



**INDIGENOUS
SCREEN
OFFICE**



**BUREAU
DE L'ECRAN
AUTOCHTONE**

ISO Submission to the Standing Committee on Industry, Science and Technology June 9, 2020

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Executive Summary

The Indigenous Screen Office (ISO) recommends federal investment for the Indigenous screen sector through its office, which fosters and supports Indigenous narrative sovereignty on screen. Both the ISO and the burgeoning Indigenous screen industry are particularly vulnerable at this moment as a result of COVID-19 because of a long history of marginalization that has resulted in limited opportunities and investment. Prior to the pandemic, the Indigenous sector was experiencing a time of unprecedented growth, momentum and success. This represents a crucial opportunity for rebuilding a screen sector in Canada that is more equitable and opens new channels for exciting new forms of storytelling to emerge. This support would be an important contribution to the Government of Canada's ongoing and necessary reconciliation work with the First Nations, Inuit and Métis peoples of this land.

Introduction

The Indigenous Screen Office is a national advocacy and funding organization serving Indigenous (First Nations, Inuit and Métis) creators of screen content, including film, television, web, gaming and emerging technologies. Our vision is to build a diverse Indigenous screen sector across Canada that has the same access to financial and market opportunities as English and French content producers. We aim to achieve this by becoming a major national funding body for Indigenous screen content in Canada. ISO is already positioned to do this work, having laid the groundwork through research, national community consultations, industry leadership, and partnership and funding programs. However, as a result of the momentum and opportunity lost due to COVID-19, we are not able to fully achieve our mandate and the future of our organization is at risk.

This submission is to bring attention to the risks posed, not just to the ISO, but to the vibrant and rising Indigenous screen sector, who have achieved unprecedented milestones in the last year alone. Without targeted federal investment, the Indigenous screen sector, already historically underfunded and with significant barriers, will lose recent gains which have contributed significantly to Canada's cultural landscape.

Government support for the Indigenous Screen Office will assure that Indigenous storytelling on screen continues to benefit communities by creating economic and cultural opportunities – opportunities that foster the sense of belonging we know is deeply connected to positive health and social outcomes. It will support the Government of Canada in meeting the TRC Calls to Action¹, UNDRIP² and the final report on the inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls.³ The MMIGW report calls on “all governments to adequately fund and support Indigenous-led initiatives to improve the representation of Indigenous Peoples in media and pop culture”. Indigenous representation in our screen culture will benefit all Canadians, creating a deeper and more truthful understanding of the history and contemporary realities of our society.

Building an Innovative and Self-Determined Indigenous Screen-based Industry in Canada

In under three years, the Indigenous Screen Office has achieved significant achievements and milestones in its mission to foster and support Indigenous narrative sovereignty on screen. We have traveled across Canada delivering workshops and talks on the document *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with Indigenous Stories, Peoples and Concepts*⁴ with an overwhelming response from both industry professionals and Indigenous creators. We have delivered \$550,000 in funding to Indigenous creators for apprenticeships and mentorships through our partnership with Netflix. And we have worked closely with multiple partners to create new opportunities for Indigenous creators both nationally and internationally.

The success of ISO is testament to the exciting wave of Indigenous screen talent that has been steadily rising over the last two decades. Prior to the devastating impacts of COVID-19, which continues to thwart the entire production industry in Canada, Indigenous screen creators and the ISO had an incredible amount of momentum and energy that all but assured our continued growth and success. There is no methodology for capturing lost momentum, potential and opportunity, and our goal is to ensure that the rebuilding phase of the Canadian screen-based sector includes equity for Indigenous creators.

¹ http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

² <https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples.html>

³ <https://www.mmiwg-ffada.ca/final-report/>

⁴ *On-Screen Protocols & Pathways: A Media Production Guide to Working with Indigenous Stories, Peoples and Concepts*, May 2019
<https://iso-bea.ca/download/on-screen-protocols-pathways/>

The 2020 Canadian Screen Awards (CSAs) were an unprecedented and exciting success story for Indigenous screen creators. Indigenous-led productions took home six prestigious awards in major categories, and the awarding of a special achievement award for industry veteran Tina Keeper. *The Body Remembers When the World Broke Open* is one ground-breaking example of the new wave of Indigenous storytelling on screen. The first dramatic feature film for writer/director Elle-Máijá Tailfeathers, the micro-budget film won three CSAs and received six nominations, including two for the lead actors one of whom appeared in her first-ever onscreen role straight out of high-school. The film has picked up awards and accolades nationally and internationally, screened at festivals around the world, and secured a distribution deal with Ava DuVernay's Array Distribution, where it has since found a home on Netflix.

In 2019, CBC green-lit its first-ever Indigenous-produced series, *Trickster*, a long-overdue milestone. It was recently announced that *Trickster*, based on the best-selling trilogy by Haisla/Heiltsuk author Eden Robinson, has been renewed for a second season.

The year prior, another small-budget independent Indigenous film shot in writer/director Darlene Naponse's First Nation community in northern Ontario premiered at TIFF and showcased the first-ever leading role for iconic actor Tantoo Cardinal at the age of 67. The performance led to a series of awards, feature news stories, and long overdue recognition for the actor, who has since become a series regular on an ABC network sitcom.

These successes and many others are the culmination of a wave of momentum and energy around Indigenous content creation that has followed decades of advocacy work and talent development from the Indigenous community. It cannot be understated how overdue this success is, and what an uphill battle it has been for Indigenous creators and talent, who experience explicit racism and multiple barriers at every turn. Reports as recent as last year, and dating back 20 years, have all called for increased dedicated support for Indigenous-made screen content, with data consistently backing up the growing audience appetite for Indigenous stories, both nationally and internationally⁵. The progress we are now finally seeing has been slow considering Inuit masterpiece *Atanarjuat* won the Palme D'Or at Cannes in 2001 and heralded the beginning of a new wave of Indigenous storytelling on screen. *Atanarjuat* was named the greatest Canadian film of all time in a poll conducted by TIFF.

Increased investment from Telefilm Canada and the Canada Media Fund has certainly supported a surge in Indigenous production, however, Indigenous production budgets remain lower than industry averages, and targeted support for Indigenous-produced content is limited, prescriptive and oversubscribed. A historical lack of access to the industry also means that infrastructure support is needed, as well as training and development opportunities which are out of scope for the existing funders. New dedicated funding is necessary to take advantage of the moment of opportunity to build a robust and successful Indigenous screen sector, one that creates new economic and job opportunities, as well as exciting new forms of cultural expression and stories that will benefit all Canadians.

⁵ Indigenous Screen Office: Reports & Publications
<https://iso-bea.ca/resources/publications/>

The Opportunity

The 2018 report *Pathways to the International Market for Indigenous Screen Content* outlines in no uncertain terms the market and audience potential of the rising international Indigenous screen sector, of which Canada is a major contributor. Over 400,000 people attended festivals prominently featuring Indigenous content. The two highest grossing box office films in New Zealand's history are Indigenous - from Maori director Taika Waititi, who has been tapped to direct the next Star Wars movie. There is no denying the potential of Indigenous storytelling, which is still in its infancy compared to English and French production in Canada.⁶

The report states:

The vibrancy of the sector is assured thanks to the work of established producers with an impressive track record of award-winning films, television programs, and digital media content made over the last decade, growing audience awareness and demand for authentic Indigenous screen content, and continual renewal through opportunities aimed at new generations of Indigenous storytellers created by the CBC, the National Screen Institute, Telus Storyhive in Western Canada and Indigenous festivals across the country. Clearly, Canada's Indigenous screen sector is poised for growth.⁷

Successful APTN series including *Taken*, *Mohawk Girls* and *Blackstone* have each reached over 2m viewers in Canada, plus international sales and distribution.⁸

The COVID-19 crisis that has impacted the entire screen sectors has come at a particularly critical moment for Indigenous content creators. We have an opportunity to ensure a future where a highly funded and robust Indigenous screen sector is a vibrant component to the Canadian cultural industries landscape. With limited resources, historical barriers and micro-funding at all levels, Indigenous creators have demonstrated success in spite of the environment. Imagine what we could do with increased and dedicated investment.

The Essential Role of the Indigenous Screen Office

It is a critical time in Canada where Indigenous knowledge and storytelling is more important than ever. Recent events are proving that a society built on inequality and racism will never reach its full potential or be safe and truly prosperous. With crisis and challenge also comes the opportunity for change and discovery. This is a moment for new voices and stories to emerge. As the only Indigenous-led advocacy and funding organization for the Indigenous screen sector, ISO is critical to maintaining a robust ecosystem that includes and empowers Indigenous voices in Canada's multi-billion-dollar production and broadcast industry. Support for the ISO will be an important contribution to the Government's continued work in meeting the recommendations regarding language, culture and self-determination outlined in both the TRC's Calls to Action and UNDRIP.

⁶Pathways to International Market for Indigenous Screen Content (December 2018), p8 <https://iso-bea.ca/download/pathways-to-the-international-market-for-indigenous-screen-content-december-2018>

⁷ Pathways, p7

⁸ Pathways, p11

Leading up to the founding of the ISO, the Canada Media Fund undertook an engagement process and report which found that Indigenous screen-based storytellers face a number of systemic barriers to getting their stories made. Without intervention, these will be further exacerbated by the current crisis and its aftermath. The report states:

Canada's legacy of colonialism has led to great disparities between Indigenous people and other Canadians across a wide range of wellbeing indicators. These disparities result in fewer Indigenous productions being released.

Indigenous storytellers are competing on an uneven playing field because of the historic advantage non-Indigenous storytellers have in the mainstream industry. Overall, participants in the engagement process expressed that current funding frameworks do not reflect the unique cultural and linguistic circumstances of Indigenous producers, including costs relating to geography, appropriate cultural processes, and accessing Indigenous language holders.⁹

A recent report commissioned by the ISO stated:

New resources are required to create a new funding stream aimed at supporting Indigenous productions intended for the broader English- or French-language (i.e. "mainstream") broadcasting markets. The resources allocated to a new stream of funding should be robust.

Our review finds that there continues to be a gap in funding for Indigenous productions aimed at more general markets, such as mainstream television and other screens. There is a need to create a new funding stream for Indigenous producers who wish to exploit opportunities in the wider screen-based market by producing content for a broad audience. A number of studies in recent years support this recommendation¹⁰.

Historically, a crisis tends to exacerbate and expose underlying inequalities, while recovery efforts favour existing institutions and structures. The ISO offers one such example of how organizations, companies or individuals outside the stability of the existing system are left vulnerable in a time of crisis.

While there has been genuine excitement and support on the part of all industry and public sector partners about the potential for the ISO, we were just halfway through a four-year strategic plan that would culminate in us becoming a funding body for all levels of Indigenous screen creation. We are grateful to our founding funding partners APTN, CBC, CMPA, CMF, and Telefilm Canada, however, their funding only supports our basic operating costs and we currently only have a one-year funding agreement in place until April 1, 2021.

⁹Supporting and Developing the Indigenous Screen Based Industry in Canada: a Strategy (CMF-FMC 2016), p13 <https://www.cmf-fmc.ca/fr-ca/global-assets/news/2017/cmf-indigenous-strategy-dec2016>

¹⁰ A Review of the Canada Media Fund Aboriginal Program: Key Trends, Stakeholder Perspectives and Future Directions (ISO-BEA 2019) <https://iso-bea.ca/download/a-review-of-the-canada-media-funds-aboriginal-program/>

Without direct federal support ISO cannot fully execute our mandate and our ability to continue as an organization is at risk.

Without stimulus funding that allows for the disbursement of new funds for innovation and infrastructure to support the creation of Indigenous content, the burgeoning Indigenous screen sector will be set back at a critical time of momentum and opportunity. ISO is willing and ready to work quickly and responsively to support the Indigenous screen sector at this time of increased precarity, in partnership with the Government of Canada. New investments in Indigenous production should be led by an Indigenous organization ready to design programs that reflect evolving technologies, content platforms, and viewing habits. In addition to a traditional strategy of funding screen content through development, production and distribution funding, we aim to focus on innovative, multi-platform strategies that will take us into the future. Our driving principle will be a focus on storytelling, and we are excited about the deep well of stories that exist within our communities that will continue to win audiences around Canada and the world.

Additionally, key initiatives identified specific to COVID-19 recovery will include:

- Skills training for crew, where a high production backlog will create a new demand for crew members particularly in high-volume areas with high Indigenous populations such as northern Ontario;
- Support for new innovations in distribution and aggregating content;
- Building corporate infrastructure and business skills development for Indigenous production companies;
- Funding for longer project development periods;
- Support for rights acquisition and translation of existing IP into screen-based content;
- Advocacy for broadband democracy;
- Support for independent screen-based journalism.

Imagining the Future of Indigenous Content Creation

ISO would like to emphasize the importance and opportunity for supporting Indigenous screen creators at a time when we recognize that difficult decisions are being made. We know that the historic system of funding content creation and distribution in Canada has never worked for Indigenous people and we want to emphasize the opportunity that exists to imagine a more equitable future where exciting and innovative storytelling can flourish. ISO is advocating for direct support to deliver funding at this time based on the following critical factors:

- Indigenous people have largely been left out of the production and broadcasting sectors in Canada and will therefore not be explicitly included in any rebuilding or response efforts related to COVID-19;
- Indigenous screen creators will largely fall through the gaps of data tracking efforts, as many are at the start of their careers, and are not necessarily registered with funders, unions, guilds or other industry agencies;
- Momentum will be lost for organizations like ISO, who are in the building phase with little funding to shore up, who may be more easily seen as lower priority;

- ISO, with support from Indigenous creators across Canada, has been championing new ways and new models of developing, producing and distributing work and we are uniquely positioned to test new methodologies in whatever new context may emerge as a result of this crisis;
- The concept of a Story Fund, as proposed by ISO, that is responsive to new and emergent platforms and technologies is critical, as we see now that viewing habits and patterns can quickly transform based on global events;
- ISO supports all forms of screen content, including gaming, apps, and emergent technologies, which will emerge as more vital platforms with increased audiences and opportunity following this crisis;
- ISO supports job creation and training opportunities across all levels of the screen production sector, which will be critical as the industry finds its way back after the crisis.

About the Indigenous Screen Office

The Indigenous Screen Office (ISO) was established in 2017, as a result of many years of advocacy from Indigenous industry professionals who knew that an organization that supports Indigenous storytellers was a crucial component to a healthy and robust media landscape in Canada. With a mandate to support and foster Indigenous screen-based creators and professionals in Canada, the creation of the ISO was a key recommendation of the Canada Media Fund's commissioned report [*Developing and Supporting an Indigenous Screen-based Industry in Canada*](#).

Key objectives identified were:

- Achieving equity for Indigenous creators and producers in the industry;
- Ensuring Indigenous people are in charge of telling stories about Indigenous people as custodians of Indigenous narrative;
- Meeting federal broadcast objectives and United Nations commitments;
- Increasing awareness of Indigenous realities;
- And perhaps most importantly, empowering Indigenous people to engage in and self-determine our own cultural reproduction, dialogues and processes.

In a short period of time, ISO has achieved significant organizational and community engagement milestones, which will continue to inform our approach. Crucially, we have a high level of engagement and support both from Indigenous communities across Canada and the screen-based industry. Our current funding partners are CBC, CMF, Telefilm, APTN and the CMPA and their support is a testament to the need for the work we are doing. Key achievements over the last two years include:

- Secured a [multi-year commitment from Netflix](#) to launch a funding program for on-set apprenticeships and culturally specific mentorships that support capacity-building and protocols work, funding over 25 projects across Canada last year;

- Co-released the report, [*On-screen Pathways and Protocols: A Media Production Guide for Working with Indigenous Peoples, Communities and Concepts*](#) with imagineNATIVE, and led multiple workshops and discussions on the document, nationally and internationally;
- Co-commissioned completed reports on [international market](#) opportunities for Indigenous content, and a statistical overview of Indigenous production in Canada;
- Recently commissioned an [analysis](#) of the Canada Media Fund's Aboriginal Program, over the last five years, to support on-going recommendations;
- Made a formal submission of recommendations to changes to the Canadian Broadcast Act and participated in government roundtables regarding the Act;
- Incorporated as a non-profit organization with a Board of Directors following a national community consultation process and engagement of an Indigenous Advisory Group;
- Launched the Indigenous On-Screen Talent Database with partners;
- Established new partnerships and/or programs with MIT Open Documentary Lab, Sundance Institute, European Film Market, Banff Media Festival, and the University of Winnipeg, as well as others, many of which continue to be developed as online programs.

Through hard work, relationship-building and strategic planning, ISO has been laying the foundation to become a funder of Indigenous screen-based content creation that would herald an exciting new chapter in Canada's history. We are asking that the government work with us to leverage the knowledge, skills and energy that we have harnessed to ensure a vibrant future for Indigenous storytellers, which will in turn benefit all Canadians.

Recommendations

The ISO recommends the following post-COVID recovery support:

1. We recommend a direct annual funding allocation to the ISO from Canadian Heritage to support the building of an Indigenous screen sector in Canada, through the mechanism of the ISO Story Fund - supporting development, production and training for Indigenous screen content-creation. This stimulus funding should be an ongoing long-term commitment.
2. We recommend an urgent strategy to address broadband access in Indigenous communities across Canada, which should be considered a democratic right and which is an unconscionable barrier to accessing education, goods and services, health and mental health support, critical information and community in times of crisis.
3. We recommend that the government's COVID-19 response plan aligns with the recommendations set forth in the TRC Calls to Action, UNDRIP and the MMIWG report.