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Sarah Dillard

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11. Loach, Laverty, and O'Brien have also used the film festival circuit to champion Palestinian rights. See Archibald & Miller 2011 for a discussion on the 2009 film festival circuit controversy regarding Israeli government sponsorship of films and subsequent calls for boycotts.

12. The full report is available at: http://www.ilo.org/global/research/global-reports/global-employment-trends/youth/2012/WCMS_180976/lang--en/index.htm (accessed on 10 June 2012).

13. For instance, the *Daily Mirror* (9 June 2012) ran a story with the sub-heading 'Paul Brannigan's life story could make a Hollywood film on its own'. http://www.mirror.co.uk/news/real-life-stories/from-a-life-of-drugs-on-a-tough-housing-estate-870119 (accessed on 10 June 2012).

14. The 'cunts' controversy was the focus of considerable UK press coverage. See, for instance: http://www.theguardian.com/film/2012/may/22/ken-loach-bbfc-hypocritical (accessed on 5 August 2012).

15. Bazin 2009, p. 15.

16. Marketing report provided by Sixteen Films. This does not include any additional press interviews as a result of the film winning the Jury Prize, which was presented on the final day of the festival.

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About the author

David Archibald, *University of Glasgow*

The 37th annual Toronto International Film Festival
Seeking the social in the virtual

Sarah Dillard

There are 11 days in September when the world's cinematic community turns to Canada for the glitz and glamour of the Toronto International Film Festival (TIFF).[1]

The streets are flooded with both lay and professional attendees taking in movies, meetings, and the charms of this North American metropolis. However, while there are thousands of people attending the festival, they are a small portion of the millions of people who can now access the glamour of the festival through countless virtual venues online. Whether it is a popular media outlet that posts reviews and tweets headlines to its followers or an individual film fan who posts a picture of himself on the red carpet for all his friends and family to envy, online platforms and social media have had a major impact on festival structure and experience.

This is not necessarily a new phenomenon. TIFF has provided limited online services to its attendees for several years, particularly for press and industry representatives. However, this year the organisational team made a concerted effort to position TIFF as not just the subject of online activity but to actively employ these tools in order to engage with its unaccredited, non-industry, general audience. For a public festival like TIFF, virtual activity changes the role and experience of the audience in relation to the film industry, professional media, and ultimately the festival itself.

An audience-driven festival

The purpose of the Toronto International Film Festival has changed since its inception in 1976 as 'The Festival of Festivals'. Instead of simply showcasing the best films from the rest of the world's festivals, it has become a premier festival in its own right, attracting international masters and new local talent alike. Moreover, with over 400,000 public attendees, TIFF exclaims that 'the festival is widely recognized as the most successful public festival in the world'.[2]

TIFF is known and valued for its audiences. As a public film festival, TIFF provides audiences an opportunity to interact with filmmakers and stars at red carpet events and post-screening Q&A sessions; there is a sense of community as people interact with one another in line before screenings and enjoy the collective experience of public film screenings. For the film industry, public screenings with the subsequent Q&A sessions provide immediate feedback on films as well as the all-important word-of-mouth buzz that is necessary to supplement small-budget marketing campaigns. Moreover, audience members get involved in the critical process as they vote for the People's Choice Award, which the industry recognises as a key indicator for eventual Oscar nomination.[3] In 2008, winning this award kept *Slumdog Millionaire* (Danny Boyle) from becoming a direct-to-DVD release and propelled it into an international sensation and winner of the Best Motion Picture of the Year Academy Award.[4]

It is this image as an audience-oriented, public festival that has led TIFF into the world of social media and online services. This year's increase in virtual activity

can be read several ways. One such reading is that it may simply be a matter of following the latest internet craze, as new sites like Pinterest have become more popular over the past year;[5] or, a matter of keeping up with the latest festival trends as many other festivals move to internet-based services.[6] Another reading is that it is an attempt to maintain or recapture the festival's public image by providing additional means for audiences to explore films, engage with the industry that produces them, and ultimately experience the festival itself. The audience-friendly image seemed to slip in the past year, as increased emphasis on market and industry ventures as well as additional membership perks have led to complaints of growing exclusion and elitism. Even the People's Choice Award winner, Lebanon's *Where Do We Go Now?* (Nadine Labaki, 2011), failed to receive much further critical acclaim.

There seemed to be an active attempt to re-energise audience participation this year. For instance, pre-screening video bumpers featuring the success story of *Slumdog Millionaire* and other past favourites were utilised to encourage audience members to vote using the new online voting system, thus re-engaging them in the critical process. In addition to the new online voting system, this year TIFF upgraded their online box office and other internet-based services which, for many attendees, provided a more streamlined experience, cutting down on ticket lines. However, while these services provided increased convenience, it was primarily through social media and online content that TIFF re-engaged the audience in festival activities.

Audience engagement

TIFF has maintained Twitter and Facebook accounts for several years, in addition to a YouTube channel showcasing both organisation-produced content and trailers. Just this year, TIFF created Foursquare, Instagram, Get Glued, and Pinterest accounts. With other accounts, such as a Google+ hangout, Flickr group, and LinkedIn listing, TIFF seems to have their social media bases covered.[7] The online presence of the TIFF organisation now allows its audience to reach their favourite TIFF programmers and personalities. Some accounts, like the Facebook page and departmental Twitter handles (@TIFF_Industry, @TIFF_Nexus) are managed by designated staff, but many of the programmers communicate directly with their followers via personal Twitter feeds, leading to public discussions of film choices and festival activity. In this sense, social media outlets can provide film and festival news much faster than waiting for information to filter from industry publications to mainstream newspapers and entertainment news programmes. TIFF Artistic Director and avid tweeter Cameron Bailey notes that

> [i]t's a fascinating instrument, Twitter...I can use it to speak directly to TIFF fans all over the world, to the film industry and, as it turns out, to the media. I like that it's direct...It's also often where I get important film world news first. The flow of information is critical in this job. Twitter makes everything faster.[8]

One effect of increased social media interaction is the empowerment of the unaccredited to access what were once exclusive press and industry arenas. For example, one of the most anticipated moments in the festival season is in late-July, when TIFF begins to announce its film line-up. It is as much about generating excitement for the *festival* as it is for the films, which means it matters how announcements are made and who gets to make them. This year, the opening press conference on 24 July (where Bailey and TIFF Director and CEO Piers Handling announced the first set of big-name films) was streamed live on the TIFF website. The excitement of the room was echoed in tweets and status updates as each title was read from the official press release. However, this excitement was momentarily sapped pre-conference when *Variety* posted their online announcement of films two hours before the TIFF conference was scheduled to take place. Bailey tweeted the following: '[w]as going to tweet a few #TIFF12 films before 10am release but will ponder the meaning of trust instead.'[9] There was backlash from both TIFF fans and fellow press members against *Variety* for breaking this trust between festival and media. From the perspective of the unaccredited audience, access to the live festival press conference, interaction with programmers, and receiving more immediate information enhances participation in festival activity and the overall festival experience.

Audience reception

However, from the perspective of the film industry, the direct connection created by social media is an opportunity to better gauge audience reception and develop marketing and distribution plans. As previously mentioned, public festivals like TIFF provide film industry representatives with the ability to gauge immediate audience reactions to films – a kind of live test audience. Where buyers, distributors, and other industry representatives would use either direct observation or press reports of audience reception, online services and social media have, to a certain extent, altered this structure. There are several kinds of online platforms that affect the relationship between the film industry and the festival audience.[10] First, there are the more commercially-based business-to-business (B2B) services that allow TIFF as an organisation to virtually interact with representatives of the film industry and corporations. Examples include Cinando and Festival Scope – services that allow TIFF-accredited press and industry delegates to access festival

films during and for a period after the festival. This means that critics can write reviews and buyers can make deals without attending a screening or even being in the same city as the festival. At an audience-oriented festival like TIFF, these services may circumvent the value of public screenings where press and industry representatives can monitor initial reactions of the audience.

However, these reactions may still be measured on social media sites or peer-to-peer (P2P) platforms like Facebook and Twitter that allow individuals to interact with one another. Well before they arrive in Toronto and long after they leave, individuals can congregate on Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and devoted websites to discuss their favourite films and festival experience. Through online analytic and metric tools, industry representatives pay attention to this interaction when making buying decisions and distribution plans. For instance, during the Q&A at the TIFF premiere of *Aftershock* (Nicolás López, 2012), writer-producer Eli Roth (a fan favourite and prolific tweeter) explicitly asked the audience to give their reviews on Twitter using a designated hashtag that potential buyers could track. This reconnects the embodied experience of the Q&A session that audiences enjoy with the virtual activity of tweeting that has become an important part of the film business. Moreover, film distributors and marketers rely on both internal forms of publicity as well as the exponential effect of re-posts, re-tweets, and re-shares through social media. TIFF Industry programming reflected this growing interest in online capabilities with an entire panel discussion[11] on how to use social media networks for marketing independent, small-budget films.

Audience mediation

Like industry representatives, accredited press have access to many of the same online resources (streaming services, analytic tools, etc.) to help with their work. However, as the above examples show, increased virtual activity in some ways bypasses the role of the media – or at least professional media – at film festivals. As Marijke de Valck describes in her evaluation 'Venice and the Value-Adding Process: The Role of Mediation, Segregation and Agenda-Setting', there is a kind of flow of information from festival buzz through recognised media outlets, which is then used by the film industry to determine distribution and marketing strategies as well as by fans hoping to hear more about favourite filmmakers or projects.[12] The growth of online activity alters this flow as the industry and fans can connect directly with the festival and audience members. Instead of reading the reprinted press release and post-screening critique, fans can watch the live-streamed press conference and potential distributors can track conversations on Twitter.

On the other hand, social media does not eliminate the need for more traditional media outlets or the privileged role they play at the festival. TIFF still provides information to specific media outlets first and relies on these outlets to

spread the word through print and their own social media accounts. *Variety* has more subscribers – and Twitter followers, for that matter – than any social media account at TIFF. In addition, while there is no velvet rope separating fans from their idol's Facebook page, on the ground there is still a rigid segregation between general festival activity and exclusive events requiring press accreditation. At least for now, the 'mutually reinforcing' relationship between film festival and professional media remains intact.[13] Moreover, even if social media and online services alter the flow of information and exclusivity of activity, they are no less mediated. Only so much information can be transmitted through 140 characters, and watching online videos is not the same as experiencing the noise and flashes of red carpet excitement. These forms of mediation will likely never completely replace professional, analytical mediation, just as the virtual experience will likely never replace the intensity of the embodied experience.

Transforming audience experience

As Daniel Dayan has noted in his article 'Looking for Sundance: The Social Construction of a Film Festival', in large-scale festivals there is no single festival happening but rather a dual event. The first is an embodied gathering consisting of film screenings and the interaction of attendees; the second is a more permanent event in which place becomes immaterial if no less structured through printed texts distributed before, during, and after the scheduled festival. Much like this secondary printed festival, the virtual festival creates both an alternative and supplementary experience for the festival-goer.[14] Social media and online tools provide an opportunity for general audience members to not just add their voice to the discussion, but also to broaden and deepen their festival experience through tools that streamline, inform, and extend the more immediate, 'manufactured' time and space of the embodied experience.[15] As festivals continue to adopt online technologies, the way they alter relationships between the festival organisation, the film industry, professional media, and the general audience will be important points of inquiry for evaluating the cultural and social impact of festivals.

For TIFF in particular, it is worth considering the way virtual activity affects the festival's image as a public, audience-oriented festival. As Julian Stringer argues, festivals cultivate their image on both a local and global scale in order to establish and distinguish their place within the broader film festival network and subsequently, the global film industry and economy.[16] De Valck adds that the function of media plays a further role in image cultivation, with festivals promoting the number of accredited media outlets in attendance as a further distinguishing characteristic.[17] In the past few years, TIFF has begun to include online services and social media statistics as a part of their image. For instance, in their latest sponsorship packet, TIFF includes both the number of accredited

press representatives in attendance as well as the number of followers on their Facebook, Twitter, and similar social media accounts.[18] This shows they recognise the potential of online activities to reach a broader audience.

However, for TIFF, I argue that the number of people reached through social media and online services will not matter as much as how well TIFF is able to engage those that are reached. This year, the 37th annual Toronto International Film Festival has taken steps to re-engage the audience that has made the festival such a unique and social experience as well as a valuable event for the global film industry. As they increase their online presence and activity, we will see how this affects the relationships between filmmaker and film-lover, between collective and individual festival experience – between Toronto, the rest of the world, and the virtual space connecting them all.

Notes

1. http://tiff.net/thefestival (accessed on 15 October 2012)
2. Statistic and statement from the 'Toronto International Film Festival Sponsorship Opportunities' pamphlet published by TIFF: http://tiff.net/pdfs/2012SponsorshipOpportunities.pdf (accessed on 11 October 2012).
3. Feinberg 2012 (accessed on 17 September 2012).
4. Newcomb 2012 (accessed on 2 October 2012).
5. Pragnell 2012 (accessed on 12 October 2012).
6. For a brief overview of the way other film festivals are using these tools, see Barraclough 2012 (accessed on 25 September 2012).
7. TIFF provides connective links on most of its website pages. In addition, a running Twitter feed and access to most accounts can be found on the TIFF Social Media web page: http://tiff.net/social.
8. Quoted in Howell 2011. See Howell 2012 (accessed on 10 October 2012) for a similar article for this year's tweets.
9. Cameron Bailey, Twitter post, 24 July 2012, 9:42 a.m., http://twitter.com/cameron_tiff.
10. For a more nuanced examination of the connective capabilities of online technology, see Benkler 2006.
11. The panel 'The Social Network: Marketing Indie Films Online' (http://tiff.net/filmsandschedules/tiff/2012/thesocialnetworkmark) took place on 9 September 2012. It was part of TIFF's 'Industry Dialogues' programme, accessible to all press and industry delegates. Online distribution platforms, video-on-demand (VOD), transmedia, and other internet-related technologies were topics of additional panels and presentations (http://tiff.net/filmsandschedules/tiff/2012/industrydialogues). Several of these panels can be found on the TIFF YouTube channel (http://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL29EAE13FFC01002C&feature=plcp), another example of granting open-access to previously exclusive festival content through online platforms (all links accessed on 1 November 2012).
12. de Valck 2007, p. 128.
13. de Valck 2007, p. 125.
14. While there have been many studies of online communities, the focus on more recent social media sites – particularly their effect on scheduled events such as film festivals – is still emerging. One such article that considers the impact of social media on conceptions of social interaction and experience is Juris 2012.

15. Harbord 2009, pp. 40-41.
16. Stringer 2001, p. 140.
17. De Valck 2007, p. 126.
18. 'Toronto International Film Festival Sponsorship Opportunities', pamphlet published by TIFF: http://tiff.net/pdfs/2012SponsorshipOpportunities.pdf (accessed on 11 October 2012).

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About the author

Sarah Dillard, *Indiana University*