. A lot of festivals have been doing greener sponsorships and giving them better positions from a marketing point of view, so there's an added incentive.

I think that all festivals share a number of commonalities, so I don't see why we're not talking more often. There's an opportunity to share best practices. When we were working on TIFF, the amount of things that the London Film Festival was doing were such easy wins for TIFF to incorporate into their operation, it was almost a no-brainer. There's a lot of low-hanging fruit that festivals just are not taking on board. This goes not just for festivals, it goes for hotels, it goes for tour operators, it goes for airlines. We keep talking about sustainability as this topic that needs to be approached by 2050. That's like saying I am going to quit smoking in 20 years, but the damage is being done right now and we're not really getting to the point of mitigation. I think that's where our biggest challenge is – that the people who are doing [great things] need to share more to inspire and invigorate everyone else to do great things, even if it is just one thing. Because one thing is going to make a huge difference. There are some big questions that we can't answer. I mean scope three emissions are almost entirely out of your control, but you can incentivise for other things that will make a difference that, hopefully, will help, rather than just saying we can't solve the climate crisis so let's not try.

**Zielinski:** From the scholarly point of view, I am very curious about some of the categories and terms that people are using, their origin, and how they are influ-

encing matters. So, the term ‘sustainability’ itself is broad enough to be wonderfully vague but dangerous. Similarly, ‘greening’ and all of these terms have these very promising aspects but also somewhat worrisome – there has been so much greenwashing over the years! Have you any comments on the potential pitfalls or issues that you may see coming in these categories?

**Dodds:** I think that there’s a big issue within the sustainability movement that we keep coming up with new definitions. For sure, there’s problems with the word ‘sustainability’, it is massively overused, but the true sense is about balance between environmental, social, and economic. But I feel like we are constantly coming up with new terms every five minutes and it is not helping our industry. The food industry has done a really great job because organic local food tastes better, looks better, is better for the economy, is just better all around, and it has been a really positive movement, whereas, overall, the environmental movement has been a very carrot and stick approach. I feel like we’re doing more harm than good, rather than encouraging we’re constantly having to attain certification. You can certify a concrete lifejacket if you do the process properly, so it is not the certification that’s the benefit, it is the managerial shifts that you do by going through certification that’s beneficial.

It would be really useful if funders would give benefits to making amendments – I mean, I am sorry for the term, but I always call us funding sluts, because whatever the funders asked for, we change our terminology to fit. But we’re not getting rewarded for sustainability efforts that should be in there anyways. I once worked on a project for the Inter-American Development Bank about setting targets that had sustainability indicators attached, so when they were funding country projects they had to have those as part of the criteria. I feel like that’s where we need to move so that everything is under those criteria. I know some festivals have done that – with their food procurement they decided what they value or what image they wanted to put forth – and they said, if you don’t comply, you can’t come to our festival. The consistency needs to be there. The sustainability indicators we install are just a baseline, right? It shouldn’t be an added value.

**Zielinski:** The festivals discussed here are dealing with much of that right now. They are engaged in the procurement and different types of contracts that aim to green the festivals in an important range of ways.

**Dodds:** And I think it is amazing! Fabienne and Amaia, it is tough because it takes a lot of work, but you need to be speaking out and sharing these stories, because it is inspirational for other festivals, to know that you've had struggles, but you've done things, I mean it is great.

**Marks:** I would like to ask a question in light of what Kirsten Stevens has been saying in the chat about the potentials of collaboration between festivals as a way to minimise impact. Fabienne, it sounds like you're already doing this. You're decentralising by having partnership cities, which is kind of similar to collaborating.

**Serrulla:** That's something that we started to do. We collaborate, for example, when we bring people from the United States to Europe, we try to make it less polluting. Sometimes it is complicated, but we are trying and we are willing to collaborate.

**Merlet:** I agree. Festivals are clearly not a disconnected system and cooperation between festivals could be very valuable. Two years ago we did an experiment, I would call it that, of cooperation between film festivals only in Switzerland. With film commissions and some organisations that are active in environmental sustainability and Swiss TV, and the goal ultimately was to create a platform of exchange from both the operational and strategic side. I have to admit it is really hard because every festival has a cycle and different peaks in our operational work, so it is difficult to find the time to share experiences, but the direction is the right one. Moreover, each festival has its own peculiarities and challenges, and also some political and commercial balances to take into account, which makes it quite hard to have this common ground, but exchange is really vital.

It is actually quite interesting. What we noticed in the last years is that sponsorship is really delicate right now. Retention and acquisition becomes more and more a

huge challenge. We noticed that sometimes we wouldn't even have a common basis with our partners to dialogue and to establish a new project if it weren't for our sustainability approach. So sustainability becomes a strategic driver. There's a lot of work to put all the data together, but it is definitely worth it. We're working with a lot of private partners but also with a lot of canvas suppliers, the next step would be to understand whether or not they all really work on a sustainable basis. The furthest step would be to not work with the suppliers that don't meet the standards that we want to ensure. I hope we'll be able to achieve it in the future, but it is still quite a challenge.

**de Valck:** Can I ask you something about the standards that you're working with? These have to do with these three pillars of sustainability that you also have in your sustainability report. So you have economic sustainability, social sustainability, and environmental sustainability, and your report cites some of the UN goals. Yes? One of the things that I was wondering about, I really understand why you are using this model because it is so widely used, but my slight discomfort with this from a humanities and cultural perspective is that culture isn't really in there. In other words, with these developmental goals, it is always about economic, social, and environmental goals and then culture is instrumental in achieving these goals. My discomfort then comes from the frustration that I think culture also has value in itself and that, in particular for film festivals like Locarno and San Sebastian, culture is one of your primary functions; the artistic added value that you bring.

**Merlet:** I understand what you mean. I don't really think that one thing excludes the other. Because while we work together very closely with private partners, the artistic direction and everything that is related to the content of films, is totally independent. What we've seen is the transition from the marketing departments of those private partners that were involved in the festival before to CSR departments now, and they have their goal of sustainability more in the social sense, so they work together with us for a project regarding cultural mediation and other projects for young filmmakers and kids. So of course, we bring more value to their CSR program at their company and they bring value to our offer at the festival. I really see a co-creation and something positive and using this model of social, economic, and environmental sustainability with the GRI standards just allows us to



talk the same language, so just to have a common ground. Of course, if there would be a cultural sustainability as well, and a way of measuring it's impact, it would be great for institutions like ours, and I think researchers are discussing this.

**de Valck:** I think it would make sense if there also was a standard that was specific to culture, in particular with the type of work that festivals do, because we could be thinking about sustainable media systems in which there is space for not only mainstream films, but also for a wider variety of films.

**Zielinski:** One question I had for Rachel, because of her long experience in this area, have you noticed trends in the type of analysis that is done?

**Dodds:** In terms of trends, I haven't been doing very much work since COVID hit, mainly because festivals have just been on pause for the most part. I think the funding is going to be a bigger thing. A lot of destinations have used festivals of all kinds, including film festivals, as a way to attract people to their destination, and as things have gone virtual it really shifted the trickle-down or the multiplier effect of somebody coming to see a film festival. The impacts can be both positive and negative, but with people not potentially coming or events being virtual – and you can just see how zoomed out we all are – the trend in terms of engagement is getting tougher for people. Some people want to travel, some people are afraid to travel, some people have changed their habits, after two years of not being able to be as mobile as they were. I think the one thing I can say that's positive – even though I am floored that we're still having conversations like does climate change exist – I do feel like we've moved the needle a little bit and it is not as far afield. People are now seeing the value of it more and they're putting a little bit more kudos towards it. Probably still not enough, but it is not as strange as it was even 10 years ago. It is becoming more mainstream, and I am hoping that will become even more so.

**Marks:** I would like to ask, because so many festivals have proliferated in the last few years, what would it take to encourage festivals to collaborate, rather than proliferating, each with their own infrastructure, to become one multi-part festival?

Kirsten has been talking about that in the chat, but I wonder if others have opinions about the increasing number of festivals. Is it a good thing, because they're reaching so many more niche audiences, or is it divisive and ultimately consuming more energy and dividing audiences?

**de Valck:** Well, one of the most striking things when you think about festivals is that they do not tend to have their own infrastructure. They usually don't have their own venues but make use of the spaces and venues in the cities that are already there, apart from a couple of exceptions like the Palais in Cannes and the TIFF Bell Lightbox. Most festivals, in particular the smaller ones that have multiplied, make use of existing cinema theatres, libraries, open-air settings, etc. In that sense, they are very lightweight. So I think the proliferation of film festivals is not having a huge environmental impact, but should be seen as a response to standardisation and homogenisation in the regular cinema supply chain.

**Merlet:** I agree. Locarno is a small town and yet during the festival, we have thirteen venues, and one of the largest is in a school gym. It would be completely unsustainable to have thirteen permanent cinemas during the year [in Locarno]. In regard to collaboration we're completely open and all festivals are, but it is still quite hard to organise and to find a shared platform. So it is not done in a very structured way. We often have informal exchanges with other big festivals, which helps us to gain new insights and to improve what we're doing. Let's not forget, there are surely more than 6,000 festivals in the world. I think we should try to connect the bigger ones first in order to make an example for the others.

**Zielinski:** Thinking about those gigantic ones like Cannes, in the chat Antonio brought up the initiative of taxpaying. Is that their only initiative?

**Merlet:** They had a good newsletter last year about all the initiatives they do in regard to green filming, and the only thing I know is that for accredited visitors they imposed a tax for the compensation of the flights. It was a non-optional measure and it was very well received. I think that would also be something great to add-in.

**Dodds:** There's a lot of different initiatives for conferences. A lot of times conferences have calculated the carbon footprint of all their attendees and then they've offset it that way, and just divided and added it to the conference registration. Some people offset their impacts through a charity donation and others have been charging taxes or will be charging taxes on pretty much anything and they'll call it an environmental sustainability tax. The challenge will be to make sure it's transparent where that money is going. Destination taxes have been discussed quite a lot and right before Covid hit, almost every destination was getting ready to try and launch such taxes. I wouldn't be surprised if it becomes a federal environmental tax in some places. Some of the festivals I have worked with have charged an environmental fee. For example, a camping fee, or they've charged an extra fee if you decide to drive to the location, rather than take public transit, or you pay an extra fee to park. However, if you carpool you get priority parking close to the festival or those kinds of things. There has been a lot of those kinds of incentives and motions, but most of the research that's been done on transportation choice is non-leisure based and so there's a gap there [in our knowledge of] how consumers make choices for things that aren't necessity travel. I think it is quite interesting because whether or not you drive to the doctor is very different than whether you drive to a festival.

**Merlet:** And there are people usually willing to pay this plus taxes already.

**Dodds:** Right. I think again, folk festivals or music festivals do a better job of incentivising it. I know Roskilde, which is a big party in Europe, outlines that if you don't carpool you have to park seven festival fields away from the action. So it is in your best interest to carpool because you're closer, you don't have to walk so far, so they make it your consumer's choice, whereas in others festivals they've just charged environmental tax, but they've been very transparent about where the money is going and people haven't had an issue. And it very much depends on your audience, right. If you went to a monster truck festival, I am sure an environmental tax probably wouldn't go down very well. If you went to a festival like your film festival in Switzerland, probably people wouldn't balk at all.

**Zielinski:** We are winding down now. Are there any final questions or comments?

**Merlet:** There was a question about the offsetting projects [in the chat], I think it was for me. Usually, this is a project that is related to the countries where the festival is present with Open Doors, which is a section of the festival that is developed together with the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation. Every year we give several filmmakers who live in countries where films are not subsidised or the conditions to produce a film are poor, the chance to come to Locarno to exchange with producers and distributors and then they receive the tools and means to produce their films. We also try to fund environmental sustainability projects in those same countries so that we can make a small contribution to the local economy. For instance in 2019, the focus of Open Doors was in Indonesia and we helped finance the installation of a bio-gas digester to have cleaner energy.

**Zielinski:** Well, this is a very wonderful conversation and again, as I said in the preamble, a kind of magical thing because I doubt that we could have ever come together in person, all things currently considered. It was a very productive and stimulating discussion with lots of interesting exchanges, and I see lots of potential for continuing it. We thank you again for your generous contributions.

## Authors

**Rachel Dodds** is a Professor at the Ted Rogers School of Hospitality and Tourism Management at Ryerson University [which has since been renamed to Toronto Metropolitan University]. She works actively with industry in her role as a consultant to help the tourism industry become more sustainable, which includes TIFF, among many others. The website Green Festivals stems from her research initiatives on greening festivals.

**Laura U. Marks**, based in the School for the Contemporary Arts at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, works on media art and philosophy. Marks led the research group Tackling the Carbon Footprint of Streaming Media and is founder of the innovative Small File Media Festival.

**Fabienne Merlet** is Head of Communication and Marketing at Locarno Film Festival in Switzerland. She directed the conception of the festival's first sustainability report in 2021.

**Amaia Serrulla** is Head of the Documentation and Films Department at San Sebastián International Film Festival, where she has worked since 2011. Since 2020 she has also been Head of the Thought and Discussion section, where the project on the increased sustainability of the festival was developed.

**Marijke de Valck** is Associate Professor of Film and Media Studies at Utrecht University in the Netherlands. Her extensive publications and research focus on transnational media cultures, art cinema, media industries, and film festivals. She is co-founder of the Film Festival Research Network.

**Ger Zielinski** is principal investigator of the SSHRC IDG research project Buffering Online and Off, on video streaming culture, festivals, and related environmental consequences. He lectures on critical media studies and film in The Creative School at Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University).

## Notes

[1] Ger Zielinski wishes to thank research assistant Kyle Rubini for his help in compiling the transcript of the roundtable.

[2] A description of scope 3 emissions by the EPA (United States Environmental Protection Agency) reads: "Scope 3 emissions are the result of activities from assets not owned or controlled by the reporting organization, but that the organization indirectly impacts in its value chain." <https://www.epa.gov/climateleadership/scope-3-inventory-guidance#:~:text=3%20Emission%20Factors-,Description%20of%20Scope%203%20Emissions,scope%201%20and%202%20boundary>.