



Quebec's creative industries and the pandemic (draft)

*Summary of findings from an initial exploratory survey de-
ployed between April 2 and June 2, 2020.*

Introduction

The aim of this survey is to get a sense for how the novel coronavirus is affecting the confidence of creative workers across Montreal in their current industry models, with the less obvious intention of examining how the situation is exacerbated by pre-existing systemic, organizational, and socioeconomic conditions.

These are unusual times for creative work. Even as activities cautiously resume, it's not clear what the outcome will be for the creative industries. Undoubtedly, particular sectors of Montreal's creative industries such as post-production, games, dubbing, and animation will be affected for some time. Live music, cinema screenings, theatre performances, all manner of festivals and the venues that host them are contemplating major alterations of their business models. A few months ago, the fear of contagion brought about an abrupt interruption of all production activities by official decree. Microphones were switched off, cameras stopped recording, and projector lights went dark across the country. Live events were cancelled.

At that moment I asked a few acquaintances in the post-production community to help me understand how this situation was affecting their work, with the inkling that whenever things did eventually get back to normal, it would not be the old normal. As I update and redeploy this survey to answer these same questions, I ask for your assistance to help me reach a wider sampling of the population as well as to connect with other researchers who might be interested in the same questions. The resulting report aims to make the struggles of talent, producers, and craft workers more visible and, it is hoped,

inform future action from various institutional and organizational stakeholders such as trade unions, media corporations, and funding agencies. It will help put into perspective some of the successful and not so successful ways that industry and government players have been dealing with the crisis. It further aims to reveal structural tensions and fault lines in the political economy of local creative work, helping us make sense of the impending "new normal" that, we are told, is presently being forged at a global scale. Perhaps knowing more about how this novel normalization comes to pass can also allow us to have a small say in its realization.

Below are the main findings followed by a brief note about the survey design. The current version of the survey is available in [English](#) and [French](#). All comments and suggestions are welcome.

[Theo Stojanov](#)

Media Industries researcher

PhD student | Cinema | Concordia University

theo.stojanov@concordia.ca | [Mediawerks](#)

Overview

Following is a condensed overview of responses. The key take-away is that within the same responses, the vast majority of participants expressed curiously dissonant combinations of hope and uncertainty, wavering between optimism and sombre expectations for the impending “new normal.”

How confident are you about the future?

Respondents predominantly self-identified as established talent and senior management in post-production and expressed faith that the creative industries are good at handling stressful and abrupt changes, particularly in conjunction with government action. In addition, all were highly confident that similar situations can be reliably handled in the future.

However, it is unlikely that this response is representative of the majority of creative industry workers whose experiences are perennially marked by precarity and risk. More data would be needed from a wider cross-section to yield meaningful results.

Frequently free-form questions conflicted with closed-ended ones. The same respondents reported being highly confident overall in some sections of the survey, yet in others expressed insecurity and apprehension about the uncertain return to work.

Will things get back to normal once the pandemic is over?

In April 2020, when most of the responses were collected, there was little doubt that work will resume. This was two weeks after studios were asked to shut their doors on March 24th 2020 (and

[scheduled to re-open a month later](#)). In fact, plans for re-opening had been underway since before the closures.

Respondents also noted that they expect things to resume with a number of provisos that would establish a “new normal,” such as permanent health and safety protocols, various restrictions, more working from home, and the “somber possibility of a second or a third stoppage” related to subsequent outbreaks.

Unaddressed concerns?

While respondents felt that they were getting reliable and timely updates from mainstream media, trade organizations, and the State, some of their concerns were remained unaddressed:

1. Many post-production companies encouraged employees to work from home without allowing them to maintain a proper work-life balance under the new circumstances. Essentially, they were expected to continue working as usual, without acknowledgement of added responsibilities such as home-schooling or taking care of others imposed by the pandemic.

Since a majority of post-production work can be done from home, there was a push from clients expecting that services would continue with minimal interruptions.

π

2. One senior project manager proposed that the dubbing sector could be considered an essential service, because of a push by clients to stick to original delivery schedules.

Eventually, the Union des Artistes (UDA) together with the Association nationale des doubleurs professionnels (ANDP) successfully argued before the Quebec government to [secure an “essential services” status for their sector](#). During the COVID-19 pandemic, “essential services” is intended to refer to those services that are vital to the health and welfare of a population, and which usually do not include the entertainment sector. This makes dubbing a curious exception, although it is also understandable given the industry’s desire to preserve the momentum of recently hard-earned concessions from streaming giants to dub locally.

Dubbing is frequently the “canary in the mine” of Quebec’s entertainment industries, positioned and presented as a national culture industry of critical importance. It frequently tests the limits of government action in advance of similar manoeuvres undertaken by other sub-sectors of the entertainment industry, such as games and film production. In 2008, when a similar stoppage of work occurred (albeit for different reasons) the [ANDP](#) and [other players](#) swiftly appeared before a government committee at the Assemblée nationale du Québec to demand dispensations in the form of tax reductions and other incentives intended to keep businesses afloat during the recession. Ultimately, as the dubbing industry’s main revenue is supplied by private clients rather than government grants, special allowances are usually granted.

¹ A closer study of other surveys about and by various players in the creative industries, their respective concerns and findings, is a worthwhile investigation that will be explored in a separate study.

[Are there pre-existing concerns that the outbreak has exacerbated?](#)

Somewhat divided, opinions ranged from attributing all problems to the outbreak to acknowledging that the inconveniences caused by social distancing and working from home pale in comparison to the economic tensions plaguing the post-production industry in recent years.

On the other hand, respondents shared the view that, going forward, projects will require considerably greater resources in terms of time, money, and personnel.

[About the survey](#)

Of the just over 900 people reached only 13% showed interest and a meager 5% completed the initial survey. The vast majority of participants identified as established career professionals and 70% were female. The numbers are quite small even for an exploratory survey, possibly because nearly every organization connected to the creative industries was running its own survey at the time, many for the first time, trying to find their bearings amidst the new normality taking form.¹ The survey was promoted primarily on Facebook (without recourse to the paid “boost” option which would certainly have helped increase participation) and via my personal mailing list, which yielded the greatest number of participants.