

Critical Studies in Improvisation Études critiques en improvisation



#CanadaPerforms How it Came to Be and What We Learned About Building Virtual Communities

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Volume 14, Number 2-3, 2021

Improvisation, Musical Communities, and the COVID-19 Pandemic

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1080710ar>

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Publisher(s)

University of Guelph College of Arts

ISSN

1712-0624 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Chan, K. (2021). #CanadaPerforms: How it Came to Be and What We Learned About Building Virtual Communities. *Critical Studies in Improvisation / Études critiques en improvisation*, 14(2-3), 1-3.

Article abstract

Kevin Chan is Director of Public Policy, Canada for Facebook. In this piece, he describes the origins of the #CanadaPerforms series, a partnership between Facebook Canada and the National Arts Centre that presented over seven hundred livestreamed musical performances by Canadian musicians during the pandemic.

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#CanadaPerforms: How it Came to Be and What We Learned About Building Virtual Communities

Kevin Chan¹

Canada Day 2020 was quite unlike any other. The COVID-19 pandemic meant virtual celebrations across the country, and [#CanadaPerforms](#), the livestreaming partnership between the National Arts Centre and Facebook Canada, was a chance to offer to Canadians an online [catalogue](#) of over 700 livestreamed performances. The program began on March 19, 2020, during the initial lockdown phase of the pandemic, and the national platform has helped to support artists from all regions and feature performances in both official languages.

The initial seed of the idea for #CanadaPerforms came to me in early March as I was finishing up a family trip in New York City, just as COVID-19 was beginning to be felt in the US. We were lucky to catch three Broadway shows in three days, and though the theatres were relatively full, it was clear to me as we left Newark Airport to return to Canada that things were about to change dramatically. Literally overnight, word came that Broadway was shuttered, along with the rest of New York City. In the coming days, it would become clear that Canada would follow a similar approach, closing down public spaces across the country, including performance halls and venues. At the same time, a new and spontaneous phenomenon of artists shifting to livestream performances began to take hold on various online sites and platforms, largely without compensation. In that moment, I recognized an opportunity to support this bold experiment in artistic expression.

As the Director of Public Policy, Canada at Facebook, I have long enjoyed a close working partnership with the National Arts Centre (NAC) on a number of projects, including Mòshkamo (an Indigenous arts festival) and the Governor General's Performing Arts Awards Gala. As the lockdown took hold, I reached out to the NAC to see how we could work together to help performing artists. Within 48 hours, we had put together #CanadaPerforms as a relief fund to support and encourage artists in a time of need. It was originally meant to be a \$100,000 program to support performing artists, providing \$1,000 in artist fees for livestreamed performances of 45 to 60 minutes on any online site. In this partnership, each institution would play to its strengths: Facebook would provide funding, digital expertise, experience with livestreaming, and interactive engagement, and the NAC would bring a deep network in the cultural community and administer the program with complete artistic independence.

To our great surprise, over the course of the two months of the emergency relief effort, #CanadaPerforms became a national platform showcasing artists from coast to coast to coast, bringing additional partners onboard to increase its reach and impact sevenfold. With the generous support of Slaight Music, the RBC Foundation, SiriusXM Canada, and the Bennett Family Foundation, the relief fund grew to \$700k, ultimately enabling us to support more than 700 Canadian artists chosen from 6,000 applicants.

The livestreaming performances were a big hit with Canadians, many of whom engaged in real-time with performers in what amounted to virtual experiments in community building. According to the [NAC](#), #CanadaPerforms was viewed by over 4.75 million people across Canada and around the world ("#CanadaPerforms"). Our efforts in Canada also sparked interest abroad, and I am proud to have played a part at Facebook in bringing the sister initiatives [#IrelandPerforms](#) and [#ArtsAcrossAmerica](#) to life, in partnership with Culture Ireland and the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts, respectively.

Heather Gibson, the Executive Producer for Popular Music at the National Arts Centre, has referred to #CanadaPerforms as a new, virtual stage for artists at the NAC. It will never (and was not designed to) replace physical performances in physical venues, but it has the potential to bring new value and reach for Canadian artists and Canadian culture. One of the most pleasant revelations for me is the degree to which #CanadaPerforms has become a discovery engine, with Canadians discovering many artists for the first time through their online social networks. It has been gratifying to go through comment threads for live videos on Facebook and to see how many viewers were tagging their friends and sharing their discoveries to a much broader audience. For many artists, this has been an opportunity to not only grow their audience, but also to earn additional revenue through direct fundraising, music streaming, and merchandise sales through being discovered on #CanadaPerforms.

Writing in [The New Yorker](#), Doreen St. Félix noted that, “The migration of social activities to the Internet predates our current emergency by decades, but livestreaming, which once seemed to presage the dissolution of human intimacy, now looks like its preservation.” And she is right. While livestreaming technology has certainly been exploited by some, its use in society has largely been to enable millions of people in Canada and around the world to share positive and personal in-the-moment experiences with friends and family. It has also brought to light terrible and otherwise private testimonies of racial injustice, as in the tragic case of [Joyce Echaquan](#). In the case of #CanadaPerforms, the program successfully leveraged livestreaming technology to promote Canadian culture and content online when the traditional means of doing so were impossible.

The potential for this new, virtual stage is exciting and tremendous. Digital livestreaming will never replace live performances in physical venues, but based on what we have learned since the pandemic started, I am convinced it can certainly augment them, opening up new forms of engagement between artists and their audiences. Anthony Sargent, former CEO of the Luminato Festival, recently wrote in [The Globe and Mail](#) that “. . . the choice of live or online [is evolving] into a much richer hybrid world, potentially the most profound change in our engagement with culture for 300 years.” There is also the matter of assisting with the transition back to physical performance venues once COVID-19 is under control. A June 2020 [survey](#) by Business / Arts, the NAC, and Nanos Research found that only about one in four culture-goers will attend an indoor event once cultural institutions re-open, with 38% indicating they will wait on average 5.2 months before attending, and 35% of respondents unsure of what they will do. Livestreaming technologies may very well be able to help in facilitating a shift from living rooms back to concert halls.

All in all, we are just scratching the surface of what livestreaming can help achieve, which is why Facebook has agreed to [invest](#) an additional \$500K over two years to transform #CanadaPerforms into an ongoing national platform at the NAC. I am personally excited about the possibilities of this bold experiment in digital engagement and livestreaming, and I look forward to seeing the creativity of Canadian performing artists further promoted and explored online.

Notes

¹ Kevin Chan is Director of Public Policy, Canada at Facebook. He is also a Technology and Democracy Fellow at Harvard University’s Ash Center for Democratic Governance for the 2020/21 academic year.

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