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ESSAY

Art as a Catalyst for Global Citizenship: The National Film Board of Canada's Approach to Societal Challenges

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Abstract

This paper examines the National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) as a model for how publicly funded art advances global citizenship, participatory media, and cultural democracy. Through analysis of NFBC's interactive documentaries, VR storytelling and counterpublic interventions, the study explores how the institution supports civic engagement and democratic resistance. Works like *Biidaaban: First Light*, *The Space We Hold*, and *Bear 71* demonstrate how digital storytelling amplifies marginalised voices, challenges colonial narratives, critiques algorithmic governance, and counters corporate media consolidation. Drawing on cultural policy, counterpublic theory, media studies, and participatory art, the paper argues that public art infrastructure is essential to sustaining alternative media spaces and resisting platform-driven content control. Concepts such as agonistic pluralism, digital sovereignty, and algorithmic resistance frame the NFBC's interventions into historical memory, environmental ethics and digital governance. By positioning the NFBC as a blueprint for media democratisation, the study highlights the urgency of protecting and expanding publicly funded storytelling in an era of digital privatisation. Ultimately, it contends that state-supported digital art remains critical to counterpublic engagement, historical witnessing and civic participation in evolving media ecosystems.

Keywords

Participatory Storytelling; Digital Sovereignty; Counterpublics; Algorithmic Governance; Cultural Democracy

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Introduction

Canada's cultural policy has consistently positioned art as a public service and a tool for civic engagement, shaping national identity, fostering cross-cultural dialogue and addressing global challenges. The National Film Board of Canada (NFBC) stands at the centre of this tradition, having evolved from a wartime propaganda institution into a leader in digital storytelling, documentary filmmaking and interactive media. Founded in 1939, the NFBC now plays a central role in participatory storytelling, using artistic innovation to engage audiences in conversations about environmental sustainability, Indigenous rights, human rights and digital democracy (Druick 2007; Bessai 2024). Through these projects, the NFBC reinforces Canada's role in cultural diplomacy while also challenging dominant narratives and amplifying marginalised voices.

While institutions such as the NFBC provide the platforms for public discourse, it is artistic expression—through aesthetics, narrative and participatory experience—that drives these initiatives, reshapes social consciousness and encourages critical engagement. The NFBC's work draws on global citizenship as an active practice, which, as Isin and Nielsen (2008) argue, extends beyond legal definitions of nationality to include civic engagement, social responsibility and ethical participation in international affairs. Their concept of 'acts of citizenship' is particularly relevant to NFBC productions, as these projects represent marginalised voices while also creating spaces in which participation in digital storytelling becomes a form of political and civic engagement.

The NFBC cultivates this engagement through speculative and immersive storytelling, creating spaces where historical injustices, environmental challenges and systemic inequalities are documented, interrogated and reimagined. By positioning public storytelling as an act of citizenship, NFBC productions prompt audiences to critically examine power structures, historical memory and the ethical implications of digital technology, transforming passive spectatorship into active civic participation.

This study examines how the NFBC catalyses global citizenship through participatory storytelling, digital innovation and social justice narratives. By analysing key case studies—*Biidaaban: First Light*, *The Space We Hold* and *Bear 71*—the paper explores how the NFBC harnesses the expressive and intellectual power of art to shape public discourse and engage with historical, environmental and technological challenges. These projects demonstrate how art as a public service frames counterpublic discourse, cultural democracy and digital sovereignty, offering a model for state-supported media that resists algorithmic control and corporate monopolisation while reinforcing civic participation and media accessibility.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The NFBC's approach to digital storytelling intersects with major debates on media, public art and civic engagement. Scholars such as Tony Bennett (1998) and Couldry and Langer (2005) argue that state-supported cultural institutions and media practices cultivate public dialogue and reinforce democratic participation by providing the infrastructures through which collective meaning-making occurs. Bennett's (1998) account clarifies how cultural institutions operate as policy instruments that organise access, visibility, and circulation for national narratives and civic values. Couldry and Langer's (2005) 'dispersed citizen' concept adds a complementary emphasis on how everyday media consumption shapes civic orientation and public connection across fragmented social space. While institutions create the conditions for public discourse, art animates these spaces, transforming abstract political concepts into embodied, affective experiences. The NFBC's productions therefore function as interactive public spheres that enable audiences to engage with social issues through aesthetic, participatory and immersive practices. This draws on Michael Warner's (2002) concept of counterpublics, emphasising how alternative media spaces challenge dominant narratives and reopen democratic possibilities. Warner's framework also clarifies how publics form

through circulation, address, and shared attention, including publics organised around dissenting styles and contested histories.

The NFBC's emphasis on participation resonates with Claire Bishop's (2012) critique of institutional co-option of participatory art and Chantal Mouffe's (2013) argument for agonistic spaces where conflict is acknowledged as a constitutive feature of democratic life. The NFBC navigates this tension by using digital and immersive media to challenge audiences, provoke discussion and reframe accepted narratives. In doing so, its productions create counterpublic spaces where marginalised voices, historical injustices and contemporary crises are explored through creative forms (Bessai 2024). Albert Murray's (2016) concept of the stylisation of experience further illuminates the NFBC's artistic strategies. Stylisation moves beyond representation to interpret and reframe lived experience, generating emotionally resonant and intellectually rich encounters. In NFBC digital environments, stylisation operates through interface design, narrative sequencing, sonic atmosphere, spatial movement, and participatory pacing. Through experimental storytelling techniques, interactive platforms and immersive digital environments, NFBC projects transform raw social realities into structured artistic expressions that invite critical reflection and public dialogue.

Together, these frameworks clarify how the NFBC's participatory ethos, immersive storytelling and artistic innovation contribute to democratic culture and global citizenship. Building on these theoretical insights, this paper examines the NFBC through three interrelated research questions that structure the analysis:

1. How does the NFBC advance global citizenship through its digital storytelling initiatives?
2. How do digital and immersive platforms redefine audience engagement with social issues? This involves analysing the NFBC's interactive and participatory forms—web documentaries, VR and algorithmic storytelling—and assessing how digital democratisation reshapes agency, witnessing and public involvement.
3. What are the broader cultural policy implications of the NFBC's work? This evaluates the NFBC as a state-supported counterpublic, considers tensions between artistic autonomy and institutional mandates and examines how digital storytelling might inform future cultural and civic policy frameworks.

Together, these questions establish a scaffold for analysing the NFBC's historical role, contemporary digital productions and wider implications for public media ecosystems.

The NFBC as a State-Supported Cultural Institution

The NFBC was established in 1939 by John Grierson, a Scottish documentary pioneer who envisioned it as a public service institution dedicated to strengthening national identity and promoting democratic engagement through film. Initially created as a wartime propaganda tool, the NFBC evolved with Canada's shifting political and cultural landscape, transforming from a government information agency into a national platform for participatory storytelling, civic engagement and international cultural diplomacy (Druick 2007).

The National Film Act, first enacted in 1950 and revised in 1967 and 1984, formalised the NFBC's role as a state-supported cultural institution, mandating it to 'produce and distribute and to promote the production and distribution of films designed to interpret Canada to Canadians and other nations' (National Film Board of Canada n.d.). Over time, this mission expanded to include documentary filmmaking, animation, interactive digital storytelling and virtual reality (VR) experiences. These innovations positioned the NFBC as a leader in participatory digital media, amplifying underrepresented voices, promoting reconciliation and challenging dominant narratives.

As the NFBC shifted from state propaganda to participatory storytelling, artistic intervention became central to its public service mission. This evolution highlights the tension between institutional support and artistic autonomy—a dynamic that continues to shape the NFBC's approach to public engagement. Today, the organisation is internationally recognised for its commitment to digital accessibility, counterpublic storytelling and immersive engagement. With more than 14,000 productions and over 7,000 awards, including 12 Oscars, the NFBC remains a key institution in Canada's cultural landscape, shaping how national and global audiences engage with social justice, reconciliation and democratic participation (National Film Board of Canada, n.d.).

Role in Cultural Diplomacy and Public Engagement

The NFBC plays a significant role in cultural diplomacy, promoting democratic engagement, inclusion and human rights internationally. Its productions are regularly featured at film festivals, human rights forums and academic institutions, reinforcing Canada's reputation as a leader in state-supported digital media innovation (Druick, 2007).

One of the NFBC's most important contributions to global discourse is its focus on digital democratisation, which enables historically marginalised communities to shape their own narratives. This echoes with Michael Warner's (2002) concept of counterpublics, highlighting how alternative media spaces challenge dominant ideologies and foster democratic dialogue. Through its immersive storytelling projects, the NFBC facilitates cross-cultural conversations on issues ranging from Indigenous sovereignty and climate change to gender-based violence and algorithmic surveillance (Bessai 2024). By amplifying historically marginalised voices, the NFBC functions not only as a cultural institution but also as a space for alternative public discourse. Its projects do more than document social issues; they create environments in which dominant ideologies are questioned and previously excluded perspectives enter public conversation. This role—establishing alternative spaces for engagement— highlighting the NFBC's capacity to shape counter-narratives that contest mainstream cultural and political paradigms.

Navigating the 'Canadian Aporia'

The concept of aporia refers to an impasse in meaning and judgment—an encounter with claims that each carry moral and political force yet refuse settlement into a single coherent resolution. In a Canadian context, the Canadian aporia names a recurring condition in which national self-description relies on vocabularies of pluralism, rights, and reconciliation, while governance practices continue to organise authority, recognition, and belonging through structures shaped by settler colonialism. This aporetic condition persists across Canadian cultural policy and public discourse because it sits at the junction of competing obligations: state narratives of inclusive citizenship, continuing Indigenous jurisdictional claims, and the uneven allocation of voice and legitimacy to racialised communities within national frameworks (Bessai 2024). The aporia therefore operates as a lived political tension that reappears through institutional routines, policy language, and public storytelling, including the cultural institutions tasked with narrating Canada to itself and to global audiences.

The NFBC works within this aporetic condition as a publicly funded cultural institution whose productions repeatedly stage encounters with unresolved questions of settler colonial governance, Indigenous sovereignty, and racialised national belonging (Bessai 2024). As Magder (1993) argues, the NFBC has long functioned as a state-linked apparatus of cultural narration, shaping public understandings of Canada through representational choices that often centred Euro-Canadian perspectives. Across earlier decades, NFBC production frequently supported cohesion-oriented narratives aligned with state priorities, including the projection of Canada as a stable multicultural democracy. Over time, NFBC practice also developed an increasingly interventionist public role, with documentary and participatory forms that

bring alternative histories into view and invite publics to engage questions of recognition, jurisdiction, and epistemic authority. This institutional evolution tracks a broader struggle over cultural production in Canada, where contested histories circulate through public media and where Indigenous and racialised communities press for epistemic justice in the terms through which the nation understands itself.

A striking example of this pressure point appears in Maurice Bulbulian's two-part documentary series Dancing Around the Table (Bulbulian, 1987a, 1987b). The films follow Indigenous leaders during the Federal–Provincial Conferences of First Ministers on Aboriginal Constitutional Matters, documenting sustained negotiations over constitutional recognition of Indigenous rights and self-government (Bulbulian 1987a, 1987b). Read through the lens of art as a public service, the series illuminates how Canada's human-rights self-narration coexists with constitutional processes that repeatedly narrowed the scope of Indigenous sovereignty claims within state frameworks (Bessai 2024). The conference setting and its procedural limits become part of the story itself, showing how recognition travels through institutional channels that shape what can be said, what can be heard, and what can be taken up as legitimate constitutional knowledge.

NFBC productions operate as cultural interventions that make these tensions visible and experiential, compelling audiences to face how systemic injustice persists within national narratives of inclusion. This mode of engagement treats the Canadian aporia as an ongoing public question and keeps it available for collective interpretation, deliberation, and contestation. The approach connects with Mouffe's (2013) account of agonistic pluralism, which understands democratic life as a field of enduring conflict managed through shared institutions and public struggle over meaning. In this sense, NFBC storytelling sustains the visibility of Canada's unresolved contradictions within public consciousness and opens space for dialogue, resistance, and the imagining of alternative futures.

By positioning its digital storytelling projects within this contested space, the NFBC demonstrates how art can function as a civic instrument that both reflects and intervenes in national narratives. Through engagements with Indigenous storytelling, environmental ethics, and social justice movements, the NFBC reshapes discussions of Canada's evolving national identity by organizing participatory encounters that bring governance tensions into view. These projects contribute to political contestation in Canada's digital environment by widening the terms through which belonging, authority, and historical responsibility become thinkable in public life.

Art as Public Service and Participatory Storytelling

The NFBC plays a vital role in cultural production and exemplifies art as a public service by advancing democratic engagement, community participation and media accessibility. While commercial media enterprises prioritise market-driven narratives, the NFBC operates within a public good framework, using participatory storytelling to engage with marginalised communities and amplify underrepresented voices.

By emphasising collaborative media-making, the NFBC challenges traditional hierarchies of artistic production, enabling individuals and communities to participate as co-creators rather than passive consumers. Through documentary film, interactive digital media and virtual reality projects, the NFBC demonstrates how art functions as a site of resistance and a platform for civic discourse. By opening up participatory spaces, the NFBC's digital initiatives encourage civic engagement beyond national borders, positioning its projects within broader conversations on global citizenship. Through interactive storytelling and immersive media, the NFBC enables transnational dialogue, inviting audiences to engage not only as spectators but as active participants in shaping public discourse. This approach redefines conventional notions of citizenship, extending beyond legal status to encompass ethical responsibility and collective action on pressing global issues.

The Legacy of *Challenge for Change*: Art as Social Intervention

One of the most influential NFBC programmes to embody the organisation's turn toward collaborative media-making and participatory cultural production was *Challenge for Change/Société Nouvelle* (1967–1980). Initiated by NFBC staff such as George Stoney and Colin Low, and supported by an institutional mandate to expand public engagement, the programme transformed film and video into instruments of social intervention. It enabled communities—especially those facing economic marginalisation and systemic exclusion—to author their own narratives and to mobilise media as a means of political empowerment.

Challenge for Change documented oppression and expanded civic capacity by giving communities direct access to media tools. The initiative provided equipment, training and collaborative support, enabling participants to shape both the content and purpose of the films themselves. As a result, storytelling shifted from a top-down model to a shared process in which community members became co-creators rather than subjects of observation. Some of its most impactful projects included:

- *You Are on Indian Land* (Mitchell 1969)— This documentary centres Mohawk (Kanien'kéhaka) protesters at Akwesasne during the 1969 bridge action responding to Canadian restrictions on cross-border passage, and it records their public claims about treaty rights, jurisdiction, and territorial authority as lived political practice.
- *The Things I Cannot Change* (Ballantyne 1967) A cinéma-vérité portrait of the Bailey family in Montréal that documents the administrative and interpersonal pressures of poverty across a three-week period; the film also signals the institutional origins of Challenge for Change as a civic media approach to inequality.
- *VTR St-Jacques* (Klein 1969)— A community video experiment in a low-income Montréal neighbourhood that uses recording and local playback to surface shared concerns, support collective discussion, and organise practical responses through a citizens' committee.

These films were conceived as activist interventions, serving as tools for dialogue and change rather than passive representations. The ethos of *Challenge for Change*—democratising storytelling and centring lived experience—continues to shape the NFBC's contemporary digital projects. Whereas early participatory media relied on portable video technology and community screenings, today's initiatives use web-based interactivity, virtual reality and algorithmic storytelling to broaden audience engagement. These innovations preserve the core principles of participatory media while adapting them to an evolving landscape of digital communication and interactive storytelling.

Building on the foundations of *Challenge for Change*, the NFBC has adapted its principles to the digital era, extending its commitment to participatory media through emerging technologies and user-driven experiences. These contemporary NFBC productions blur the line between audience and storyteller, reinforcing the idea that art is most powerful when it is placed in the hands of the public.

Interactive Web Documentaries as Counterpublic Spaces

The NFBC's investment in web-based interactive storytelling has expanded the reach of its participatory ethos. Unlike traditional films, these projects allow users to navigate narratives at their own pace, engage with multiple perspectives and explore histories that are often excluded from mainstream media.

Key examples include:

- *The Space We Hold* (Hsiung et al. 2017)—An interactive documentary that presents the testimonies of survivors from China, Korea and the Philippines who were subjected to military sexual slavery by the

Japanese Imperial Army. By requiring audiences to engage as witnesses actively, the project transforms viewing into an embodied ethical encounter. This mode of 'active witnessing' demands sustained attention, emotional labour and a recognition of one's own positionality, shifting engagement from passive empathy to ethical responsibility.

- *Do Not Track* (Gaylor 2015)—A serialised web documentary exploring online surveillance and data privacy. It integrates real-time digital tracking to turn the viewer into both subject and participant, demonstrating how everyday digital behaviours feed algorithmic profiling and highlighting the urgency of digital rights discourse.

These interactive projects expand the role of documentary storytelling by transforming audiences from passive viewers into active participants. These works create spaces where users co-construct meaning through navigation, choice, and reflection. This participatory mode raises important questions: How does digital interactivity shape audience agency in narrative construction? In what ways does this form of engagement empower marginalised voices, and where do the boundaries of participation begin to falter? These questions will be examined further in the case studies, as the NFBC's approach to audience engagement offers a compelling model for rethinking the role of public storytelling in the digital age.

Virtual Reality as an Immersive Mode of Civic Engagement

The NFBC has extended participatory storytelling into virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR), creating immersive experiences that engage audiences through embodied forms of storytelling. VR intensifies sensory and emotional proximity through embodied perspective-taking. It asks audiences to navigate social issues through spatial and temporal immersion. By placing audiences inside reconstructed environments and encounters, VR enables a mode of engagement that is spatial, affective and experiential, inviting users to inhabit perspectives that are often marginalised or inaccessible through conventional documentary forms.

Notable projects include:

- *Biidaaban: First Light* (Jackson 2018)—An Indigenous futurist VR experience set in a radically altered Toronto, where users move through an urban landscape reclaimed by nature and guided by Indigenous language, story, and relational place-making. The work uses immersion and exploration to prompt reflection on historical continuity and civic responsibility within future-oriented urban imaginaries.
- *Homestay* (Smith 2017)—A room-scale VR narrative centred on a Canadian host family's experience living with international students, tracing how cultural immersion can produce clashing expectations and reframe ideas of family, hospitality, nationality, and intimacy. The embodied environment invites perspective-taking through proximity, pacing and spatial storytelling.

By integrating immersive modes of engagement, these projects reinforce the idea that art as a public service is not solely about accessibility but about active participation in the formation of meaning. VR demands physical orientation, emotional investment and reflective decision-making, transforming audiences from observers into experiential participants in the narratives they encounter.

Art as Resistance: Challenging Media Monopolisation

The NFBC's commitment to participatory media stands in stark contrast to the increasing corporatisation of digital storytelling. As algorithm-driven content curation narrows public discourse and major streaming

platforms prioritise profit over diversity, the NFBC offers an essential counter-model for non-commercial, socially engaged media production.

Unlike commercial digital platforms, which commodify user engagement, the NFBC uses publicly funded art to democratise access to storytelling tools. This approach ensures that:

- Marginalised voices are heard beyond the constraints of market-driven media
- Alternatives exist to corporate-controlled digital ecosystems, reinforcing art's role in public knowledge production
- Publicly funded cultural institutions remain radical spaces of resistance and innovation

To see how these principles materialise in concrete works, the next section turns to three key NFBC projects that exemplify participatory storytelling in practice.

Case Studies: NFBC's Participatory Storytelling in Action

The NFBC's commitment to participatory storytelling is best demonstrated through its case studies, which show how art catalyses civic engagement, social justice and digital democratisation. These projects reveal how state-supported media challenge dominant narratives, amplify marginalised voices and engage audiences as active participants in shaping cultural memory and political discourse.

Three NFBC productions exemplify the role of participatory storytelling in advancing global citizenship:

- *Biidaaban: First Light* mobilises virtual reality to stage Indigenous futurism and ecological engagement as civic orientation and relational place-making (Jackson 2018).
- *The Space We Hold* uses interactive testimony to structure historical witnessing and ethical responsibility through sustained attention and reflective participation (Hsiung et al. 2017).
- *Bear 71* links environmental consciousness to surveillance culture through digital interactivity, inviting publics to interpret how data systems shape perception and governance (Allison & Mendes 2012).

Taken together, these works demonstrate a distinct approach to participatory art, showing how the NFBC employs digital innovation, audience interaction and immersive storytelling to advance critical engagement with contemporary social and political issues.

Biidaaban: First Light – Decolonising Urban Spaces through VR Artistic Approach and Participatory Engagement

Biidaaban: First Light (2018), directed by Lisa Jackson (Anishinaabe), presents a speculative future in which Indigenous governance, ecological sustainability and traditional languages shape urban life. Moving beyond traditional documentary forms, *Biidaaban* employs virtual reality (VR) to immerse audiences in a decolonised Toronto, where Anishinaabemowin, Mohawk and Wendat are spoken fluently. The narrative foregrounds the reclamation of Indigenous knowledge and governance, reframing the city as a site of Indigenous futurism rather than a product of colonial infrastructure.

The experience is fully embodied, requiring participants to navigate a reimagined landscape rather than passively observe a storyline. This approach draws on Albert Murray's (2016) concept of the stylisation of experience, in which artistic interventions reconfigure reality rather than merely depict it. Engaging with *Biidaaban* invites viewers to step into a speculative future that extends Indigenous governance structures while envisioning radical possibilities for urban spaces. In this way, VR is transformed from a technological

tool into an artistic medium for political engagement, reinforcing the NFBC's role in creating counterpublic spaces that challenge colonial narratives.

Global Citizenship and Digital Sovereignty

As an NFBC production, *Biidaaban* exemplifies the institution's wider commitment to cultural democracy and digital sovereignty. The project insists that Indigenous storytelling should not merely be included within digital public discourse but should lead it. This principle underpins the NFBC's role as a counterpublic institution, ensuring that Indigenous narratives shape both representation and distribution rather than being appropriated, diluted or redirected by corporate media.

In the context of global citizenship, *Biidaaban* challenges Western-centric narratives of urban planning, sustainability and linguistic preservation. The project demonstrates how publicly funded digital storytelling can facilitate decolonial engagement by placing Indigenous knowledge at the centre of an imagined—yet entirely plausible—urban future. Here, Indigenous governance is not a supplementary or symbolic component; it forms the conceptual and ethical foundation of the project's vision. In doing so, *Biidaaban* reinforces the essential role of Indigenous epistemologies in debates on urban development, environmental responsibility and cultural sustainability.

This case study also signals the role of participatory digital media in advancing civic engagement. By immersing users in a speculative reality where Indigenous knowledge and governance shape urban planning, the project affirms that decolonisation is an active, ongoing process rather than a static reflection on the past. This resonates with Chantal Mouffe's (2013) account of agonistic pluralism, in which public spaces—including digital platforms—sustain productive tensions between competing visions of society rather than seeking premature consensus. In this sense, *Biidaaban* does more than imagine an idealised Indigenous future; it invites audiences to engage with a contested and evolving political reality.

Through its participatory VR format, the project also prompts viewers to recognise their positionality within the continuing legacy of colonialism, encouraging reflection on the responsibilities of non-Indigenous participants in processes of reconciliation and urban decolonisation. This interactive mode of engagement highlights the transformative potential of NFBC digital storytelling, illustrating how state-supported media institutions can function as alternative public spheres in which marginalised voices shape the terms of public dialogue.

By incorporating VR as a mode of public engagement, *Biidaaban* expands the possibilities of digital storytelling as a form of political resistance. It challenges the commercialisation of Indigenous narratives, repositions decolonial discourse as an active engagement rather than a passive act of consumption and compels audiences to participate in alternative world-building practices. In this way, the project functions as both an intervention and an invitation, reinforcing the NFBC's role as a leader in culturally responsive digital storytelling and a proponent of global Indigenous futurism.

The Space We Hold – Digital Witnessing and Historical Accountability Art as Ethical Engagement

The Space We Hold (2017), directed by Tiffany Hsiung, offers an innovative model of interactive digital storytelling as a mode of historical witnessing. The project centres on the testimonies of three surviving 'comfort women' from China, Korea and the Philippines who were subjected to military sexual slavery by the Japanese Imperial Army during the Second World War. Unlike traditional documentary filmmaking—where viewers often receive information passively—*The Space We Hold* employs an interactive structure that requires audiences to engage actively with the narratives. By navigating layers of personal testimony,

historical contextualisation and archival material, users participate in a mediated form of witnessing that reinforces ethical responsibility towards historical trauma.

The concept of bearing witness through digital media draws on Michael Warner's (2002) account of counterpublics, in which alternative platforms challenge dominant narratives and demand forms of engagement that exceed passive spectatorship. In *The Space We Hold*, the interactive structure shifts part of the burden of historical memory onto the user, transforming viewing into an ethical and political commitment. In doing so, the project operates as a radical intervention in public memory, confronting the historical erasure of sexual violence in wartime contexts while resisting the reduction of trauma to a consumable narrative.

The NFBC's approach in this project also speaks to Claire Bishop's (2012) critique of participatory art, which warns that institutional contexts often dilute participation into superficial inclusivity rather than meaningful political engagement. *The Space We Hold* pushes against this tendency by demanding sustained, active involvement from audiences, supporting what Chantal Mouffe (2013) would describe as an agonistic encounter. The project does not merely reconstruct history; it invites participants to situate themselves within it, highlighting the capacity of art to provoke ethical reflection and catalyse social transformation.

Expanding the Role of Public Memory

By creating a digital space for suppressed histories, *The Space We Hold* positions publicly funded art as a site of resistance. The NFBC's involvement extends beyond storytelling into policy advocacy, transitional justice initiatives and human rights education, demonstrating how participatory media can shape legal and political discourse. Through partnerships with educational institutions and advocacy organisations, the project functions as a living archive—one that keeps these testimonies active within global conversations about historical justice and gender-based violence.

The project's interactive format extends Albert Murray's (2016) stylisation of experience, in which artistic interventions reconfigure reality in ways that require active audience engagement. This approach positions survivors as narrators rather than passive subjects, allowing them to reclaim their stories within a publicly accessible digital framework. Moving beyond static museum exhibits or textual archives, *The Space We Hold* transforms historical memory into an evolving participatory dialogue, signalling the role of public storytelling in shaping contemporary understandings of justice.

In the context of digital sovereignty, the project also raises critical questions about who controls historical narratives in the digital age. By supporting interactive works such as *The Space We Hold*, the NFBC highlights the importance of publicly funded digital platforms in preserving contested histories. This commitment ensures that public discourse surrounding historical atrocities remains a matter of collective engagement and ethical responsibility rather than being shaped—or silenced—by corporate interests.

The Space We Hold exemplifies the NFBC's role as a global leader in digital civic engagement through its fusion of participatory storytelling, historical witnessing and political activism. It demonstrates that publicly funded art not only documents the past but actively shapes the future, ensuring that cultural production remains an essential tool in the pursuit of historical justice and social accountability.

Bear 71 – Surveillance, Ecology, and the Limits of Digital Control Narrating Environmental Crisis through Digital Interaction

Bear 71 (2012), directed by Leanne Allison and Jeremy Mendes, offers a compelling critique of surveillance culture, human–wildlife relations and the technological mediation of nature. The interactive web documentary recounts the life of a female grizzly bear in Banff National Park who was tagged, monitored and recorded by researchers until her death. By narrating her story through data visualisation, motion-sensor

footage and wildlife-tracking technologies, *Bear 71* exposes a fundamental paradox: efforts to protect the natural world increasingly rely on surveillance systems that, in turn, extend human control over it.

Unlike conventional environmental documentaries, which often depict nature as a passive object of observation, *Bear 71* subverts the gaze by compelling audiences to experience the world from the vantage point of an animal subjected to continuous tracking and monitoring. This narrative strategy challenges traditional conservationist assumptions, asking whether surveillance technologies genuinely protect wildlife or simply extend human domination over non-human environments.

The project extends Michael Warner's (2002) account of counterpublics by disrupting dominant conservation and environmental policy narratives. Rather than presenting digital surveillance as a neutral or benign tool for ecological management, *Bear 71* confronts audiences with the unintended consequences of data-driven interventions. Its interface constructs a sterile, algorithmic vision of the wild, underscoring how technological mediation erases organic forms of experience. Through its interactive design, the project implicates viewers in the very act of surveillance, transforming them from passive observers into active participants within the system of control. This mode of engagement resonates with Claire Bishop's (2012) critique of participatory art, which warns that audience involvement can be reduced to superficial inclusion rather than meaningful political intervention. *Bear 71* resists this tendency by ensuring that participation reveals, rather than obscures, the viewer's complicity in the expanding surveillance apparatus.

Counterpublics and Algorithmic Resistance

Bear 71 offers an ecological critique. It also intervenes in surveillance culture by linking data practices to environmental perception and governance. The NFBC's decision to release the project through an open-access platform positions it as a counterpublic response to the increasing privatisation of digital storytelling. In resisting dominant corporate models of algorithm-driven content curation, the project ensures that critical discourse on data ethics, surveillance, and technological power remains publicly accessible rather than confined within commercial digital ecosystems.

The interactive experience's depiction of machine-driven decision-making reflects contemporary concerns about the extent to which predictive analytics and algorithmic surveillance shape human behaviour. By drawing parallels between the tracking of wildlife and the monitoring of people, *Bear 71* foregrounds the ethical dilemmas posed by data-driven governance, mass surveillance and the erosion of autonomy in both digital and physical environments.

Chantal Mouffe's (2013) concept of agonistic pluralism provides a further lens through which to interpret the project. The documentary creates a space of productive tension, compelling audiences to navigate the contradiction between conservation and control, freedom and surveillance, organic life and algorithmic management. Rather than offering resolution, the project keeps these tensions visible, inviting sustained critical reflection on how data practices regulate human and non-human lives.

As a state-funded production, *Bear 71* signals the NFBC's commitment to using public storytelling to interrogate dominant narratives. In contrast to commercial digital media platforms that prioritise user engagement as a commodity, the NFBC offers an alternative model in which audience interaction serves a critical purpose—revealing, rather than reproducing, the systems of power embedded in contemporary digital culture.

Reframing the Digital Wild

At its core, *Bear 71* examines how technology reshapes our understanding of the natural world. Its interface—closer to a live surveillance grid than a conventional cinematic experience—echoes the tools used by governmental and corporate actors to manage populations, ecosystems and behaviour. This

aesthetic choice aligns with Albert Murray's (2016) notion of the stylisation of experience, in which artistic interventions reconfigure familiar realities to expose the structures of control and power that organise them. By transforming the wilderness into a data network, *Bear 71* investigates how digital systems impose artificial order on organic environments, reducing complex ecological relationships to simplified metrics and machine-readable patterns. This process of datafication—now pervasive in urban governance, policing and labour management—shapes public perceptions of nature and society in ways that demand critical scrutiny.

The project raises pressing questions about the implications of treating both nature and people as data points. By confronting audiences with the limitations of digital representations of life, *Bear 71* challenges the assumption that technological systems provide objective or sufficient solutions to complex ecological and social problems. Extending the NFBC's broader commitment to art as a site of civic engagement and critical discourse, *Bear 71* demonstrates how interactive digital storytelling can address ethical dilemmas ranging from conservation to algorithmic governance. The project reinforces the NFBC's contribution to cultural democracy by sustaining a public space in which dominant ideologies and technological practices can be examined rather than taken for granted.

Through its immersive, participatory structure, *Bear 71* moves beyond depicting the consequences of surveillance to engage audiences actively in its contradictions. The project demonstrates how publicly funded media can operate as a platform for resisting algorithmic control, ensuring that digital storytelling remains a tool for ethical reflection rather than passive consumption. By positioning digital media as both a space of possibility and a site of struggle, *Bear 71* illustrates how NFBC productions cultivate critical engagement with the technological systems that shape contemporary life. Its challenge to data-driven environmentalism, corporate surveillance and algorithmic governance remains essential to current debates on digital ethics, media monopolisation and the future of public storytelling in the 21st century.

Policy Implications of the NFBC's Participatory Art Model

The NFBC's commitment to participatory storytelling and art as a public service carries significant implications for cultural policy, digital governance and public engagement. In an era in which corporate platforms increasingly shape media ecosystems, the NFBC operates as a counterpublic institution, demonstrating how state-supported media can sustain cultural democracy, resist monopolisation and advance global citizenship. The case studies analysed in this paper show that publicly funded participatory storytelling is more than a cultural artefact: it actively reshapes civic discourse, exposes historical injustices and interrogates emerging systems of algorithmic control. From *Biidaaban: First Light*'s decolonial intervention in urban futurism to *The Space We Hold*'s interactive witnessing of gendered violence, and *Bear 71*'s examination of surveillance and digital governance, these projects illustrate how public storytelling can inform policy debates and contribute to digital rights discourse.

This section examines the NFBC's approach as a model for state-supported participatory art, considers its role in advancing digital citizenship and argues for the policy protections required to ensure the longevity of public media institutions in an increasingly privatised digital sphere.

The NFBC as a Model for State-Supported Participatory Art

Governments increasingly face the challenge of balancing public investment in the arts against the dominance of corporate-controlled digital platforms that shape how audiences access and engage with media. The NFBC offers a compelling alternative model, demonstrating that state-supported art can remain politically independent while advancing public engagement and democratic discourse.

The case studies discussed in this paper show that public media must continue to experiment with storytelling formats beyond conventional film and broadcasting. The NFBC's sustained commitment to

VR, AI-driven narratives and interactive web documentaries highlights the need for cultural policies that prioritise innovation and participation rather than static, top-down models of media distribution. Public storytelling projects such as *Challenge for Change* historically positioned art as a mechanism for civic action rather than a passive cultural product. Contemporary NFBC productions, including *Biidaaban: First Light*, demonstrate how this tradition of participatory art has evolved into a model for digital sovereignty. The NFBC's decision to foreground Indigenous knowledge as central—rather than peripheral—to Canada's urban and ecological futures highlights the power of public media to shape national identity beyond state-sanctioned narratives.

Furthermore, the NFBC's sustained critique of power remains central to its cultural and policy relevance. *Bear 71* and *The Space We Hold* show how participatory storytelling functions as a critical lens on algorithmic bias, surveillance and systemic injustice. By bringing these critiques into publicly funded spaces, the NFBC preserves public discourse as a site of radical imagination rather than market-driven cultural production. State-supported media institutions worldwide can learn from the NFBC's approach, particularly through embedding participatory digital storytelling within policy initiatives. Governments seeking to strengthen public broadcasting and cultural diplomacy should look to interactive and community-driven storytelling models to expand civic engagement and cultural sovereignty.

Cultural policies must recognise that media literacy and participatory storytelling are interconnected. Rather than treating them as separate domains, they should be understood as essential components in cultivating informed digital citizens who can critically engage with algorithmic governance, media monopolisation and contested histories. As algorithmic curation increasingly shapes public discourse, a key challenge is ensuring that public media institutions can continue to counter corporate content-distribution models. Platforms such as YouTube, Netflix and Meta prioritise engagement over accuracy, often amplifying viral over investigative content, commercial over civic storytelling and corporate over independent media. The NFBC's success in developing counterpublic digital storytelling platforms offers a scalable policy model for preserving independent public discourse in the digital era.

Ensuring the Future of Public Media Institutions in a Corporate-Dominated Digital Space

Public media institutions worldwide are increasingly under threat due to the corporate consolidation of digital platforms and declining government funding. The NFBC's capacity to maintain its commitment to open-access, publicly funded digital storytelling provides a valuable roadmap for sustaining public media as a democratic resource. Future policies must ensure that public storytelling projects do not become financially dependent on private sponsorships, which risk compromising editorial independence and shifting priorities toward market-driven narratives rather than civic engagement. Sustainable funding models are therefore essential to preserving the autonomy and democratic mission of public media institutions.

Additionally, digital sovereignty must be a central tenet of cultural policy. The NFBC's investment in Indigenous-led digital storytelling, as exemplified by *Biidaaban: First Light*, offers a model for ensuring that cultural production remains rooted in community control rather than corporate or state appropriation. Policies that safeguard publicly owned digital platforms are essential to ensuring that public storytelling remains accessible, participatory and resistant to commercial exploitation.

Beyond national policy settings, transnational cooperation will become increasingly important as corporate platforms consolidate control over global media markets. Establishing international public-media partnerships for co-produced participatory digital projects would help ensure that non-commercial artistic content remains globally accessible rather than confined by national broadcasting constraints. The NFBC provides a blueprint for resisting the privatisation of digital culture, ensuring that art and public service media continue to serve as sites of accessibility, engagement and critique.

Conclusion: Public Media and Cultural Democracy

The NFBC's participatory storytelling model demonstrates how public art policies can sustain civic engagement in the digital age. By extending participatory practices into digital and virtual spaces—through the legacy of *Challenge for Change*, the development of interactive web documentaries, and the adoption of VR as a tool for social consciousness—the NFBC has consistently shown how publicly funded media can function as both a cultural institution and a site of political resistance.

In an era in which corporate-controlled and algorithmically curated platforms increasingly narrow the field of cultural expression, the NFBC provides a blueprint for how state- supported media can counter digital privatisation and preserve independent public discourse. Its productions challenge passive spectatorship by inviting audiences to participate actively in meaning-making, bearing witness, and critical reflection. In doing so, the NFBC cultivates civic agency, amplifies counterpublic voices and foregrounds the political stakes of digital storytelling.

To ensure the continued vitality of public media, governments must commit to long-term funding for participatory storytelling, protect publicly owned digital platforms from corporate monopolisation and integrate digital art practices into civic education and historical memory initiatives. Transnational collaboration among public media institutions will also be essential in maintaining globally accessible alternatives to commercial platforms. As corporate influence over digital storytelling intensifies, the NFBC stands as a vital space of resistance—affirming that public storytelling remains an essential mechanism for ethical engagement, cultural expression and democratic dialogue. Its work not only strengthens civic participation within Canada but also offers an international model for sustaining cultural democracy in an increasingly privatised digital sphere.

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