Locating Buzz and Liveness: The Role of Geoblocking and Co-presence in Virtual Film Festivals

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The importance of material presence in the development of film festivals is by now well understood. For audiences, "being there" has been an essential ingredient in "taking part" in festivals. Discourses of embodied participation drive understandings of how atmosphere is created within such events and shape understandings of how festivals are experienced. From Lindiwe Dovey's (2015) conceptualization of "(dis)sensus communis" at African festivals to Janet Harbord's (2016) theorization of the "contingencies" of festival time, material presence has been a core assumption of festival studies. Marijke de Valck (2012) notes the potential of shifts

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toward digital consumption in her discussion of online festivals (e.g. Media That Matters; CON-CAN Movie Festival) but ultimately reinforces the primacy of festival space as a necessary ingredient in "festive atmosphere," ritual, and ceremony associated with festivals' role in the media economy (123–125). Even in recent work that challenges notions of "liveness" or "live togetherness," such as Stevens' (2018) examination of digital engagement and Burgess' (2020) discussion of the dispersive qualities of festival buzz, participation and value creation are not completely untethered from territoriality. However, in 2020, the sudden and near-complete move of film festivals to online platforms has further complicated our understanding of the "there" and "then" involved in festival participation. Experiencing festivals in lockdown (often from domestic spaces) had the potential to dramatically expand access points for virtual events, an approach embraced by the globally accessible and relatively unstructured We Are One festival. However, for the vast majority of single-festival-run online events, access to content has been shaped by different forms of restrictions aimed at reinstating and delimiting festival boundaries.

This chapter examines the function of geoblocking content and the residual importance of material presence in hybrid virtual/real-world film festivals. It poses the question: what are the benefits for festivals in enforcing territoriality and place-boundedness in the de-territorialized world of online media? The shifting of screenings and events to online platforms carries the potential of increased access, bypassing travel-related costs and overcoming some issues associated with inaccessible venues or inconvenient schedules, thus lowering potential barriers associated with attendance. Yet, this shift simultaneously threatens the discursive power of exclusivity that is a key driver of festival buzz—after all, part of the lure of major festivals involves being amongst the first viewers at a premiere screening. This perspective on embodied festival participation stresses privileged access, as well as the discernment of taste, as a factor of selection and its visibility (i.e. being seen at the scene). When the festival's networking publics transform to networked publics, untethered from the physical venues, it is imperative to reconsider the performative aspects of both the festival experience and value creation and how they might manifest online.

Before a discussion of virtual festivals, a note on terminology is necessary. There is an important distinction to be made between Covid-era hybrid virtual/real-world film festivals and online film festivals, which have existed in varying forms for over 20 years, dating back to the early years of Web 2.0 (Bakker 2015). Unlike online festivals, which sought to

engage the freedoms and affordances of online technology to share audio-visual works with dispersed online audiences, the virtual events of 2020 have approached the use of online technologies from a need to adapt to existing technology rather than crafting technology specifically for a festival setting. In this chapter, we will be referring to Covid-era events offered wholly or in part online as virtual film festivals. We use this term as distinct to online film festivals to describe festivals that began as physically located events rather than as events that were conceived from their beginning as fully web-based offerings. In this sense, our use of virtual locates these events as part of real-actual-virtual systems rather than more binary online/offline presentations (Grimshaw-Aagaard 2014), where their "virtuality" is framed in relation to a recalled "real" that is absent in wholly online events. This distinction between a conception of online and virtual is important in the context of understanding the cultural geography of the Covid-era internet-enabled festival experience. As we explore in the following sections, the virtuality of these events provides both expressions of continuity as well as important points of disruption to how we understand film festivals and their operation in an increasingly complex technology-enabled and socially-distanced moment.

Geoblocking and Locating Film Festival Space

On April 27, 2020, Tribeca Enterprises along with YouTube announced that 21 international film festivals were combining to present We Are One: A Global Film Festival (Tribeca Enterprises 2020). Bringing together such geographically dispersed events as the Berlin, Cannes, Tribeca, Karlovy Vary, Sundance, and Sydney international film festivals, the event ran for ten days from 29 May to 7 June and was available worldwide to internet users with access to YouTube's platform. We Are One was not the first virtual event to result from the rapid shutdown of mass gatherings and in-person entertainments due to the Covid-19 pandemic. However, its approach to collaborative programming and global delivery marked it as a significant example of what moving online could mean for the future of film festivals. This was an event that seemingly exemplified the idealized notion of an open, borderless internet experience based on global connectivity (Lobato 2016, 14). As a free event that took advantage of YouTube's near-global reach, We Are One promised a festival where all that was needed to unlock access to the types of content and cultural experience previously restricted by barriers of wealth, location, and reserves of

professional and cultural capital was an internet connection and compatible device.

Despite the utopian visions of connectivity that surrounded We Are One (McIntosh 2020), the festival did not usher in a new wave of open access film festivals. In contrast, for the vast majority of film festivals that moved all or part of their event online in 2020, their delivery was marked by levels of restriction that worked to condition and limit where, when, and by whom their programs could be accessed. While SXSW partnered with Amazon Prime to screen sections of its program following the festival's cancelation in March, these films were available for ten days to Prime subscribers located in the United States (Roberts 2020, Hobbins-White and Limov 2020). CPH:DOX in Copenhagen, one of the first festivals to pivot entirely online in partnership with Shift72 and FestivalScope, likewise restricted the geographical reach of their film screenings to Denmark, while also implementing other restrictions, such as caps on tickets (1000 tickets per film), a 5-day rental period, and a 30-hour watch window (CPH:DOX n.d.). This delimiting of festival reach and durations has now become standard, with some of these restrictions required as part of digital rights agreements. However, this is not the only factor driving their use, with festivals choosing to impose these limits as part of their event design and in advance of rights negotiations (Fitzgerald et al. 2020). It is worth examining, then, what appeal these types of restrictions might hold for festivals beyond considerations of distributor obligations and Digital Rights Management (DRM). Among the different types of restrictions that have come to condition pandemic-era virtual film festivals, the use of geoblocking is particularly noteworthy in exposing the underlying logics that shape how festivals function as *sites* of experience and value creation, even as they transition to virtual environments.

Geoblocking describes the process of restricting access to digital content and services based on a user's geographic location. More specifically, this term is activated in relation to a set of geolocation technologies—geographic self-reporting, Internet Protocol (IP) address detection, hardware with Global Positioning System (GPS) capabilities—that are used to determine whether an internet user's perceived location grants them access to territorially restricted content (Kra-Oz 2017, 388–9). Ramon Lobato (2016, 10) has identified the use of IP addresses to detect the location of devices (if not specifically their users) as the primary mechanism employed by video streaming services to control the flow of media content within and across established international media territories. The use of

geoblocking by major video platforms, Lobato (2016, 10) argues, enables a filter to be applied to international audiences that allows distributors to discriminate across territories in relation to pricing, release dates, and customized product versions and delivery (such as subtitled or dubbed versions), as well as offering "an automated mechanism to enforce territorial licensing arrangements with rights-holders." In this sense, as Evan Elkins (2019) notes, geoblocking is not a novel concept within the realm of media control. Rather, it is simply the most recent manifestation of regional lock-out measures that work to maintain established media distribution patterns across geographically segmented markets (Elkins 2019, 4).

From an experiential perspective, the application of geoblocking technologies works to frustrate expectations of global access that accompany thinking of the internet as a placeless, singular, and instantaneous cyberspace (Wagman and Urquhart 2014, 125). The experience of "blockage" that accompanies a denial-of-service notification—the by now familiar "this video is not available in your location"—offers not only an impediment to accessing content, but functions, as Ira Wagman and Peter Urquhart argue, to remind internet users "of the power of place" (2014, 125). It imposes, on one level, an awareness of what Edward J. Malecki identifies as *cyberplace*—the material infrastructures of the internet—on the navigation of more dynamic, fluid, and open cyberspace, with the effect of reminding users that "the internet is grounded by supporting infrastructure with distinct geographical biases" (2017, 4). In the case of geoblocking, this manifests as an awareness that where in the world you are matters in terms of the version of the internet you access—a device in Canada is distinct from one located in Australia or the United States based on which websites can be accessed and in what form. On another level, this reminder of the internet's physicality also works to reinforce degrees of cultural distinction that are both socially and geographically inscribed. As Wagman and Urquhart note in their discussion of the Canadian experience of geoblocking, the technology's application has important implications for the flow and experience of material culture (2014, 126). Geoblocking enables the flow of cultural content to be stopped, delayed, and altered so that its experience and articulation may appear manifestly different depending on one's place in the world.

In his work on regional lock-out technologies, Elkins employs the concept of geocultural capital to articulate the power that geographically based media inaccessibility holds for reminding internet users "about where they sit within global hierarchies of media access and cultural

status" (2019, 11). For Elkins, the geocultural capital of a territory—be it nation, region, or city—is reflected "through both the accessibility of media within their borders as well as their ability to shape what kinds of media resources are made available within their borders and around the world." Capital, in this sense, accrues to those places with both the highest levels of access as well as the most desirable media resources—such as the desirability and domestic pride associated with BBC iPlayer due to its geoblocked national exclusivity (Elkins 2019, 84–90). Through this lens, Elkins offers a view of geoblocking that both aligns with dominant themes of media and cyber-legal scholarship, which focus on tensions between the implementation of geoblocking as modern DRM and its circumvention by savvy media users (see Burnett 2012; Lobato and Meese 2016; Kra-Oz 2017; Lobato 2019), but also acknowledges, as Wagman and Urquhart (2014, 126) argue, that geoblocking can be deployed "in the name of other causes beyond intellectual property or copyright." For both Elkins and Wagman and Urquhart, the cultural function of geoblocking works not only to block internet users' access to online content through exclusionary practices, but it also holds a powerful role in articulating an experience of place within cyberspace—albeit often as an experience of cultural deficit. Indeed, it is this activation of geoblocking as linked to cultural status and a sense of cultural locatedness that offers the greatest insight into how the technology fits within pandemic-era virtual film festivals.

Two pledges initiated and signed by a variety of film festivals across Europe and North America in 2020 highlight the importance that geographic space and its negotiation hold for festivals as they move online. In March 2020, film crowdfunding platform Seed&*Spark asked festivals and distributors to "take action to support the independent film ecosystem in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic" by signing the "Film Festival Survival Pledge." The pledge listed a range of commitments that were seen as necessary for the ongoing viability of film festivals in the Covid era. Significantly, the pledge called for festivals to embrace a "geoblocking waiver" that would allow for region-specific premiere status to stand despite potential screening overlaps occurring "when granular geoblocking technology, smaller than at the country level, is unavailable." The call recognized that while the online availability of festival programs enabled geographically dispersed audiences to engage with more remote events than might usually be accessed, the cultural geography of the festival circuit nevertheless relied on a greater distinction of place than provided by national borders. The Survival Pledge therefore sought to maintain the

cultural status of regional premieres, even as the exclusivity of their experience became indistinct within the virtual realm.

Echoing the Survival Pledge's concerns over the cultural status of film premieres, a second call for festivals to commit to rules around geoblocking emerged in August 2020. Initiated by Thessaloniki International Film Festival (n.d.) the call took form as a "festival pact to support and protect the audiovisual ecosystem in a digital environment." The pact called for festivals hosting virtual screenings to undertake to "geo-block for the audience the online diffusion of national and international premieres," while also relaxing requirements around acknowledging international premieres where films had already debuted online (Thessaloniki n.d.). As with the Survival Pledge, the Thessaloniki pact identified the potential for virtual festivals to dissolve regional distinctiveness and negate the accumulation of geocultural capital linked to territorial premieres as the greatest threat to the festival ecosystem. The question of how far a festival's geographic zone of influence can claim to reach, and where that zone of influence ends, lies at the heart of this negotiation. For both Seed&*Spark and Thessaloniki, geographic place is central to the formation of power relationships within the global festival ecosystem. In this regard, Thessaloniki (n.d.) invokes the "written and unwritten rules," developed organically over time through negotiations of individual events within regional and international circuits and by associations such as FIAPF as evidence of the pact's necessity, as well as a basis on which a new negotiation of place within a virtual setting might be handled.

As these pledges suggest, geography holds importance for film festivals that exists beyond traditional concerns of media markets and territorial releasing. Place and the linking of festival programs to located festival environments matter in situating festivals in relation to one another and within broader networks of influence and prestige. The activation of geoblocking in this regard works less as a function of blocking outsiders from getting into festivals and is rather a mechanism for articulating festival space within the more ambiguous realm of the internet. Far from a disruptive ejection from a global flow of media, the function of geoblocking within the festival environment is then focused on locating and defining the "there" involved in the "where" festival films screen and who they screen for.

In recognition of this, it is worth noting the tendency within the North American festival context to use the term "geofencing"—often interchangeably with geoblocking—to describe the use of geolocation

technologies in shaping festival delivery. The term geofence was often raised in examinations of high levels of VPN use in Canada to access the US Netflix catalogue ("Sony, TV Producers" 2015),[1] with questions raised about the legal implications of jumping the geofence. Noting the use of tunnel metaphors by some VPN services (including the aptly named TunnelBear), Juan Llamas-Rodriguez (2016) highlights the significance of spatial metaphors for "think[ing] through the practices that circumvent 'geofences'" (32). In the context of virtual film festivals, providing geofenced access alludes to the possibility of forging an imagined community of networked festival-goers. From the more inclusive perspective of access (i.e. who is inside the geofence), the spatial boundaries of Vancouver International Film Festival (VIFF) expand outward from brick-and-mortar venues to encompass the entire province of British Columbia. The notion of community-building inside the geofence further connects the festival experience to recollections of material presence. As is taken up in the next section, the geographies of participation and the links these hold to experiences of space and time hold an important role in how festivals operate and can be seen particularly clearly in the value creation that accompanies the spatial and temporal dimensions of film festival buzz.

NETWORKED CO-PRESENCE: GEOFENCING AND VALUE CREATION

Reflecting on pandemic-era film festivals, Ger Zielinski (2020) has noted the connection between disease transmission and mass gatherings. His work cites Philippe Gautret and Robert Steffen's 2016 meta-analysis, which found that the temporal and spatial concentration of people at large-scale events, such as open-air festivals, had been linked to outbreaks of vaccine-preventable diseases as well as to their international spread. During Covid, the potential for indoor crowding caused even seemingly mundane interstitial activities like "queuing for tickets and screenings" and "waiting between events" to be considered "highly dangerous to participants and their social circles" (Zielinski 2020). Yet, these transient moments of potential social interaction between festival-goers also have been connected to the viral spread of buzz. Both Dovey's (2015) concept of (dis)sensus communis and Harbord's (2016) analysis of contingent occurrences rely on "live togetherness as a pre-requisite" (Burgess 2020)

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[1] A 2014 poll estimated the figure at 35% of anglophone Netflix users ("U.S. Netflix" 2014).

for the festive excitement that fuels ephemeral value creation. Indeed, if social distancing measures eliminate live togetherness to halt the spread of Covid-19, will they also disrupt the viral transmission of film festival buzz?

Exploring the construct of buzz in film festival research, Burgess (2020) distinguishes between presence—in relation to "the energy generated in festival space(s)"—and place or the situatedness of program delivery. Yet, with the festival as the site of community formation, or networked co-presence, the two appear to be inextricably linked, as though festive energy requires some sort of anchoring to a physical location or embodied gathering (even as the networking itself has expanded onto virtual platforms). Some of the anxiety about the fate of pandemic-era virtual film festivals seems to involve nostalgia for place. In November 2020, federal funding agency Telefilm Canada tweeted a short video from Executive Director, Christa Dickenson, to thank Canadian film festivals for their "resilience, creativity & tenacity." Although Dickenson praises the "reimagination of these festivals" that actually created broader national access to "seeing Canadian stories," she spends more than half of the video reminiscing about attending back-to-back screenings and feeling inspired while "looking at who was in the audience" (Telefilm Canada 2020). With a memory that foregrounds the festive experience of shared viewing as live togetherness, the theatrical screening venue looms large. Similarly, in We Are One festival promotion, attention was "inevitably drawn not to the stories that festivals share but the lived experiences and encounters they support" (Stevens 2020). Voiced over a montage of red-carpet moments, stargazing fans, and exotic screening venues, Tribeca Film Festival Co-Founder Robert DeNiro explains that "filmmakers and film fans gather together…to be nourished by our community" but that "sadly this year we can't bring you into our spaces" (We Are One 2020). In both instances, the palpable nostalgia for physical festivals seems to overshadow the potential of online platforms to connect the world through film.

Although the impossibility of live togetherness evokes the social isolation and general sense of loss associated with pandemic restrictions, the nostalgia for festival sites also carries the anxiety that these re-imagined events would somehow miss the mark. From the perspective of buzz, if the mechanisms of value creation are disrupted, will the film festival experience still be seen as valuable? The decision by Netflix to skip a 2020 festival launch for their original films appears to lend credence to this anxiety. In an August *IndieWire* interview, Netflix co-CEO Ted Sarandos pointed to being able to relax post-production deadlines but also noted: "The idea

of getting folks together to go to the mountains [clearly referencing Telluride] to watch movies in small dark rooms didn't seem all that appealing to a lot of people" (Kohn and Thompson 2020). In addition, in a May interview for *Screen Daily*, General Delegate of the Cannes Film Festival Thierry Frémaux indicated that a new film from Jury President Spike Lee, *Da 5 Bloods*, "should have marked the return of Netflix to the red carpet, Out of Competition of course" (Goodfellow 2020). The potential end to the two-year standoff between Netflix and Cannes over straight-to-subscription-video-on-demand (SVOD) releasing, along with the landmark selection of Lee as the first Black President of the Jury, suggests that there was more at stake: the one thing that a socially distanced Covid-era festival cannot offer is a spectacular media event, at least not the kind of spectacle that relies on crowds.

With the cancelation of the 2020 Cannes Film Festival announced in mid-March, it is important to note that Netflix's decision also involved opting not to launch Oscar contenders in the uncertain (and rapidly evolving) context of virtual film festivals. There would be no red carpet fringed by throngs of media, no screaming fans, and definitely no standing ovation in a sold-out 2300-seat theater. In his study of Hollywood in Cannes, Christian Jungen (2015) explores the festival's capacity to generate hype as a launch pad for global mass releases, with media coverage helping to catalyze shared attention. Netflix's decision to skip participation speaks to their "clear engagement with the logics of the film industry" (Burgess and Stevens 2021), specifically a desire for their original productions to be celebrated, and indeed launched as films.[2] In terms of value addition, it could be argued that a streamed world premiere carries the risk of disrupting the brand image the SVOD service has sought to secure on the international festival stage, by not being sufficiently distinct from everyday Netflix viewing behaviors. Without media events, a significant question arises about what press coverage looks like during a virtual film festival.

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[2] The 2021 Berlin Film Festival included *A Cop Movie* (*Una película de policías*, Alonso Ruizpalacios), marking the third year in a row with a Netflix film in Competition (Lang 2021). Although the Berlinale made a late stage pivot to a virtual format due to "rising Covid-19 infections in Germany" (Keslassy and Barraclough 2020)—suggesting an initial commitment to return Netflix Originals to in-person international festivals—Ruizpalacios' film arguably stood to benefit more from critical attention (Lang's 2021 *Variety* review places the film among "the best auteur cinema that Mexico has to offer") than it would have from a glitzy media event.

At a 2008 Cannes press conference, then head of DreamWorks Animation Jeffrey Katzenberg lauded the festival's "carnival" atmosphere, noting "Cannes is a wonderful place to do publicity stunts" (Jungen 2015, 296). These moments of spectacle capture press attention and column inches, ensuring that films are mentioned while conveniently bypassing embargos on full reviews, which are generally held for the commercial release. In some instances, filmmakers have suggested that the relative absence of "big films" and celebrities, along with pared down program slots, could shift the spotlight onto newer voices and national cinema— "possibly provid[ing] a bigger chance for Canadian projects to stand out" (Ahearn 2020). Often, media coverage turned toward the festivals themselves and how they were coping with pandemic restrictions or focused on the spectacle of the pandemic with features like *Us Weekly*'s photo spread showing how "Stars are slaying the fashionable face mask game at the 2020 Venice Film Festival" (Petrarca 2020).

Returning to We Are One's promotional video, visual references to red-carpet glamor and exotic locales need to be considered in the context of spectacle and the spectacular gaze. When the "community" gathers, it is a visible presence that is framed by the gaze of fans, and it is also witnessed by photojournalists as ubiquitous flashes punctuate clips of celebrities like Lady Gaga as she pauses to blow a kiss (We Are One 2020). The spectacular media event mobilizes the global gaze of film fans in the spread of festival buzz. Consistent with Jungen's (2015) focus on media hype, de Valck (2007) stresses the transformative potential of "media value" that drives the convertibility of "festival value" into economic capital. In describing the combustive dispersion associated with value creation, she designates "film festivals [as] nodal points, where the concentration of material and media inevitably implodes into festival buzz, which, in its turn, may explode into global media attention" (128). The dispersed spectacular gaze, which stretches the geographical reach of value creation, points to the elasticity and potential porousness of the festival's spatial boundaries, such that embodied co-presence is not necessarily a precursor to participation. In addition, increased digital engagement has already demonstrated that the networked co-presence of digitally connected audiences can extend a festival's community. However, as part of her discussion of liveness and physical co-presence (i.e. asking whether "you had to be there"), Stevens (2018) wonders about the extent to which the festival's spatial and temporal boundaries can be stretched in the interests of expanded connectivity and access before reaching a point of rupture.

Citing the archival angle of digital preservation that enables a "return to the livestreams from past Sundance festivals," she speculates that the festival's event status may be undermined as access to the experience becomes "perpetual rather than temporary" (25).

Similar anxieties arose about the temporal destruction of liveness that occurred during Comic-Con@Home, a virtual fan convention that replaced San Diego Comic-Con in July, 2020. With the majority of panels pre-recorded, and YouTube comments sections turned off, opportunities for fan interaction were limited and Twitter engagement plunged over 90% (Vary 2020). In *Variety* coverage, the event was deemed "the starkest example yet of what we lose when we lose the live experience" (Vary 2020). For the virtual edition of the Sydney Film Festival in June 2020, festival trailers included the reminder to "Please switch off your mobile (Even while at home)." Although possibly intended to encourage an immersive viewing experience, this type of prompt is generally associated with theater-audience etiquette and the courtesy of not disturbing other patrons. At home, switching off mobile devices has the added impact of further isolating viewers from the possibility of networked co-presence or the shared experience as a digitally connected audience. As geofencing expands the possibilities for access to film festival content, it also requires a rethinking of the temporal dimensions of festival participation. For the dispersed attendees of virtual festivals, there is the convenience of the asynchronous viewing of on-demand screenings as well as the ability to time shift by catching up on recorded panels. But, unlike the scenario presented in Stevens' (2018) reference to archived livestreams, many virtual film festival panels are pre-recorded, which means that there was never a live audience. Pre-recording limits the possibility of the contingent occurrences that Harbord (2016) has highlighted as integral to the unfolding of festival time. From the perspective of buzz, is there as much incentive to view recordings when there is no "catching up" involved? Although synchronous co-presence may not be required to fuel festive excitement, it seems likely that some concentration of attention—inherent in the value of liveness—is required for the initial spark.

The allure of liveness is only one element that needs to be considered in the conceptualization of virtual festival time. For festival participants faced with a slate of asynchronous programming, there is a burden of choice that comes with deciding both what and when to watch. Research on SVOD audiences has drawn attention to "paralysis among consumers grappling with too much choice"—"with 21% saying they simply give up

watching if they are not able to make up their minds" (Hayes 2019). Nielsen's Senior Vice President of Audience Insights Peter Katsingris refers to this phenomenon as "being stuck in decision purgatory" (Nielsen 2019, 2). Meanwhile, happiness guru Gretchin Rubin (2014) sums up the problem of unstructured time with the aphorism that "something that can happen at *any* time often happens at *no* time." Taken together, these insights highlight the problems of task initiation that can arise with asynchronous festival attendance.

One interesting, and potentially useful, parallel emerges from congruences with the conceptual toolkit for Covid-era remote teaching, where task initiation has been flagged as a barrier to asynchronous learning. The community of inquiry (COI) framework, with its focus on collaborative processes of knowledge construction, could offer a suitable analogy for understanding the networked nature of value creation at film festivals. As with festivals, the pandemic forced an abrupt pivot from embodied co-presence in classrooms to online platforms. In an online course, social presence relies on the creation of a usable learning environment that fosters positive rapport, belonging, and a sense of purpose (Parker and Herrington 2015). Researchers have found that the external facilitation of "meaningful interaction" (through instructional design) boosts the positive indicators of social presence that are most strongly associated with higher grades (Joksimović et al. 2015). Thus, teaching presence, which includes both content curation and facilitation (Cormier and Siemens 2010), moderates the relationship between social presence and academic performance (Joksimović et al. 2015). Exploring how virtual film festivals foster communities of value creation could add nuance to previous formulations of ephemeral value creation that appear to take for granted the primary significance of co-presence—assumed to be embodied (situated) or, at minimum, synchronous (liveness).

Drawing a parallel to the role of teaching presence in COI models, festival presence or the festival's role in creating a usable environment for networked value creation involves more than curation or questions about digital content delivery platforms. Instead, drawing from the offline festival, it is important to also consider the structuring of festival time and how attendee experience is shaped by screening schedules, daily program updates, and even the architecture of festival venues (where attendees gather, queue, and converse). Specifically, how might virtual festivals facilitate a sense of belonging or a sense of purpose that supports asynchronous engagement? A noteworthy example of how this might work

occurred with *Nomadland*'s (Chloé Zhao, 2020) TIFF premiere, which serendipitously coincided with the Venice Film Festival's announcement of its Golden Lion award.

TIFF's regular daily release time—with several features premiering each night at 6 pm EDT—set a rhythm for festival engagement. This approach focused audience anticipation, while providing pacing for the release of media coverage and loosely delimiting social media conversations. Converging on Twitter under the hashtag #TIFF20 were @TIFF_NET's announcement of the day's premieres (TIFF 2020a), media hype from international and local film critics (New York Times 2020; NOW Magazine 2020), and anticipatory tweets from ticket holders, many of whom were re-tweeting mentions of the Golden Lion (e.g. Baldwin 2020). TIFF's screening of *Nomadland* subsequently sold out by mid-afternoon.[3] All of these elements create a context for the concentration of shared attention that can spark buzz. In a similar effort to build on audience interest, the Whistler Film Festival (2020) tweeted their "Box Office Top 10," which, in the absence of visible queues, draws attention to popular films. In Vancouver, VIFF continued their use of color-coded signals (from green to red) to advise ticket-buyers of availability. While this approach can create a sense of urgency about possibly missing out, it requires potential attendees to already be visiting the VIFF website. In contrast, tweeted interrogatives like "Planning your weekend at #WFF20?" (Whistler Film Fest 2020) or TIFF's (2020b) "Trying to do the math?" streaming explainers point to festival presence and the external facilitation of meaningful festival engagement.

While creating a sense of belonging and marshaling shared attention underpin the virtual festival's community of value creation, exclusivity persists as another key feature of buzz. However, notions of exclusivity—from gala premieres to reserved passholder seating to exotic or distant festival locales—tend to invoke the spatial dimensions of festive excitement, and these access points have been re-configured by geofencing. For TIFF, access to screenings on their Digital TIFF Bell Lightbox platform was available across Canada. Meanwhile, other major festivals on Canada's fall circuit were geofenced regionally. As part of a panel discussion about virtual film festivals, VIFF programmer Curtis Woloschuk noted a spirit of

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[3] It is important to note the ambiguity that surrounds sold out screenings in the virtual festival context. Without a bricks-and-mortar venue as a reference point, the actual size of a specific film's audience is not readily apparent (nor is the number of available tickets).

cooperation among regional events that included regular meetings of some of the organizers of Canada's fall festivals. The reference to a "much more collaborative and open conversation" between events that have overlapping or proximal schedules included setting aside much of the competitive maneuvering associated with the premiere status of films (Profiles Project 2020). Woloschuk explained the decision to limit VIFF to British Columbia as "multifold"—allowing filmmakers and distributors to manage "territorial exclusivity," embracing the "gentleperson's agreement" among individual festivals, and solving the logistical challenges of robust customer support for their streaming app, VIFF Connect (Profiles Project 2020).

In a report on indie exhibition in the Covid era, Calgary International Film Festival artistic director Brian Owens noted a similar commitment to collaboration in the decision to geofence that festival. For Owens, the decision reflected an interest in preserving pre-pandemic audience dynamics, while not encroaching on the zones of influence of other national festivals: "We geo-blocked films to Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba (as there were no major film festivals in the other two prairie provinces to 'steal audience' from)" (Owens qtd Fitzgerald et al. 2020, 16). Taking a different approach in December, the Whistler Film Festival provided cross-Canada access, with some geofencing at the Quebec border for French-language productions, while the 2021 Kingston Canadian Film Festival had a combination of national and regional geofences in place for different films in their program. What stands out about these variable approaches to geofencing is how they are effectively virtualizing the spatial relationships (and circuit hierarchies) that sustain the festival sector and overall global festival ecosystem. In other words, there is an implicit recognition of networked value creation rooted in festival circuits that are tied to geographically situated stakeholder groups.

RETHINKING FESTIVAL (STUDIES) FUTURES

Writing for *The Guardian* in late April 2020, Peter Bradshaw designated the We Are One festival "a loss leader for all the big festivals" faced with cancelations thanks to Covid. Its function, he reasons, lay in maintaining public awareness of the participating festivals: "They want to keep their various brand identities alive" (Bradshaw 2020). Framed as an early reaction to the threat of a year absent of film festivals, We Are One showcases festival anxieties about their relevance in a virtual world. When there is no

red carpet to draw the media's gaze, when the spectacle of the "event" is missing and only the films remain, will film festivals still matter? Will they still spark buzz? A similar telling anxiety is apparent in the formalized geo-blocking pledges,[4] as well as in the level of informal cooperation demonstrated within the Canadian fall festival circuit. The geography of festival operation and its negotiation through inter-festival dialogue points to a broader self-reflection that has emerged as the disruption of physical space has thrown geographically distanced events into proximity. The anxiety here is revealed through efforts to spatially frame and maintain brand and power relations even as notions of "place" become increasingly fluid.

Yet, even as these anxieties continue to play out moving into 2021, there is a growing recognition that many of the changes wrought by Covid are not temporary. Reflecting on interview responses sought in 2021 for a report examining the impact of Covid on Canadian film festivals, the Whistler Film Festival acknowledged unanimous agreement that the hybrid model is "here to stay" (2021, 21). Questions then remain about whether the anxieties that have shaped the development of events in 2020 will continue to influence the future of virtual film festivals, or if nostalgia for a recalled "real" festival experience will pass as affordances of new festival models are more fully embraced.

If the Covid moment is forcing film festivals to re-evaluate their place within wider film and cultural eco-systems, the same applies to film festival researchers. We began this chapter by noting the centrality that notions of material presence and the spatial dimensions of festivals hold in relation to how film festivals have been conceptualized by researchers, including this chapter's authors. Yet the rapid adaptation to new modes of presentation and the success of festivals in supporting networked co-presence and value creation in the absence of embodied participation challenges earlier assumptions about what elements are central to the festival experience. The collaboration of festivals in navigating new geographies within the virtual space also throws into sharp relief previously obscured lines of power, influence, and cooperation. In this sense, the Covid moment offers a unique opportunity for both festivals and festival researchers to reconsider assumptions about what makes festivals work and what future exists for these events beyond their physical spaces.

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[4] At writing, over 250 organizations had signed the Seed&*Spark Pledge, while over 50 festivals had signed Thessaloniki's geoblocking pact.

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