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**Media Industry Events as Platforms for Social Justice: Moving from
Inspiration to Impact in Creative Production**

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**Media Industry Events as Platforms for Social Justice: Moving from
Inspiration to Impact in Creative Production**

by

Brad Limov

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my partner in life, Xia Zhang.

Acknowledgements

This dissertation is the end result of more than four years of labor, both my own and that of others whose guidance shaped what follows in these pages. Its completion would not have been possible without the numerous people who excitedly contributed their insights to the project, affirmed its direction, and encouraged me to see it through to the end. I am equally indebted to those who selflessly provided a more general kind of support as I worked through the obstacles and frustrations that inevitably arise when dissertating and transitioning out of life in a PhD program. This acknowledgements section is my brief, and incomplete, attempt to express my gratitude to all of you.

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on the Austin technopolis was a welcome resource as well. Joe always made himself available to grab a coffee, and I have immensely enjoyed our conversations on international politics and US-China relations. Seminars I took with Madhavi Mallapragada and Curran Nault were similarly influential and became foundational to my developing interests in identity, representation, media activism, and cultural struggle. Figuring out how to handle my positionality in relation to forces of oppression and domination became much easier after studying under Madhavi, and many of the theoretical perspectives presented in this dissertation have their roots in what I learned from her. My discussion of Austin events and cultural history, especially when challenging dominant narratives, benefits massively from Curran's expertise on local scenes and his constant nudges for me to be more critical. Finally, I owe a lot to Dr. Anita Varma, whose example made it clear that solidarity is not something only to be practiced when organizing outside of the ivory tower but is itself a valid concept for rigorous academic exploration. I learned a great deal when collaborating with Anita at the Center for Media Engagement and value her continued friendship and advice. I cannot wait to write together more in the future.

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We are told the dissertation writing process is a solitary, isolating experience. Though I felt fairly removed from the academic community for at least a year while completing this manuscript, I had a core group of lifelong friends I could turn to on a daily basis: Garrett, Joe, Ronnie, James, Clayton. Nothing has been more valuable than having you all as an initial sounding board for my unfiltered thoughts on politics, media, and technology. Our chats keep me grounded and thinking about the big picture. Supportive parents, Mary and Tom, have also been a blessing, and a loving partner has been a necessity. Xia Zhang, your companionship has sustained me, and your work ethic continues to shock me. Whenever I felt exhausted and overwhelmed, there you were, studying all night after working all day. You kept me focused when it was time to write and helped me forget when it was time to rest. Whether I forge a path forward in academia, disappear abroad again, or both, I am sure it will work out if you are with me.

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Abstract

Media Industry Events as Platforms for Social Justice: Moving from Inspiration to Impact in Creative Production

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2024

Supervisor: Sharon Strover

This dissertation examines media industry events to understand their capacity as platforms for social justice in creative production. Organizations and individuals throughout the United States expressed vocal commitments to social justice following mass protests in 2020 over the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers. I investigate how these commitments, which build on existing social movements and extend beyond race to include gender, sexuality, class, and the environment, appear when media professionals gather to promote their work, connect with peers, and discuss the trajectories of their industries. As a liberal city within one of the country's most conservative states, one that has seen massive growth as an epicenter for music, tech, and media, Austin, Texas is a productive location in which to ground this investigation. I present South by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference as two case studies with a shared location but different scopes of programming. I take a critical media industry studies approach, which involved three years of ethnographic field work as a participant observer, in-depth interviews ($N = 33$), computational analysis of Twitter data ($N = 1,607,302$), and qualitative analysis of media artifacts surrounding the events to

answer questions regarding the respective roles played by event organizers and event participants in advocacy and activism. I argue that media industry events can catalyze social justice within normative industry processes, however this comes with constraints and setbacks as media professionals navigate hegemonic pressures and balance corporate imperatives in seeking to close the gap between inspirational rhetoric and material impact.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

IN THE SHADOWS OF CORPORATE PR

On March 15, 2022, a group of costumed climate activists gathered for a midday demonstration outside the iconic Antone’s Nightclub in downtown Austin, Texas. Some were covered in aquatic hues as personifications of hydropower and ocean ecosystems, while others dressed in patriotic reds, whites, and blues with “Russia” and “USA” written on their shirts. They washed themselves in a bucket of black liquid as they begged for money from a performer dressed in a suit labelled “Big Oil.” Around them, signs in the yellow colors of the Sunrise Movement read “Divest from fossil fuels” and “Stop gas lighting.”

This demonstration was in response to Shell House, a two-day public relations event hosted by Shell Oil that had booked the night club on 5th Street as a promotional space during South by Southwest (SXSW), an annual tech, media, and music megaevent in Austin. Following a typical South By format, Shell House included panels with industry experts, live music, and “an interactive experience that displays a journey to net zero by 2050 and how choices we all make impact this journey.”¹ The activists had organized their impromptu performance in opposition to this greenwashing, “protesting oil companies through art @sxsw,” as one of them wrote on Instagram, resisting Shell House by staging a media event of their own. The display would have been an unusual public spectacle at any other time of year, perhaps garnering the attention of local news media. In the middle of SXSW, however, where its many spectacles and novelties in 2019 attracted 4,331 members of the media and press who produced global media

¹ Taken from Shell House’s Eventbrite page, which was hyperlinked to the SXSW 2022 online platform.

coverage valued at \$339.6 million² for that year (Greyhill Advisors & SXSW, 2019), the journalists were looking elsewhere during the Shell House protest. The demonstration reached the outside world only through its traces across social media and alternative news outlets.

Organized by members of the Sunrise Movement, Extinction Rebellion, and Public Citizen, the demonstration did not benefit from association with the SXSW brand in the way Shell House itself did. I only learned about the protest two days later from some of the activists themselves, who were then attending SXSW in a more official capacity at Youth Climate Lab’s “Everyone vs Climate Change” reception. There, in a downtown space not too different from Antone’s, they mingled with climate advocates, nonprofits, media makers, and impact investors. Their gathering followed a conference panel tucked away deep in the Hilton Austin Downtown, a pocket of grassroots progressivism in the shadows of the more centrally located, corporate blocks of street-level festival space. In addition to well-funded and highly visible corporate PR on bold display at the event, interactions among those earnestly committed to finding just solutions to pressing social and environmental issues were also present, and they were not always at odds with industry stakeholders. Rather, the event’s platform created opportunities for tension, for critique, and for ideas and projects that could unsettle the status quo at the event and, by extension, within the media and tech industries it gathers.

² According to SXSW’s report released in collaboration with Greyhill Advisors, “The media valuation calculations, though imprecise, represent the most comprehensive attempt to properly quantify the economic benefits Austin enjoys each year via SXSW’s ‘media buzz’ factor.” (Greyhill Advisors & SXSW, 2019)



Figure 1.1: Protesters demonstrate outside of Shell House at SXSW 2022. Photo by Elmer Ferro and shared with permission.

INDUSTRY EVENTS AS PLATFORMS FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE IN CREATIVE PRODUCTION

In this dissertation, I offer an account of the relationship between social justice and globalized media industries by considering how their networks of production are temporarily localized at festivals, conferences, trade shows, and markets (hereafter “media industry events”). I seek to explain how social justice discourses get platformed at industry events, the mechanisms through which events impact industry production, and what this all means for the work of media professionals from historically marginalized and underrecognized groups, as well as those who specifically engage in social justice advocacy and activism related to the media and entertainment industries.

Due to its history and current political makeup, Austin is a center for both industry events and polarized ideological conflict in the United States. For these reasons,

it became the primary site for my investigation. In a moment of heightened rhetoric and mobilization across the political spectrum accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic (Bringel & Pleyers, 2022; Delanty, 2021), I examine the extent to which industry events function as participatory platforms for social justice discourses. Their panels, screenings, exhibitions, and other experiences, which are curated by the events themselves and guided by the organizers' intentions, give participants voice and access to discourse production within certain constraints. I explore the contradictions that inevitably arise out of the inherently corporate nature of industry events as promotional and networking platforms with a high cost of entry for participants who, ultimately, seek return on their investment (ROI).

This dissertation investigates the value of event participation to the work of advancing social justice within the “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991) that gather at such events. Broadly defined, communities of practice are “groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly” (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015). There are numerous groups that constitute professional communities of practice at media industry events. Those examined in this dissertation include television writers, film directors, media nonprofit workers, and studio executives. I examine these and other communities of practices in relation to one another at industry events. I further discuss the importance of events for smaller creative peer groups, or “tribes,” as they were called time and again throughout my observations and interviews. How individuals and groups differentially cohere around ideas and agendas platformed at events, which goes beyond a shared experience as the audience of an event’s curated programming, is a critical focus here.

I build on previous scholarship that theorizes film festivals as platforms for “leftist or liberal practices” that “can shape alternative public spheres” (Wong, 2011, p. 161), as well as the idea of “platforming” online as “the method of creating independent platforms on top of existing corporate platforms...to lift up voices and perspectives that are historically suppressed or misrepresented” (Christian et al., 2020, p. 4). The shape of an event ultimately depends upon those who gather for it and what they do when they come together. In other words, events are social infrastructure, if ephemeral; their capacities for fostering creative networks and introducing lasting ideas scaffold more durable outcomes. I argue that the combined efforts of event organizers and event participants to platform social justice have the potential to achieve an impactful “politics of presence” (Winton & Turnin, 2017) for social justice issues that can amplify calls to action, clarify what desirable action entails in industry contexts, and catalyze change within communities of media practice. Event organizers do this through their self-professed roles in identifying and promoting “emerging” voices and “forward-focused” perspectives within the media industries. Participants then leverage events as platforms to amplify their messages and connect with existing and emerging industry networks.

Industry events operate as platforms through inward-facing and outward-facing processes (see Illustration 1.1). As trade rituals, they offer “consensus-building interactions” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 104) for industry actors who attend in person. As media events (Dayan & Katz, 1992; Harbord, 2002), they provide an “experience of not being there” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, pp. 100-101) for those who follow their developments from a distance. How an event is mediated beyond itself is as important, or more important than the event itself, as Dayan and Katz might put it.

Bringing together media makers and industry stakeholders can be politically consequential in and of itself. Industry events are interactive and experiential, impactful

for those who are able to participate due to how they create conditions for affective engagement across a mix of planned and serendipitous encounters. In addition to actively curated event programming, activities include spontaneous interactions and unofficial offerings arranged by participating organizations, attendees, and local residents. Experiences may be predominantly fun and entertaining, but they also can hold real or perceived professional, educational, or promotional value. As nodes within larger circuits of cultural production and circulation (Iordanova, 2015), festivals are sites for metacommentary on media industry processes, labor, and the work this labor produces. They are more flexible in their priorities than the industries they bring together, often becoming meaningful for those who are able to participate as the starting point for collaborations, or for newsworthy happenings with which participants can associate themselves and their projects.

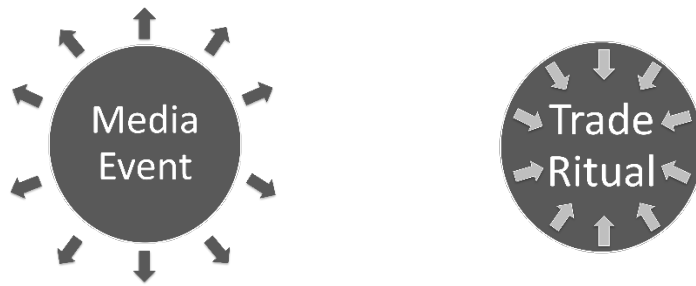


Illustration 1.1: Media industry events conceptualized as industry nodes with discourse and social processes spanning inward-facing (trade ritual) and outward-facing (media event) dimensions.

As exemplified by Shell House, there is typically a gap between inspirational rhetoric and change to industry practices that can move the needle on the representation of injustices and action toward their solutions. In some cases, neoliberal rhetoric is aligned with social justice discourses, coopting movement symbols as part of broader processes to continue or build upon the status quo while pacifying opposition (see Baer,

2016; Táíwò, 2022). In others, expressions of solidarity attempt to catalyze collective action to realize empowerment within, or at least in connection to, existing structures and professional networks.

There are shades of activity at media industry events that fall between these two extremes (see Illustration 1.2). Attempts to advance social justice might recognize the value of difference (Young, 1990), but stop short of institutional or organizational change to equitably distribute resources and opportunities (Fraser, 1997). In other instances, both recognition and redistribution might be understood as constitutive parts of achieving social justice, but collective action is replaced by a deference to marginalized voices. This runs the risk of compartmentalizing social justice off from core activities while absolving decision-makers of accountability—an “elite capture” of identity politics that preserves the status quo (Táíwò, 2022). Recognition is implicated especially in the inspiration-generating, outward-facing, media event dimension of events. Redistribution is more pertinent to the trade ritual, or the impact events can have for participants in building connections and finding resources or support. Both dimensions, and the processes they facilitate, are thoroughly intertwined.

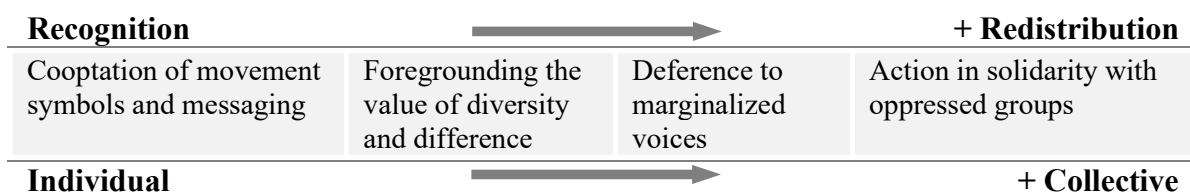


Illustration 1.2: A continuum for interpreting social justice activities. Here I heuristically break these activities down into four “steps,” where solidarity is ideal but has the highest threshold for engagement.

The “politics of presence” is a productive concept for assessing the range of activities taken toward social justice at media industry events. After Ezra Winton and Svetla Turnin (2017), I take the politics of presence as an indicator of how events are programmed and structured to give space and priority to certain voices and issues, as well as how event participants leverage these opportunities.³ I argue that a politics of presence that mobilizes social justice discourses can influence media and entertainment by impacting the “politics of production” and the politics of representation (see Illustration 1.3). After Anamik Saha (2016, 2018), I understand the “politics of production” as the various industrial logics, norms, and processes through which media are produced. By “politics of representation,” I am referring to the broader struggle over meaning and representation in media, as often analyzed by media scholars and critics and discussed at length by Stuart Hall (1997). Behind struggles over meaning in the politics of representation, there are politics of production at the level of representational practices. Interventions in these practices and what they produce are possible at industry events. This varies depending on how well events advance a politics of presence within their event spaces and programming schedules that enables social justice discourses to speak to the media industries and their normative practices of production. It also depends on how well events connect participants with resources and the means to act on these critiques.

³ See also Anne Phillips (1995) for a broader discussion on the relationship between the “politics of ideas” and “politics of presence” as they pertain to representation for, and accountability to, marginalized groups within democratic political systems.

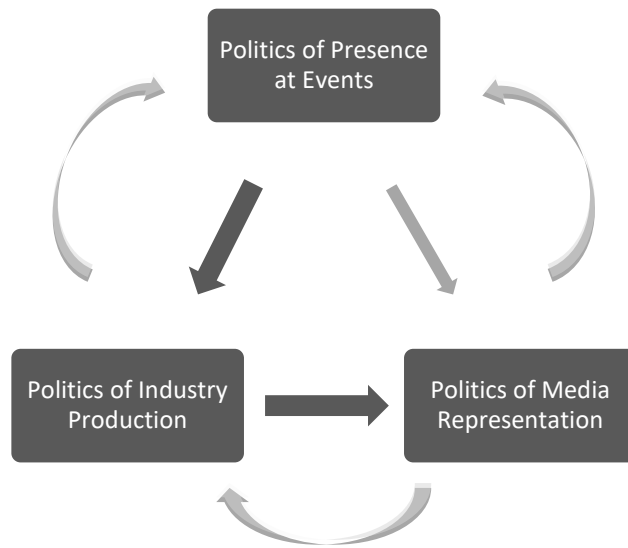


Illustration 1.3: Theorization of how the politics of presence can impact the politics of production and politics of representation.

All of this depends on working through contradictions that arise within the media industries as systems shaped by capitalist political economic forces. It is not that media makers are unaware of the logics and pressures of production under capitalism. They experience them every day as media industry labor. Moreover, solidarity expressed between industry unions during the 2023 DGA, WGA, and SAG-AFTRA strikes,⁴ a solidarity that extended outward toward the rest of the burgeoning US labor movement, is indicative of a growing class consciousness among many industry laborers (Press, 2023; Schuhrke, 2023). But contradictions emerge and reemerge as media makers are socialized into and navigate hegemonic industry structures and production cultures in different ways (Gitlin, 1980/2003), some managing to hold onto their values and commitments to social justice more successfully than others. While well-resourced corporations can stage their rebrands or express symbolic commitments at industry events, media makers can coopt

⁴ According to Miranda Banks and Kate Fortmueller (2023), the Directors Guild of America (DGA), Writers Guild of America (WGA), and the Screen Actors Guild-American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (SAG-AFTRA) experienced in 2023 “a cohesion rarely witnessed in Hollywood labor fights” due to the existential threat posed by business and technological transformations in the content streaming era. The unions had to confront not only the media conglomerates, but also tech companies like Netflix.

the cooptation, so to speak, by sneaking in resistant media texts, making genuine calls for transformative industry practices that can reconfigure labor, or connecting with others who seek to incorporate such practices into their media production.

This dissertation focuses particularly on examples at events where resistance and change are pushed, where events as platforms, hubs, or infrastructure for interactions and resources among communities of media practice can catalyze change within and adjacent to existing industry structures and practices. To guide my investigation of industry events, an investigation that is grounded in Austin, Texas, I have framed these concerns in terms of the following three research questions:

RQ1: What temporal and locational qualities contribute to media industry events' abilities to create platforms for social justice?

- a. How might contemporary crises such as the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement create critical junctures for societal change through events?
- b. How does location interact with event possibilities?

RQ2: How does social justice fit into the missions of media industry events?

RQ3: In what ways do media industry events catalyze social justice within normative industry processes?

- a. How do events' programming practices inspire social justice?
- b. How do event participants shape social justice discourses at events?
- c. How do event experiences impact the work of marginalized media professionals and social justice practitioners?

I take a “critical media industry studies approach” (Havens et al., 2009) to answer these questions, situating ethnographic methods within case study research to illuminate “the way in which institutional discourses are internalized and acted upon by cultural workers” (p. 247). In the first phase of research, I conducted event ethnography at South by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference during each edition of these events held from March 2020 to March 2023. Throughout this period, I

continuously monitored developments as they appeared in newsletters and the trade press. Additionally, I collected social media data via Twitter API after each event occurred ($N = 1,607,302$) in order to glean insights into popular event topics and notable incidents that could corroborate and extend my personal observations. In the second phase of research, taking place throughout 2023, I conducted in-depth interviews with event organizers and participants ($N = 33$), who ranged from competition-winning filmmakers and writers to nonprofit representatives and major studio executives.

These data sources came together into an ethnographic record on which I base the following analysis of industry events and their impact, an analysis I situate within a historical investigation of Austin as a key location for media industry and event networks. I assess the media event node and questions related to discourse, “inspiration,” and recognition through participant observation, computational analysis, and textual analysis. I examine the trade ritual node and issues of connection, “impact,” and redistribution through, again, participant observation, but also interviews. I describe these methods in greater detail in Chapter 3.

WHAT ARE THE ‘MEDIA’ INDUSTRIES?

Defining and delimiting the media industries is not an easy task. I use the term over others like “cultural industries” or “creatives industries” due to my central concern with the role these industries play in mediating our understanding of social justice within popular culture. There is considerable overlap in the use of all three terms within media studies. In practice, scholars of media industries have examined entertainment sectors like film, television, gaming, and music, as well as news media and how all of these industries have been transformed by digital technologies and platforms in recent decades (Herbert et al., 2020). I would include advertising, PR, and marketing in this list,

particularly given their large presence within the trade press and the events I study. In this dissertation, I draw on relevant media industry studies scholarship even when authors use the terms “cultural” or “creative” industries.

While the term “creative” is used broadly and ambiguously by practitioners within the media industries, often to distinguish from a broader category of “professionals” who support production logistically or financially, my preferred term in this dissertation for those involved in production is “media maker” in that it specifies my focus on the work of symbolic production and the contributions of this production to cultural and political discourse. Relatedly, the term “film festival” cannot entirely capture the scope of the events studied in this dissertation, even if they borrow film festival structures and operate alongside them within global circuits of film and media circulation. I instead use the broader term “media industry events,” given that they curate their programming for media makers around all-encompassing, industry-blind buzzwords like “inspiration” and “storytelling.”

The industry events studied in this dissertation are representative of a media convergence (Jenkins, 2006) common at many events in the United States. They also reflect Austin's distinct identity as a media capital (Curtin, 2007), an important node within globalized media industry networks set apart from other production centers like Los Angeles and New York City by its explosive growth and distinctive atmosphere. Colloquially described by event organizers and attendees as Austin’s “vibe,” this atmosphere has its origins in decades of “weird” Austin counterculture (Long, 2010; Moretta, 2020) and local government support for its now booming, tech-driven creative economy (Florida, 2012; Straubhaar et al., 2012). Here, local media industries and global festivals emerged within the context of a self-professed “live music capital of the

world,”⁵ a gentrifying urban space that exudes a distinct neoliberal energy flavored by artistic experimentation and flashy, individual expression.

SOUTH BY SOUTHWEST AND THE AUSTIN FILM FESTIVAL AND WRITERS CONFERENCE

I present two separate media industry events as case studies to illustrate how an event’s scale and scope of programming can create different opportunities for the communities of practice it gathers. South by Southwest (SXSW) is a ten-day cluster of festivals, conferences, and exhibitions that brings together new films, tech, and music from around the world under the banner of inspiration, innovation, inclusion, and impact. “Calling all dreamers!” its call for submissions in 2022 reads, “Want to make the world a better place?” (SXSW, 2022n). South By attracts highly anticipated film premieres, chart-topping music artists, as well as corporate executives, world leaders, and nonprofits to discuss the future of society. Narrower in scope, and smaller in scale, the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference (hereafter AFF) is an annual event that gathers writers from Hollywood and beyond to foster community around the art and craft of storytelling across its many forms, from film and television to video games and podcasts. Priding itself as “a bridge from craft to career” (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-a), it launched its Uplifting Storytellers Initiative in 2021 as a way to foreground equity and inclusion as a concern across its script competitions, conference panels, film screenings, awards, and fellowships.⁶

To the extent that industry events can influence the politics of production within the media industries, AFF and SXSW are at the forefront of platforming social justice. “I

⁵ Austin City Council approved a resolution declaring Austin “the Live Music Capital of the World” in 1991 (Buchele, 2016).

⁶ While Austin is home to many other large film festivals with global reach, like Fantastic Fest and ATX TV Festival, these events are oriented toward audiences and do not prioritize trade rituals and industry functions to the same degree as the case studies selected for this dissertation.

think those are the two most inclusive film festivals to be talked about,” one Hollywood talent agent stressed to me in an interview about their experiences at both events in recent years. In this dissertation, I use “social justice” more prominently than related terms like “equity” and “inclusion” because the issues addressed at these two events go beyond improving representation on screen and behind the camera to also contesting the interconnected issues of white supremacy, heteropatriarchy, neocolonialism, and class divides. As shown with the example of the protest against Shell House, in the case of SXSW, this even includes climate activism.

The forms that social justice discourses take at each event relate to the communities of practice they attract. In addition to media makers, other participants at SXSW relevant to this research include representatives from social movement organizations, narrative change nonprofits, and social impact agencies.⁷ Beyond aspiring writers, Austin Film Festival gathers executive producers, staffed writers, talent agents, script coaches, and others who support writers’ professional development and career advancement. The wide range of participants SXSW attracts across industries and sectors is enabled by its massive scale; meanwhile, the narrower range of participants AFF attracts is due to its emphasis on writers as a community of practice, a community it prioritizes over others like filmmakers.

⁷ Narrative change nonprofits and social impact agencies are new organizational formations, which alongside partnering media makers and media companies, constitute an emerging industry of social justice-related communication and media production. Narrative change nonprofits engage in multifaceted advocacy work across entertainment, government, and corporate settings to improve how marginalized groups are represented and to expand the opportunities these groups receive within these settings. Social impact agencies partner with media companies on advocacy campaigns to accompany media products. Both have their origins in “strategic impact documentary,” which unites documentary storytelling and strategic communication practices with the goal of social change (see Nash & Corner, 2016).

THE INSPIRATION-IMPACT GAP

Social justice discourses are manifest in the media texts and experiences programmed by these events. However, the causes platformed, the ways in which participants are called to act, and the contradictions they face are specific to each. As my vignette at the opening of this introduction suggests, SXSW is a space where radical ideas create friction against corporate narratives and the progressive neoliberal consensus (Fraser, 2023; Winton & Turnin, 2017), contradicting them and shaping the meaning of impact from the event's peripheries and other spaces that advocates and activists "carve out" for themselves. Equity and inclusion in above-the-line industry work has emerged as a central cause at Austin Film Festival, though this largely has been driven *and* resisted by the writers in attendance themselves in conscious and unconscious ways as they work through dissensus and form consensus on diversity as a community of practice.

The contradictions emerging at each event are similar to those found in wider industry responses to social justice movements. Representation in entertainment media and big tech responses to climate change comprise two salient examples. On-screen representation has quantitatively improved in Hollywood in recent years (Ramón et al., 2022, 2023), but it is arguably driven by an awareness of untapped revenue tied to shifting demographics and underserved audiences, which McKinsey & Company recently valued at a \$10 billion increase should racial equity for Black talent be realized (Dunn et al., 2021). Achieving this equity and inclusion is still an issue behind the scenes, where executives, directors, and showrunners remain overwhelmingly white, despite new talent pipelines to address the issue (Braxton & Faughnder, 2021). On the corporate side, Chief Diversity Officers (CDOs) may find themselves included in more high-level conversations, but they describe it as an exhausting position between employees who want them to fight harder and executives who express "D&I fatigue" (Sun, 2022).

Big tech is caught in similar contradictions due to its responses to climate change. Companies like Alphabet and Microsoft are attempting to innovate their way out of their carbon footprints by pledging hundreds of millions of dollars to carbon dioxide removal technologies, yet they do not cut their own emissions as called for by climate activists (Calma, 2022). In these examples, “collective action frames” (Benford & Snow, 2000; Gamson, 1992) advanced by social movements butt up against the profit motive, producing contradictions and advocacy that is either performative (see Moultrie & Joseph, 2020), or effective only insofar as it remains profitable.

Industry events are productive for thinking about advancing social justice tactically within, through, and alongside the media industries. While “mobilize” is too strong a word, events enable an on-the-ground vantage point into how social justice discourses emerge when industry workers are brought together, with featured speakers and media makers as participants shaping the industrial impact of these discourses within their communities of practice. The events are an opportunity to locate collective action frames around how participants perceive injustices (injustice frames), identify with one another against the adversaries responsible (identity frames), and respond collectively (agency frames; see Gamson, 1992). Even when encounters with social justice at industry events are constrained or contradicted by the capitalist logics of the media industries, these experiences might still be memorable and personally impactful as professionals continue their work at the level of cultural production. Even when efforts do not lead to direct or immediate social change, they can still hold transformative importance on individual or community levels (see Tufekci, 2022). If nothing else, communities of practice in the media industries become primed for change.

Event participants come for the experiences and encounters that can translate into social or even economic capital for their careers, projects, and businesses, but there is

also a reflexive capacity to these interactions as trade rituals (Caldwell, 2008). Topics go beyond apolitical discussions of craft and career, increasingly questioning power and systemic inequities within the industries and society more broadly. It is perhaps part of a larger trend. Within journalism studies, for example, scholars have written about solidarity journalism (Varma, 2020), advocacy journalism (Waisbord, 2009), and solutions journalism (McIntyre & Lough, 2021) as emerging approaches to journalistic practice that push against hegemonic routines and norms in the news industry to address the pressing social and environmental issues of the present. This dissertation makes a similar intervention with entertainment media. Film, television, and other media workers can reflexively examine the power and influence of their media messages, all the more important when the notion that their work is simply for entertainment purposes is deployed to absolve bad actors of ethical responsibility (Watson, 2004).

At the outset of this research project in March 2020, I was driven by a curiosity directed towards the political dimension of media industry events in a broad sense. After all, industry events are primarily industry nodes embedded in normative processes of production, distribution, and exhibition (Iordanova, 2015). Their politics emerge through the contexts in which they are convened and the participation they attract. What I found nearly immediately was a heightened focus on social justice after the disruption of pandemic lockdowns galvanized racial justice protests associated with the Black Lives Matter movement.⁸ The political juncture examined in this dissertation follows George

⁸ In addition to the racial justice activism of the Black Lives Matter movement since 2013, it is also important to acknowledge feminist activism associated with the #MeToo hashtag since 2017, as well as class-based activism that followed the 2008 global financial crisis with the Occupy Wall Street movement in 2011 and ensuing presidential candidacies of Bernie Sanders in 2016 and 2020. These strands of progressivism come together in an intersectional approach to social justice often observed at the events studied.

Floyd's murder by police, after which United States media and tech companies expressed vocal commitments to social justice.

SXSW and the Austin Film Festival engaged with this political moment through their programming. As mentioned, the Austin Film Festival responded with its “Uplifting Storytellers Initiative” in 2021. Meanwhile, at a meeting of the Austin Forum on Technology and Society the following year, SXSW Chief Programming Officer Hugh Forrest announced, “We've doubled and tripled and quadrupled down on [DEI] for 2022” (Boisseau & Forrest, 2022). These efforts are indicative of how certain historical moments become “critical junctures” (Della Porta, 2021; McChesney, 1999/2015) due to crises in the political economy, where the status quo of business as usual is destabilized enough for the gap between inspirational rhetoric and impactful action to potentially be closed.

This dissertation evaluates the extent to which industry events, at a critical juncture, help close the inspiration-impact gap in media production. At the same time, I assess if and when industry events become counterproductive to social justice or harmful to marginalized groups due to the persistence of constraints and limitations within spaces that are, in the last instance, commercial rather than political. While I did not set out to specifically investigate critical junctures, the critical juncture of the pandemic surfaced intensifying crises under progressive neoliberalism (Fraser, 2023). These crises highlight the race reductionism and displacement of accountability that have come with the elite capture of identity politics (Táíwò, 2022), as well as the emergence of an intersectional politics that incorporates class-based, if not anti-capitalist, perspectives. These developments have shaped politics at the events studied.

CONTRIBUTION AND SIGNIFICANCE

This dissertation will make a significant contribution to interdisciplinary scholarship on media, social movements, and popular culture. While there is a growing body of scholarship on activism at film festivals (Iordanova & Torchin, 2012; Tascón & Wils, 2017), particularly in relation to documentary film festivals (Winton & Turnin, 2017), activist film festivals (Cable, 2021; Davies, 2018), and identity-based film festivals (Loist & Zielinski, 2012), my project extends this conversation from film festival studies into the broader industrial context of entertainment media production. This contrasts somewhat with the film festival studies literature, where European festivals and Asian festivals have been discussed as alternatives to Hollywood’s hegemony. In place of state support and public funding that sustains arts sectors committed to cinema with a capital “C” in more substantial ways (De Valck, 2007; Iordanova & Cheung, 2011), one of the most salient things about my case studies are their connections to the entertainment and tech industries.⁹

The Austin Film Festival and SXSW have been at the forefront of embracing television, video games, podcasts, and other new media forms and technologies in step with industry convergence. Other understudied US festivals like Tribeca and, to a lesser degree, Sundance have joined them (see Messer, 1996; Perren, 2023; Sinwell, 2023). This shift in focus from the “global art film economy” (De Valck, 2020) to Hollywood and Silicon Valley is observable at events in Austin. They allow for a glimpse into the media industries’ hegemonic role in popular cultural production from the inside, as well as how social justice discourses permeate the lives of producers and intermediaries within these industries who are in a position—albeit more constrained than their independent

⁹ While it is possible European festivals are responding to industry pressures in similar ways not yet addressed in the scholarly literature, review of their promotional materials suggests a continued commitment to cinema in particular.

counterparts—to engage with calls to action through their media work. The extent to which constraints can be overcome, or how much these industry workers have a desire to overcome them, is a central question. Media industry events hold value for scholars as sites of struggle for communities of media practice who are invested in events as important nodes for their work.

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

In Chapter 2, Conceptual Framework, I present clear definitions of social justice and related key terms, including identity politics, deference politics, progressive neoliberalism, and critical junctures. I discuss how social justice relates to the politics of production within the media industries, and how the politics of presence at media industry events shapes this politics of production—which is the main focus of my investigation in this dissertation. Finally, I describe the inward-facing trade rituals and outward-facing media event dimensions through which this shaping occurs.

In Chapter 3, Methods, I begin by describing what constitutes a critical media industry studies approach to research and how this relates to case study research, ethnography, and my combination of these research approaches in this study. I then describe my methods for data collection and analysis in detail, which include participant observation, semi-structured interviews, the use of computational methods to collect and analyze Twitter datasets, software-assisted qualitative coding, and textual analysis.

In Chapter 4, The Austin Imaginary, I review how some cities operate within global networks of media industry production, as well as how these networks relate to the liminal, yet no less global, networks of media festivals and industry events. To answer my first research question regarding locational and temporal qualities, I discuss how interest in a particular “media capital” and the events it hosts are driven by how they are

imagined. Using the example of Austin, I describe how perceptions of the city's counterculture, progressive politics, and growth as a center for tech and media attracts participants to its globally recognized industry events.

In Chapter 5, *South by Southwest and the Benefits of Scale*, and Chapter 6, *Austin Film Festival and the Benefits of Community*, I address my remaining two research questions on event missions and how events catalyze social justice in media industry production. Both of these chapters follow a similar structure, starting with a discussion of the events' origins, scope of programming, targeted participants, position within global event networks, and the place of social justice within their missions and goals. I then move into thematic analysis sections that present the results of the data coding and textual analysis described in Chapter 3. These analyses are organized into sections that examine each event's politics of presence. First, I assess the events' outward-facing dimensions as media events that inspire through how they curate their programming and the ways participants contribute to event discourses. Second, I analyze the events in terms of their trade rituals and how these impact the politics of production directly in material ways as connections form and opportunities coalesce.

As the case study chapter titles suggest, I discuss how SXSW's massive scale influences its significance as a media event in particular, while AFF's intensive focus on a particular community of practice influences the significance of its trade rituals for forming consensus among writers around social justice in their media production. Chapter 7, *Discussion and Conclusions*, reviews the theoretical implications of the findings, offers recommendations to programmers and stakeholders on how to further close the inspiration-impact gap at events in solidarity with marginalized groups, discusses study limitations, and introduces areas for future research.

Chapter 2: Conceptual Framework

This chapter introduces a conceptual framework for understanding media industry events as platforms for social justice in creative production.¹⁰ In the first section, “Media Production and Social Justice at Critical Junctures,” I begin by defining key terms related to social justice that are productive for interpreting social justice-related activities at events, which range from symbolic cooptation on one extreme to collective, structural action on the other. I describe how political economic crises produce critical junctures that unsettle dominant discourses and conventional practices, creating openings for solidarity at events with marginalized and oppressed groups. Providing conceptual clarity is necessary for understanding why social justice appears in the ways that it does at the industry events, as well as the tensions and dissonance these activities provoke.

In the following section, “Politics of Production,” I connect this discussion of social justice to hegemony and contestation within the media industries’ politics of production, examining how industry norms shape media representations. Then, in “Politics of Presence,” I discuss how industry events can disrupt hegemonic practices within the politics of production when they enable the presence of certain actors and ideas. Events can become spaces for dissensus and consensus in catalyzing action. Finally, in “Outward and Inward Facing Dimensions,” I describe the mechanisms through which media industry events construct their politics of presence and can impact the politics of production. I elaborate on events’ outward-facing dimension as media events and their inward-facing dimension as sites for trade rituals, as well as how these dimensions relate to events’ scale, scope of programming, and the communities of practice they attract.

¹⁰ Portions of this chapter first appeared in Limov, B. (2023). Platforming inclusion at U.S. media industry events: Confronting Hollywood’s lack of representational diversity. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 40(4), 227–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2023.2245440>

MEDIA PRODUCTION AND SOCIAL JUSTICE AT CRITICAL JUNCTURES

Defining Social Justice

Theories of justice have always tackled the challenge of realizing individual good and how this may interfere with collective or social good. John Rawls, for example, has theorized “principles of justice for institutions” that propose equal opportunity for all and the arrangement of social and economic inequalities “to the greatest benefit of the least advantaged” (1971/1999, p. 266). Rawls is representative of the liberal philosophical tradition in how his notion that society can be egalitarian in its distribution of resources and opportunities is dependent on a universalizing logic that presupposes abstracted, rational subjects. Iris Marion Young (1990) critiques this “original position” from which individuals are said to start with impartial reason, privately seeking to maximize their own interests while conscious of the plurality of individuals around them. These “constraints” on how the social whole is conceived, Young argues, “rule out not only any difference among participants in the original position, but also any discussion among them” (p. 101).

In this dissertation, I adopt Young’s definition of social justice, which she defines as “the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression” (1990, p. 15). This definition shifts the focus from an abstracted individual to social interactions and questions of power, both of which are crucial considerations in an analysis of media industry events, which gather communities of practice and industry gatekeepers. Moreover, Young’s definition offers a perspective that begins to grapple with the systemic nature of historically produced inequities experienced by social groups. For Young, social groups are “a specific kind of collectivity, with specific consequences for how people understand one another and themselves” (p. 43). Challenging oppression and

domination experienced by social groups is thus not just a matter of distribution, as described via Rawls, but also affirming difference in “decision-making procedures, division of labor, and culture” (Young, 1990, p. 39). These are key aspects I examine in my discussion of the social processes at industry events and how they relate to the circulation of culture and division of labor within the media industries.

The Question of Identity Politics

Nancy Fraser (1997) has critiqued Young for “a wholesale, undifferentiated and uncritical version of the politics of difference” that ultimately places cultural recognition at odds with economic redistribution as the means to pursue justice in society (p. 190). For Fraser, “remedying injustices” requires “figuring out how... claims for recognition can be integrated with claims for redistribution in a comprehensive political project” (p. 3). The rise of “identity politics,” a term understood here by Fraser as a politics of recognition without an accompanying politics of redistribution, ironically poses a barrier to social justice due to its antagonism with class-based political action (p. 2). At the same time, identity politics in popular usage has become “a derogatory synonym for feminism, anti-racism, and anti-heterosexism” among opponents to these forms of identity-based activism (p. 5).

Clarifying the nature of identity politics is important to an analysis of media industry events as platforms for social justice because how these terms—social justice and identity politics—are understood by event organizers and participants determines the forms their social justice advocacy take in relation to recognition and redistribution. Equally important, understandings among organizers and participants influence how receptive they are to activities that might be dismissed as identity politics. In both use cases of the term described by Fraser, however, the meaning of identity politics has

diverged from its origins. In its original sense, identity politics is instead a concept that *drives* the very sort of comprehensive political project Fraser calls for. It does this in ways that affirm difference in decision-making processes and challenge institutionalized domination and oppression as they appear differentially, and ultimately, structurally.

Nearly three decades after Fraser's theorization, a public debate on identity politics put scholar Robin D.G. Kelley and activist Barbara Smith of the Combahee River Collective against leftist public intellectual Norman Finkelstein, who engaged in a similar reductionist framing of identity politics as "identity stripped of the class component," citing the work of a number of Black scholars and thinkers including Kimberlé Crenshaw (Katie Halper, 2023). In his response to Finkelstein's misrepresentation, Kelley articulated how Crenshaw (1989) in fact coined her concept of "intersectionality" to describe a labor lawsuit filed against General Motors (GM) by Black women employees. In the incident, cuts made by GM caused these Black women to lose their jobs due to their shared position as the lowest paid workers, highlighting their shared circumstances at a particular intersection of class, race, and gender. It is an example, Kelley explained, "very much about capitalism's effort to extract surplus value from a working class that's differential."

Smith, who coined the term "identity politics" as part of the Combahee River Collective Statement in 1977 (see Taylor, 2017), elaborated further on the original meaning of the term. According to Smith, identity politics instead means "that you have a right to have all your selves be in the room, and that people who have not experienced the things that you experienced might take some heed that when you share about how your identity affects your objective material conditions, that they listen to you" (Katie Halper, 2023). The Combahee River Collective Statement and its explication of identity politics is an example of how, to use Fraser's terminology, the politics of redistribution and

politics of recognition come together when experiences with oppression and domination are addressed intersectionally. Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor (2017) explains this means “recognizing the plight of Black women as an oppressed group that has particular political needs,” or as the Combahee statement itself declares, “We are not convinced... that a socialist revolution that is not also a feminist and antiracist revolution will guarantee our liberation” (Taylor, 2017, “Introduction”, para. 14).¹¹

Identity politics, in this original sense, were not separate from redistribution. But attacks on identity politics by figures like Fraser (1997) and Finkelstein (2023) are not without basis. Identity politics have been deployed in terms of this separation by institutions and organizations whose structural, class interests run counter to redistribution. Awareness of this dynamic also must factor into any assessment of the forms social justice-related activities take at media industry events, which as I have alluded, often veer into cynical public relations activities that coopt the symbols and rhetoric of social justice movements.

The Problem with Deference Politics

Olúfẹ̀mi O. Táíwò (2022) describes how identity politics without redistribution, what he refers to as “symbolic” identity politics, are a product of “elite capture” through which identity politics in the sense originally introduced by the Combahee River Collective are separated from the structural demands of social movements. In its place,

¹¹ If identity politics is a name for this comprehensive political project, then “racial capitalism” is a name for its opponent. A term originating with Cedric J. Robinson (1983), racial capitalism is the idea that capitalism and racism emerged historically alongside one another and coexist in inextricable ways that can be seen throughout history from slavery and imperialism in the past to the current neocolonial era of coercion, violence, and extraction still inflicted on the Global South by the Global North in the present (Kelley, 2017). Racial capitalism suggests the need for identity politics in a comprehensive political project for social justice. This means extending its formulation to gendered or other identity-based oppressions, which differ in their sociohistorical construction, but for which the same logic on sociohistorical processes applies.

elites appropriate social justice symbols to simultaneously placate movements while rebranding, rather than replacing or restructuring, existing institutions (pp. 4-5). In the particular case of mainstream media production, this has resulted in what Isabel Molina-Guzmán (2016) calls “the Hollywood paradox—the lack of diversity in film and TV production, yet TV’s increasing shift toward on-screen representational diversity” (p. 439).

The vulnerability of social justice movements to this placation, wherein symbolic empowerment is split from material demands, becomes understandable with a clearer definition of the term “social movements.” Social movements are more than just resistance and more than simply “contentious politics,” which Sidney G. Tarrow (2011) defines as “when ordinary people—often in alliance with more influential citizens and with changes in public mood—join forces in confrontation with elites, authorities and opponents” (p. 6). In order to constitute a social movement, Tarrow argues, a group engaging in contentious politics requires “sustained interactions with opponents” that are “backed by well-structured social networks and galvanized by culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols” (p. 6). This idea of “sustained” is important. For example, Zeynep Tufekci (2017) argues the “networked protests” of the social media era are fragile in that they lack such well-structured backing. Outbursts of popular contention instigated by social media discourse constitute “signals” that would previously have indicated organizing “capacities” (p. xvi).

It is during attempts to sustain opposition through long-term organizing, which works backwards toward these capacities, that movements are particularly vulnerable. The formation of coalitions and alliances—often with elites—and the symbolic production that accompanies these processes is where the separation of recognition from redistribution occurs. Elite capture is a hegemonic process rather than a class conspiracy,

wherein elite ideology becomes accepted as common sense through social interaction as individuals and groups pursue their interests (Táíwò, 2022, pp. 10-11).

The elite capture of identity politics is exacerbated, if not enabled, by what Táíwò calls “deference politics,” which he describes as “an etiquette that asks people to pass attention, resources, and *initiative* to those perceived as more marginalized than themselves” (p. 12; emphasis added). In Táíwò’s critique, the appearance of deference politics is due to how the claims of standpoint epistemology have been implemented within social structures following their popularization in feminist academic and activist circles since the 1970s. Táíwò describes standpoint epistemology in terms of three ideas: “1) knowledge is socially situated, 2) marginalized people have some advantages in gaining some forms of knowledge, and 3) research programs (and other areas of human activity) ought to reflect these facts” (p. 71).

Standpoint epistemology itself is not a problem. It is central to the conceptualization of social justice I have presented so far. Rather, issues arise when standpoint epistemology creates a politics of deference within “rooms” of power. Inside such rooms—Táíwò gives the example of the White House Situation Room, newsrooms, and conference rooms, while we might visualize the ballrooms, auditoriums, and exclusive parties of industry events—deference politics mean “handing conversational authority and attentional goods to whoever is *already* in the room and *appears* to fit a social category associated with some form of oppression” (pp. 69-70; emphasis added). The issue here is two-fold: a politics of recognition again threatens to overshadow a politics of redistribution, as those who most severely suffer the material consequences of oppression remain outside of the room; at the same time, the knowledge and insights presumed under standpoint epistemology are not guaranteed. Here, Táíwò defers to the work of Briana Toole (2019, 2022) on “epistemic privilege,” explaining that “by itself,

one’s social location only puts a person in a position to know; ‘epistemic privilege’ or advantage, on the other hand, is achieved only through deliberate, concerted struggle from that position” (Táíwò, 2022, p. 119).

Going beyond deference politics is required for social justice as a collective endeavor. Deference politics tokenize and burden the most marginalized in the room, who may not have the knowledge they are presumed to possess, while simultaneously absolving those who defer to them of their accountability in addressing systemic injustices (Táíwò, 2022, p. 81). The mic is passed and attention is redirected, at least for a while, with the deferrer “sanitized” by the performance (pp. 74-75). It is in this sense of deference politics that popular, derogatory phrases like “greenwashing” and wokewashing” are used to describe superficial corporate activities that remain at a performative, symbolic level like Shell House discussed in the previous chapter, or the widespread hiring (and subsequent firing) of diversity-related executives post-2020 (Chen & Weber, 2023). The elite capture of identity politics works to preserve the status quo.

In this dissertation, the events studied are composed of the very rooms of power at the heart of Táíwò’s analysis. In the coming chapters that examine social justice within these spaces, I will review a range of activities that appear as event organizers and participants prioritize social justice, and what this means for the media industries’ politics of production. Táíwò explains that “being in one of *these* rooms means that our words and actions affect institutions and broader social dynamics outside of it” (2022, pp. 69-70). At the events studied, the composition of the rooms they temporarily construct is addressed more aggressively and immediately than is possible within the comparatively static structures of the media and tech industries at large. This is in response to

burgeoning social justice discourses that were accelerated by the post-pandemic era of the 2020s.

Progressive Neoliberalism and Crisis

Scholars have begun to reflect on the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic for social justice and social movements (see Bringel & Pleyers, 2022). Introducing a volume of timely, critical perspectives released less than a year after the world started to lock down in 2020, sociologist Gerard Delanty (2021) concisely describes the globally fractured moment as “entwined in a range of other social and political issues, such as the Black Lives Matter [BLM] movement around racial injustice, the acceleration of post-democracy, and the problems already endemic to capitalism of major social inequalities” (p. 1). For Fraser (2023), these developments constitute a “general crisis” primed by decades of decay across economic, ecological, and social systems that has resulted in longer workdays, weakened social safety nets, extreme weather events, and racialized mass incarceration. The political dimension of this crisis, she argues, is a “crisis of hegemony” (2023, pp. 99-101), but more specifically, a crisis of the hegemony enjoyed by progressive neoliberalism in recent decades. Cracks are emerging in the elite capture of identity politics, evident at media industry events where social justice activities increasingly include deference, if not solidarity, with movements and marginalized groups.

Appending “progressive” to neoliberalism¹² is a means of understanding how neoliberalism became hegemonic. Theorizing in terms of “hegemonic blocs,” which are

¹² According to David Harvey (2005), “neoliberalism is in the first instance a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade.” (p. 2). It supercharges the aforementioned liberal values of freedom, autonomy, and equal opportunity with an entrepreneurial spirit that thrives in a globalized and financialized capitalist system. Neoliberalism, crucially, is antithetical to solidarity, shifting focus from collective action to

“a coalition of disparate social forces that the ruling class assembles and through which it asserts its leadership,” Fraser (2023) argues that “for the neoliberal project to triumph, it had to be repackaged, given a broader appeal, linked to other, non-economic aspirations for emancipation” (pp. 100-101). Progressive neoliberalism has tied itself to a range of ideals “interpreted in a specific, limited way” to be compatible with the neoliberal project, superficially and symbolically adopting values like “‘diversity,’ women’s ‘empowerment’ and LGBTQ rights, post-racialism, multiculturalism, and environmentalism” (p. 101). In the process, progressive neoliberalism has “worked to seduce major currents of progressive social movements into the new hegemonic bloc” (p. 102).

The elite capture of identity politics can be understood as a key dimension to how progressive neoliberalism achieved hegemonic force, while the associated concept of deference politics illuminates the process through which progressive social movements are “seduced,” or to use a more nuanced term, consent to a progressive neoliberal consensus politics that promise to advance the politics of redistribution incrementally through the politics of recognition. As the word “crisis” suggests, however, this split has become untenable.

A salient example of the contradiction at the heart of the progressive neoliberal hegemonic bloc, one relevant to this dissertation’s attention to the tech dimension of Austin and South by Southwest, is that of the “Californian Ideology.” Emerging at the intersection of San Francisco counterculture and the rise of Silicon Valley’s tech industries, Barbrook & Cameron (1996) define the Californian Ideology as a shared set of

individuals and what are perceived to be natural market forces. In the case of the United Kingdom, for example, Harvey notes how Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, who led the country’s adoption of neoliberal policies in the 1980s, declared “... who is society? There is no such thing! There are individual men and women and there are families” (p. 23; Thatcher quoted in Keay, 1987).

beliefs and values that “promiscuously combines the freewheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies” (p. 45). The California Ideology, and arguably progressive neoliberalism in its contemporary formation more broadly, is united around “a near universal belief in technological determinism” (p. 50). It involves a neoliberal emphasis on free markets, deregulation, and the individual as drivers of technological innovation that can create a “digital utopia” in which the freedoms of the individual, like freedom of expression, are ensured (p. 45).

However, as Barbook & Cameron stress, this alliance between “the social liberalism of New Left and the economic liberalism of New Right” means there is an inherently exclusionary nature to the California Ideology, and its lack of concern for social justice means it is destined to fall short of its democratic and egalitarian goals, becoming instead “a deeply pessimistic and repressive vision of the future” (p. 63). Nearly three decades after their theorization, the digital utopia has yet to arrive, and technology has yet to attenuate the material drivers of contemporary crises. How the media industry events examined in this research grapple with developing platforms for social justice against the backdrop of neoliberal, pro-innovation companies and their expectations comprises a core concern in my research, particularly in this context of crisis.

The crisis of the pandemic, combined with social protest movements of the past decade, constitute what some call a critical juncture. Citing Kenneth M. Roberts (2015), Donatella Della Porta (2021) defines critical junctures as “periods of ‘crisis or strain that existing policies and institutions are ill-suited to resolve’ and are therefore different from normal politics, when ‘institutional continuity or incremental change can be taken for granted’” (pp. 213-214). In the critical juncture of the pandemic, possibilities for change identified by Della Porta include “a discursive opening on issues of social justice, an

increase in public intervention, innovative forms of participation, the building of alternative public spheres, the growth of grassroots solidarity, and the broadening of collective identification and global connections” (p. 223).

These openings within the global political economy are relevant to media industry events. As I will elaborate in the upcoming chapters, social justice has been reflected in the experiences that events program for their communities of practice. Meanwhile, their participants have seized on the discursive opening to call for further public (and private) interventions. As noted, some events have already been acknowledged as subcultural sites shaping alternative public spheres (Wong, 2011), while for larger, mainstream events, 2020’s racial justice protests have catalyzed solidarity with social justice movements in events’ politics of presence. For example, the Vancouver Asian Film Festival created an advocacy arm, *Elimin8Hate*,¹³ following the rise in white supremacist, anti-Asian racism at the start of the pandemic that transformed Asian Americans into an embodied form of contagion (see Mallapragada, 2021). As I will explain in the coming chapters, similar activities have occurred in Austin, Texas.

While by no means the digital utopia of the Californian ideology, digital technologies have driven many of the innovative forms of participation and global connection noted by Della Porta. Though Della Porta is drawing on a different intellectual tradition for her understanding of critical junctures (see Collier & Munck, 2017; Roberts, 2015), Robert McChesney (1999/2015) also uses the concept in relation to media and communication, describing how “there are certain historical moments when the range of options for a society as it addresses how to structure its media and communication systems is far greater than is generally the case” (p. xxxix). For

¹³ *Elimin8Hate*, a partnership with the grassroots Asian feminist group Project 1907, describes its mission as “to interrupt, dismantle and eliminate anti-Asian racism at the individual, institutional and systemic level by harnessing the power of arts, film and media” (*Elimin8Hate*, n.d.).

McChesney, critical junctures present breaks in long-term “path dependency,” during which “dominant institutions, technologies, and practices” are “locked in place” (p. xxxix). With global populations stuck indoors for extensive periods of time, engaging with the outside world almost entirely through media and communications systems, or else participating in mass protest and contentious politics through social media, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a critical juncture in this media and technology sense of the term as well. McChesney’s call to action is that we must rebuild “democratic infrastructure” to collectively decide how we should harness the “benefits of the digital revolution” within a “postcapitalist democracy” (p. lix). There is opportunity for new discursive approaches and new solidarities when political conditions change at critical junctures (see Dolber, 2021).

Media industry events can be thought of as spatial junctures where this decision-making plays out, though perhaps not in the radically inclusive way called for by McChesney, as they are hardly postcapitalist formations and remain constrained by the logics of capitalist production. Nonetheless, at such a break in long-term path dependency, they are platforms for catalyzing tactical interventions in representational practices among media makers and industry professionals, firstly, in how the media industries operate, but also in how they shape the popular imagination of global problems and solutions. In the case of Austin, this platforming is simultaneously inflected by countercultural forces and intense capital flow, affording tenuous opportunities—though opportunities nonetheless—for social justice discourses at this critical juncture to produce dissonance. At such critical junctures, events have more leeway to prioritize a politicized mission without alienating stakeholders. The presence of activities at events that span the entire continuum from recognition to redistribution represent a range of different interventions and accompanying critiques of these interventions (see Illustration 1.2).

While social justice movements' social networks extend into and depend upon media networks, looming large on social media (Bennett & Segerberg, 2013; Tufekci, 2017), they also seep into the operations of the media industries, where influential media makers and intermediaries are involved in the creation and transmission of their action-oriented symbols—part of the media's role in the hegemonic struggle over meaning-making (Hall, 1997). At industry events, interactions occur with movements' allies and opponents alike. Though usually not as blatant or dramatic as the scene that transpired at Shell House, events are sites to observe hegemonic struggle within the capitalist logics and profit motive that circumscribe the media industries. What may seem to be “business as usual” can coopt and commodify progressive causes in many ways, with even the symbols of protest appropriated and repurposed to commercial ends (Baer, 2016; Fraser, 2023; Táíwò, 2022).

Industry events play a role in sustaining opposition through their programming, namely, the media texts and experiences they curate and which act as “culturally resonant, action-oriented symbols.” The events can become productive, especially at critical junctures, for understanding what a range of progressive social movement discourses around topics like social justice, or climate change, or human rights, or online harassment, mean for media production through the media industries. In other words, how social justice is understood among media makers in a post-2020 moment, and how coming to this understanding affects their role in producing symbols with ideological resonance. Based on this theorization of social justice at critical junctures, I reintroduce the first research question that will guide my analysis in the coming chapters:

RQ1: What temporal and locational qualities contribute to media industry events' abilities to create platforms for social justice?

- a. How might contemporary crises such as the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement create critical junctures for societal change through events?
- b. How does location interact with event possibilities?

I expand further on the second part of this research question concerning locational qualities in Chapter 4: The Austin Imaginary.

Solidarity in Media Production

Political praxis that addresses both the politics of recognition and the politics of redistribution in pursuit of social justice, which is again, “the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression” (Young, 1990, p. 15), becomes the task at hand for social movements. In Táíwò’s theorization, this means a “constructive politics” in which we “decide collectively where we’re going, and then we have to do what it takes to get there” (2022, p. 121). It is an approach that involves “building power in and through institutions and networks” (p. 109). When it comes to global political economy in the broadest sense, Táíwò is thinking in terms of institutions like labor unions. For Fraser (2023), who is theorizing political coalitions in the US post-Trump, the solution is “progressive populism” as a “counterhegemonic bloc” that aligns the politics of recognition with “other sectors of the working and middle classes, including communities historically associated with manufacturing, mining, and construction” (pp. 108-109). In both cases, these are long-term political projects that must span decades of organizing.

In a historical moment where the politics of recognition are frequently untethered from the structural, systemic causes of injustice, these solutions push for a rejuvenation of the politics of redistribution. But then what becomes of the “institutions and networks” of media representation and those who labor to tell stories in the current moment? What

role does media play in “the elimination of institutionalized domination and oppression,” and how might media makers be influenced by this goal when they gather and interact at certain moments and within certain spaces that are inflected by social justice as a priority? Deference politics may be “a flawed model of doing” solidarity within a broader political project (Táíwò, 2022, p. 12), but there is place for it when it remains reflexive and open to its shortcomings.

In devising an approach to news production that can transform this abstract theoretical discussion into a guiding framework for journalists, Anita Varma (2020) defines solidarity as “a commitment to social justice that translates into action, when social justice is defined as dignity for everyone in society” (p. 2). Similar to Táíwò’s constructive politics, this activated definition emphasizes action toward ensuring social justice as a positive right. Within the context of entertainment media, its brevity and clarity make it useful as a cognitive tool for assessing media representations, production discourses, and structural changes for inclusion and equity within production spaces. Solidarity, when discussed directly or implicitly by my interviewees, or within the discursive spaces I observed at events, went beyond advocacy around a single issue or group, instead acknowledging the structural interrelations of various oppressions. It is not unlike what social justice activists across issue areas have described in relation to news coverage of contemporary activism (see Varma, Limov, & Cabas-Mijares, 2023). I will use solidarity as a concept to navigate the openness of terms like “impact” and “diversity” as they appear within the discourses at media industry events and to assess where these discourses and activities fall on the continuum of social justice I have presented (see Illustration 1.2).

POLITICS OF PRODUCTION

Hegemony and Normative Industry Practices

The question of solidarity in challenging industry norms raises the question of what normative industry practices are, and how they form. Todd Gitlin (1980/2003) has theorized a definition of hegemony in relation to media production, drawing on the work of Antonio Gramsci:

Hegemony is a ruling class's (or alliance's) domination of subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology (ideas and assumptions) into their common sense and everyday practice; it is the systematic (but not necessarily or even usually deliberate) engineering of mass consent to the established order. (p. 253)

There are a number of points deserving further attention in this definition. First, it is important to emphasize that hegemony is not devised in a backroom somewhere by an evil cabal sitting around a table smoking cigars. As with the concept of elite capture, such a conspiratorial perspective of total control is neither defensible nor necessary. Instead, hegemony inevitably forms out of an alliance of powerful groups as they work to advance their interests. It also relies on the "consent" of the less powerful to the normal hegemonic processes of life. The reason those who do not benefit from this system nonetheless consent to it is because the ideas and assumptions on which the status quo depend become "common sense" to dominated groups, a truth embedded in the ongoing practices that make up their everyday lives. As noted via Fraser (2023), crises of political economy can disrupt everyday life and bring this truth into question.

Gitlin's definition is useful due to his concern with the operation of hegemony in mainstream news media framings of social movements, in this case the framing of the New Left during the 1960s. Gitlin examines the processes of building consent in relation to the production of news itself, theorizing the connection between common sense and

the development of journalistic norms and routines, and thereby suggesting limitations inherent to industrial reflexivity:

Routines are structured in the ways journalists are socialized from childhood, and then trained, recruited, assigned, edited, rewarded, and promoted on the job; they decisively shape the ways in which news is defined, events are considered newsworthy, and “objectivity” is secured. News is managed routinely, automatically, as reporters import definitions of newsworthiness from editors and institutional beats, as they accept the analytical frameworks of officials *even while taking up adversary positions*. When reporters make decisions about what to cover and how, rarely do they deliberate about ideological assumptions or political consequences. *Simply by doing their jobs, journalists tend to serve the political and economic elite definitions of reality*. (1980/2003, p. 12, emphasis added)

Here, the *duration* of routines especially stands out as key to the workings of hegemony, together with hegemony’s *diffusion* across trusted social networks (familial, educational, professional) and affirmation mechanisms (awards, editorial assistance, promotions) in which journalists are embedded. Most importantly, these processes of making consent into common sense shape how journalists frame issues within the stories they tell. This suggests the need for conscious interventions when industry norms and routines exacerbate systemic issues, interventions that ideally come in solidarity with those subjected to these norms in harmful ways (Varma, Limov, & Cabas-Mijares, 2023).

These hegemonic processes are relevant to entertainment media production. Though the industrial pressures media makers face and their expected creative output differ, we can similarly understand the norms and routines among entertainment media professionals in relation to hegemony and how it shapes the stories they tell and the ways they frame issues as storytellers. Journalists aspire to accuracy in their reporting that truthfully represents newsworthy happenings in the world as they unfold, a goal repeated in professional codes of ethics (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014), news organization mission statements (Washington Post, 2021), and university classrooms. As

I will show in the upcoming chapters, and Chapter 6 on Austin Film Festival in particular, discourses on practice among producers of narrative fiction emphasize the related concept of authenticity, which I define as an accuracy grounded in perceived “truths” that seeks their faithful representation. A key question is how to create dissonance in elite definitions of reality, or how to break up the routines. It is my contention that media industry events that bring together various communities of media practice play a role in accomplishing this, especially at critical junctures when “common sense” is under scrutiny.

Historically, authenticity has been in short supply in the entertainment media industries due to homogeneity among creative labor and executive decision-makers that has entrenched hegemonic modes of representation and reproduced stereotypes (see Ramón et al., 2023). It is a difficult problem to contest in incremental terms due to the workings of hegemony in professional norms and routines. In her scholarly reflections on working in Hollywood’s writers’ rooms, for example, Felicia D. Henderson (2011) describes how “all writers and all characters may not look alike, but they all mimic the dominant group because there is little acceptance of actual difference” (2011, p. 152).

In Gramsci’s terminology, we could say these writers to varying degrees consent to the political and economic elite—and by extension white and heteropatriarchal—definitions of reality. In their professional work, they then represent this reality. But that does not mean there is no resistance, no hegemonic struggle, just that it is circumscribed by those with power in production spaces. Normative dynamics in writers’ rooms lead to the “homogenization of ideas” as socially marginalized writers seek approval from showrunners and senior writers to survive (Henderson, 2011, p. 147). Commonly the token representative of a demographic in their workplace, socially marginalized voices are burdened with “speaking up” against stereotypes others may not perceive, thereby

making those whose approval is so important feel uncomfortable or threatened (Adamo, 2010, p. 82). These power relations often overwhelm an individual writer's agency in effecting equitable changes (Martin, 2021).

Maryann Erigha (2015) describes this as part of a vicious cycle between token representation in writers' rooms and misrepresentations on screen that stalls lasting change. When there are BIPOC or other marginalized people in powerful roles, they tend to promote inclusion and integration in production spaces. When there are not, however, "the lack of diversity enables a cycle of unemployment, leading to misrepresentation, which prohibits members of marginalized groups from manufacturing their own on-screen representations in mainstream popular culture" (pp. 86-87; see also Reid, 2005 and Smith & Choueiti, 2011). Common sense incentives necessary to instigate change in this system tend to be economic: racial equity must be profitable, and it is as of late, according to the aforementioned McKinsey & Company report that found achieving diversity in Hollywood to be worth an additional \$10 billion in annual revenue (Dunn et al., 2021). The "Hollywood paradox" (Molina-Guzmán, 2016) has diminished, but persists, as of 2022 (Ramón et al., 2023).

Hegemony within neoliberal society also shapes norms and routines among workers at the many internet platform companies that transmit news and entertainment. Shoshana Zuboff distinguishes this "surveillance capitalism" from what came before due to what she calls its wielding of "instrumentarian power": "the instrumentation and instrumentalization of human behavior, for the purposes of modification and monetization" (Zuboff et al., 2019, p. 260). It is somewhat difficult to imagine these developments outside of the operation of hegemony among Silicon Valley tech workers. Much like journalists in Gitlin's (1980/2003) account of hegemony and the routinization of news coverage, employees at Google and Facebook arrived at their consent to this

mode of capital accumulation through socialization and (increasingly lengthy) educational processes of their own: either as “technical” or “knowledge elites” of the postindustrial information economy (Bell, 1975/1983, p. 542), tasked with coding the design or algorithmic underpinnings of platforms, or else as members of the “professional-managerial class” (Ehrenreich & Ehrenreich, 1977/1979) tasked with devising schemes for its monetization. Both are shaped separately and together through lived processes to take as common sense the need for—and acceptability of—instrumentarian power. It should come as no surprise that it took more than a decade for whistleblowers to emerge from the industry. Hegemony is key to understanding “the endurance of advanced capitalist society” (Gitlin, 1980/2003, p. 10). But the fracturing of the progressive neoliberal bloc, as discussed by Fraser (2023), suggests that consent is not stable, even if a new hegemonic bloc has yet to coalesce.

Contestation within the Politics of Production

There are professional interventions that center reflexivity in challenging the workings of hegemony within the media industries. What we need within the entertainment media industries, according to Anamik Saha (2016, 2018), is a “politics of production” that can resist “the rationalizing/racializing logic of capital” that packages works by creators from marginalized groups in ways that suit the tastes of the dominant group. Saha (2016) gives the example of orientalist tropes used in marketing books related to South Asia in Europe, which include repeated imagery on book covers like the profiles of shy women covered in exotic jewelry or the Taj Mahal. “The effect is clear,” he explains, “through these covers, the diversity of a vast continent is reduced to a romanticized, exoticized, and eroticized Western conception of South Asian culture” (p.

3; see also Said, 1978). The extent to which industry events facilitate opportunities to intervene within the politics of production is at the heart of my investigation.

In Saha's critique of hegemonic norms and routines, political economy and commodification are emphasized. Through the operation of the rationalizing/racializing logic of capital, "ideas about race (themselves through political, regulatory, and representational discourses of European/white racism in the West) are allowed to manifest insidiously through what appear as neutral, common sense, commercial rationales" (Saha, 2016, p. 5). This can be seen in DVD artwork or movie trailers that emphasize categorical Otherness in marketing efforts similar to Saha's example of book covers, but also the reproduction of stereotypes within narratives. One of the most salient examples might be Arab and Muslim representation in the United States post-9/11 in television shows like *24* (2001 – 2010) or, more recently, *Jack Ryan* (2018 –), where "simplified complex representations" construct Arabs and Muslims at positive and negative extremes as either terrorists or patriotic supporters of the War on Terror. This creates consent around declarations of war and racist policies by relocating the problem, in neoliberal fashion, as a matter of individual moral choices. In turn, it justifies violence exacted against those in the negative extreme, becoming a matter of common sense (see Alsultany, 2012). Thus, the politics of production have real ramifications for the politics of representation.

Whether at the scale of nationally "imagined communities" (Anderson, 1983) or "imagined worlds" knowable from different global vantage points (Appadurai, 1996), representations are central to how we construct and are constructed as distinct groups. When it comes to the industrial projection of such imaginaries, the profit motive driving capitalist production has meant representations tend to be risk averse. Dominant representational norms default to the assumed economic safety of perceived universal

similarities which, upon closer inspection, reflect a white, heteropatriarchal processing of difference and injustice by those with control over representation. This limits opportunities for “layered representations” of race, gender, sexuality, and other intersections of identity that complicate monolithic portrayals of similarity and difference (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 312). Audiences are left with normative representations of Otherness that reify the dominant order and allow for visibility only on its terms (see Gray, 1995; Martin, 2021). Media representations of difference, as part of “racial projects”¹⁴ that orchestrate the racial redistribution of resources (Omi & Winant, 1986/2015), “use stereotypic images to influence the redistribution of resources in ways that benefit dominant groups at the expense of others” (Davis & Gandy, 1999, p. 368). Once again, the politics of redistribution are implicated in the politics of recognition.

Signaling the public’s ability to entice corporate responses, in the aftermath of George Floyd’s May 2020 murder by police, media companies crafted statements calling for racial justice. YouTube, going a step further, set aside \$100 million for Black creators (Lyles, 2020). These responses to the critical juncture require cautious optimism. Despite what corporations position as progress, I have already discussed progressive neoliberalism’s co-optation of social justice discourses for profit without proffering long-lasting structural change as nothing new (Harvey, 2005; Fraser, 2023; Táíwò, 2022). Even stories celebrated for representational diversity can be constrained by “paradoxical ideation” that undermines the liberatory potential of narratives with conflict resolutions reinforcing the status quo, as in the case of Marvel Studio’s *Black Panther*¹⁵ (Griffin &

¹⁴ An example discussed by Omi & Winant (1986/2015) is the hegemony of colorblind ideology in the United States amidst racial wealth inequality exacerbated by the 2008 financial crisis and mass incarceration (pp. 229-230). I discuss colorblind and color conscious approaches to storytelling, and how these relate to stereotypes, in Chapter 6: Austin Film Festival and the Benefits of Community.

¹⁵ Griffin and Rossing (2020) highlight three paradoxical ideations in *Black Panther*’s plot: “(1) Wakanda’s thriving reality versus global assumptions of its third-world status; (2) T’Challa’s nationalistic

Rossing, 2020). Baer (2016) describes how this co-optation of emancipatory social movements occurs within the politics of production, with the neoliberal mode of production “replacing their anti-hierarchical and redistributive politics with discourses of personal responsibility and individual empowerment...while at the same time transforming their signs and symbols into commodities” (p. 31). Although Baer is theorizing the potential of feminist Twitter campaigns, this propensity for neoliberal co-optation is arguably more relevant to entertainment media, where activism—if it can be called such—is a struggle over representation, and representation necessarily means commodification.

For Saha (2018), commodification in fact presents opportunities. An effective “politics of production” can exploit the enabling tendencies of the commodification process even though “the rationalizing/racializing logic of capital” constrains creators as their works undergo production processes that flatten representation and reproduce readily packageable stereotypes (Saha, 2016, 2018). If the politics of representation occur at a semiotic level, Saha explains that the politics of production, “is tasked with the opening up of representational practices; that is, removing the constraints placed on minority cultural production” (Saha, 2018, “Conclusion: The politics of production”). One example, though short-lived, is Black-produced television on Fox in the early 90s when a marketing strategy targeting Black, urban audiences inadvertently created a pocket of televisual possibility for “intraracial dialogue and collective autobiography” before the network sought a whiter audience (Zook, 1999, p. 102). While acknowledging the tentativeness of market-driven opportunities for empowering media workers from marginalized groups, but also the weakening of the progressive neoliberal consensus, the

allegiance versus Killmonger’s diasporic activism; and (3) distinctions between providing aid and resisting capitalist structures” (p. 204).

opportunities at industry events for intervening in the politics of production is worth our consideration.

The politics of production become all the more important to consider as writers from marginalized groups reproduce the rationalizing/racializing logic of capital to avoid conflict around representation of, to again use Henderson's (2011) words, "actual difference." Greater representation behind the camera is perceived as one important part of the solution to this problem of representation. Christian and White (2020) refer to this as "a reparative praxis" requiring "engagement and restoration, not just taking stories but using them as an opportunity to train, fund, and provide resources to the communities from which these narratives originate" (p. 147). The other part of the equation concerns ownership and distribution, which we can productively think about in terms of the "platforming" also proposed by Christian and coauthors (Christian et al., 2020). As previously mentioned, it refers to "the method of creating independent platforms on top of existing corporate platforms...to lift up voices and perspectives that are historically suppressed or misrepresented" (2020, p. 4).

This solution offers a politics of production that can empower communities and achieve "organic representation" (Christian & White, 2020); however, the representations they produce must still contend with the greater quantity and spectacle of productions from large media conglomerates backed by transnational capital. Both politics of production internally and platforming externally have their value in contesting hegemonic representations and practices. Crucially, success in one does not preclude success in the other. Dominant and alternative platforms are best analyzed relationally within networks of resources and support available to media makers who reject representational norms or otherwise resist progressive neoliberal worldmaking.

POLITICS OF PRESENCE

Industry Events as Relays for Alternative Public Spheres

Festivals and industry events help to advance changes in the politics of production through the politics of presence they achieve at scales ranging from niche, community-oriented gatherings that prioritize intimate interaction to global, corporatized platforms that maximize the network effects of “weak ties” (Granovetter, 1973). Cindy Hing-yuk Wong (2011) notes that film festivals have long functioned as sites for alternative public spheres. She builds on Roland Barthes’ semiotic writings about mythmaking, arguing that the tendency of many festivals to “question the status quo—the myth” in the construction of their events and programming has meant that festivals are usually “sites of leftist or liberal practices” (p. 161).

While leftist and liberal politics are often quite different animals, and commitments to “impact” can run the gamut of performative and transformative activities, the spontaneity and serendipity of even the largest festivals means that the discourses which run through them as industry nodal points cannot be completely or centrally controlled and disseminated in the manner of press releases or “fully embedded” texts and activities of “intraguild, intra-association, or interpersonal interaction and dialogue among crew members” (Caldwell, 2008, p. 346). The many discourses constituting a media festival include among them those of the local media and political environments, as well as marginalized perspectives on industry-wide challenges. Their concentrated format, with participants packing in as many interactions and experiences as possible over several days, lends itself to the emergence of activist arenas for aesthetic and political contention within what are otherwise dispersed media environments.

Festivals as temporary sites for relaying and reinforcing alternative public spheres have largely been discussed in relation to events at the community-oriented end of the spectrum. Queer film festivals, for example, have been enmeshed in liberatory projects from the time social movements concerning identity and representation appeared in the 1970s (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p. 49). Festivals' roles have extended beyond appreciation of film as art by "offering a space for disenfranchised artists and audiences to use culture as a means to strategize around social and political issues such as housing, employment, segregation, and inequity" (Rastegar, 2012, p. 312). However, these local festivals are also important in broader processes of media production and distribution as they "help circulate, or even create, representations that were not available otherwise" (Loist & Zielinski, 2012, p. 54). For decades, such festivals have foregrounded marginalized subjectivities by curating work that challenges mainstream elisions.

That global prestige festivals like Cannes, Berlinale, and Sundance have historically drawn on local, specialized fests to "discover" works for their own programming points to their importance in the value addition and agenda setting processes of the festival circuit (De Valck, 2007). The Berlinale, for example, has presented the Teddy Award to LGBTQ films since 1987 (Damiens, 2015). This dynamic is not without tensions as the idea of a queer community is globalized, commodified, and consumed by broader audiences. On the one hand, as Antoine Damiens (2020) puts it, "LGBTQ festivals matter, not because they participate in the economy of films but simply because they illustrate how queer people relate, through film, to the world and to one another" (p. 237). On the other hand, Stuart James Richards (2017) discusses how some of the largest queer film festivals have been shaped by neoliberalism, becoming "social enterprises" in the name of financial viability with "market-focused activities serving a social goal" (p. 25). Ticket sales come first, meaning less experimental

programming. This commercialized format is then made to encompass the “carnavalesque celebrations [that] are at the very core of the queer film festival” (p. 22). Though we need to be wary of how this reproduces white, homonormative hierarchies in the queer community (Richards gives the example of the Hong Kong Lesbian and Gay Film Festival and its English-only subtitling practices), he optimistically argues that “sustained social empowerment occurs when the transgressive nature of [the former] begins to infiltrate and change the configuration of [the latter]” (p. 230).

I find this last point on “infiltration” to be useful for thinking about how to build solidarity between dominant and marginalized groups in society and within the politics of presence at festivals or industry events in their selection processes and curated programming. It connects well with Roya Rastegar’s (2012) concept of “programming for difference... connecting individual affective responses to the project of interpellating different audiences into collective experiences offered by festivals” (p. 315). This can challenge the hierarchies of taste that operate through festivals (p. 317), which otherwise “not only render illegible cinematic sensibilities that flourish on the margins of film culture and wider society, but also obscure how cinema reflects social, economic and political realities (and fantasies), and informs our individual and collective consciousness” (p. 311).

When festival organizers program for difference, we can perhaps understand film festivals—even the large, commercial ones that cater to broad, popular audiences—as sites of encounter, for potential border crossing (Anzaldúa, 1987/1999), “an entry point for strangers and familiars alike to engage with differences in perspective, experience, identity, and position that might be otherwise reviled or ignored offscreen” (Rastegar, 2012, p. 315). This is easier said than done, of course, and most industry-oriented events must carefully balance the interests of many different stakeholders that might constrain

the range of encounters, whether they skew more toward the commercially minded “social enterprises” discussed by Richards (2017) or operate according to the “festival-as-nonprofit” model highlighted by Rhyne (2009). However, it is important to acknowledge that a typical festivalgoer most likely does not distinguish between these operational models when attending an event. From the system-wide perspective of festival circuits, discourses can spread from events that are more activist in character to those that are more industry-oriented.

Industry Events as Spaces for Consensus and Dissensus

Ezra Winton and Svetla Turnin (2017) wrestle with these constraints when documentary film festivals screen activist films, concluding that “an *effective cinema of action* will only flourish within an *affective screening space of political possibility*” (p. 88). Their discussion of the “NGOization” of film festivals, “whereby ‘festival activism’ is seldom approached from a critical, especially anti-capitalist, perspective, and where spectatorship is rarely problematized as a mode of consumption” (p. 85), is helpful for curating productive arenas for action. They give the example of a screening of *Blackfish* at Hot Docs in 2013, where after its short Q&A a frustrated audience member shouted, “But what can *we* do?” According to Winton and Turnin, the festival failed to connect audiences with community activists and an existing action nearby to shut down Marineland in Ontario (p. 88). Embodied affect within the festival space was thus split from opportunities for “impact” in the realm of politics, which were left in “the social space outside the festival, whence they came” (pp. 89-90).

The key to resolving this problem is to create a festival experience that capitalizes on its affective power in bringing people together (see Dickson, 2015), while at the same time producing the kind of conflict and resolution that can disrupt common sense,

hegemonic understandings and foster “new kinds of temporary consensus” (Dovey, 2015, p. 19). This requires a “politics of presence” where the intentional inclusion of different perspectives and diverse people—including those who are outside of the “rooms” of power—creates a space “where productive debate, justice-oriented discourse and egalitarianism can exist in the public sphere” (Winton & Turnin, 2017, p. 90). Winton and Turnin illustrate this idea with the example of a Q&A panel at International Documentary Film Festival Amsterdam (IDFA) that gathered representatives from two NGOs, Oxfam and Friends of the Earth, to discuss the environmentalist film *No Land No Food No Life* (2013) with its radical director, Amy Miller. During the Q&A, the representation of both anti-capitalist and neoliberal consensus perspectives fostered a productive debate that Friends of the Earth, who were invited by Miller, then capitalized on in their outreach efforts during the remainder of the festival (pp. 96-97).

As indicated by this example, festivals can organize “off-screen events” (Davies, 2017) that enable reflexivity during encounters with peers, as well as the articulation of collective action frames (Gamson, 1992) that identify injustices, adversaries, allies, and avenues for collective action in solidarity with the oppressed and marginalized. In practice, this would mean festival organizers improving the politics of presence at their events by creating space in the program for such experiences, while participants themselves make this opening in discourse meaningful. For industry professionals and media makers in attendance, this would mean challenging hegemonic representational practices in the work they exhibit, or else contesting the politics of production in interactions with their industry peers and decision-makers to influence who makes what and how. Notwithstanding broader critiques of “the nonprofit industrial complex” that is made to fill the vacuum of receding governments under neoliberalism, disciplining progressive social movements with their privatized financing structures and limiting the

possibility for radical transformation (see INCITE!, 2007/2017), a silver-lining to the NGOization of film festivals is the ability to push back against broader political economic processes within the infrastructure for discourse that events curate among these organizations. With the role played by event curation in mind, as well as the increasing involvement of NGOs, nonprofits, and political organizations in media industry events, I once again pose my second research question:

RQ2: How does social justice fit into the missions of media industry events?

Film screenings have a secondary importance at the industry events I examine in this dissertation. Within the many discursive spaces created by these events, I observed an “activated logic of dissensus” (Winton & Turnin, 2017, p. 92) created through the participation of those who questioned the dominant progressive neoliberal consensus. “Where this occurs,” Winton and Turnin suggest, “the festival space resembles less a commercial space of consumption and more an affective architecture that breeds dissent, confrontation and radical political action” (p. 93). More than connecting event participants to grassroots organizing, which did happen in some instances as I will discuss, dissent and confrontation among media makers and industry professionals creates dissonance and chips away at a politics of production that perpetuates progressive neoliberal representational norms. This occurs through their outward-facing dimension as media events and inward-facing dimension as trade rituals.

OUTWARD AND INWARD FACING DIMENSIONS

In this section I introduce the concepts of “media event” and “trade ritual,” which I use to describe the outward and inward facing dimensions of media industry events as platforms for discourse and social interaction. After introducing media events in the context of the broadcast television era in which they emerged, I discuss how the theory

has been updated for the participatory and fragmented era of social media, as well as how scholars have applied the concept to the specific case of film festivals. Finally, I elaborate on the ritualistic and participatory nature of media industry events as sites for trade rituals among communities of media practice.

Media industry events market their capacities to “inspire” those in attendance as well as those who observe their media events from a distance. Media industry events also promote the “impact” produced by the trade rituals they host, which foster interactions and opportunities in the short-term and long-term through association with an event’s brand as a marker of distinction. When social justice features within events’ politics of presence, these inward and outward facing dimensions become mechanisms for the recognition of difference and redistribution of resources within and through the media industries. For the purposes of an academic investigation, they most importantly offer concrete phenomenon in which to ground an analysis of how social justice appears within events’ politics of presence and how it impacts the politics of production.

Industry Events as Media Events

According to Daniel Dayan and Elihu Katz (1992), who coined the term, media events were initially conceived as a broadcast television phenomenon made possible by “the unique potential of the electronic media to command attention universally and simultaneously in order to tell a primordial story about current affairs” (p. 1). This was a time when as many as hundreds of millions of viewers around the world could be found watching the same thing like the Olympic Games. Dayan and Katz describe these collective viewings as “festive” and “ritualistic” in comparison to the ordinary flows of broadcast and everyday life, calling them “the high holidays of mass communication” (p. 1). Crucially, a media event is a unique experience separate from whatever the profilmic

“event” might be, an “experience of not being there” (pp. 100-101). And yet, media events shape public opinion and institutions by becoming part of “collective memory” (p. 17). How an event is mediated beyond itself is as important, or in many cases more important, than the event itself in terms of influence and impact. Media events play an important role in reinforcing common sense through their contributions to collective memory, reinforcing hegemony and sustaining the status quo.

This definition of media events is resonant with James W. Carey’s (1989/2009) argument that beyond traditional conceptualizations of communication as an act of transmission with a message moving from sender to receiver, communication is inherently a ritualistic phenomenon. “A ritual view of communication is directed not toward the extension of messages in space but toward the maintenance of society in time,” Carey explains, “not the act of imparting information but the representation of shared beliefs” (p. 15). Applying this perspective to a critique hegemony, we might consider how media events sanitize current events that might otherwise instigate critical junctures, thereby maintaining existing social structures and their ideological underpinnings. They constitute the kind of ceremony and ritual “which anthropologists would find familiar if it were not for the scale” (Dayan & Katz, 1992, p. 14).

But what happens to these processes of public opinion and collective memory formation when technologies change and broadcast television gives way to the networked, user-generated flows of social media feeds? Some scholars advocate for radically expanding the definition of media events to include any “happening in which a series of things and processes, of possibly different qualities and affordances, come together, and might subsequently then disperse” (Pink et al., 2016, Ch. 8, “The Event as a Concept”). However, such a definition lessens the term’s usefulness in critiquing power.

If we wish to adapt the concept of media events for such critiques, we might start with an affordances perspective—where “possibilities for action” emerge through the situated use of particular technologies by particular users (Evans et al., 2017, p. 36)—and focus on the use of new technologies by “old” audiences in “old” situations. This is more or less what Vaccari et al. (2015) do in their study of debates during the 2014 European Parliament elections, a “hybrid” media event where, like most others now, audiences engaged in “dual screening: the bundle of practices that involve integrating, and switching across and between, live broadcast media and social media” (pp. 1041, 1044). If we keep this new practice of dual screening, but swap the users and the situation, our exploration of possibilities for action could lead us to consider, for example, how Twitter becomes a “technology of fandom” where Eurovision fans can “offer their own running commentary... as it unfolds live” (Highfield et al., 2013, p. 315). If we remove broadcast television from the picture altogether, we might consider the possibilities for action when media events are entirely mediated—or when there is news coverage, re-mediated—by users on social media. From this perspective we can understand media events as networked, participatory cultural production by those who construct the events from the bottom-up, along more complicated temporalities than the “unfolding” of traditional broadcast media events (Frosh & Pinchevski, 2018, p. 137).

The concept of the media event and its possible critique of power over the social imaginary is as relevant as ever, particularly when the construction of media events by powerful actors with control over media systems is contradicted by the “media witnessing” of those engaged in participatory cultural production (see Frosh & Pinchevski, 2018). If the original conceptualization of a media event construed power in terms of the lack of alternatives to Broadcast TV and consequently large audience sizes, contemporary media events hold power due to the overwhelming volume of information

that is now not only accessible, but unavoidable. There exists a heavy demand for a human touch in curating a path through the more complicated, dispersed media environment, whether this comes through specialized streaming services (Smits & Nikdel, 2019), or in the case of this dissertation, festivals and industry events.

Film festivals as media events have been discussed by scholars for some time. Dayan (2000) himself turned his anthropological eye to Sundance in an attempt to study its social construction as a ritualistic, collective performance. He was ultimately struck by the event's mediation, what he calls "the written festival": "While Park City officials kept showing films and throwing parties, a Niagara of printed paper was spelling out meanings, offering captions, telling and retelling daily events until they reached a stable, paradigmatic form" (p. 52). In her monograph on film cultures, Janet Harbord (2002) embraces this phenomenon entirely, approaching the media event of a film festival as a "discursive formation" comprising four main discourses:

First, discourses of independent film makers and producers circulate in catalogues, press releases, interviews, and other texts. ... Second, discourses of media representation, particularly the press, provide a commentary on events, on controversies, spectacles and the 'new'. ... Third, a business discourse of purchase, price, and copyright, existing in the texts of legal transactions and contracts, in verbal discussion, reported partially in the trades press. ... Fourth, the discourse of tourism and the service industry, the local press releases, brochures, advertisements and guide books that provide an intertext between the filmic event and the location. (p. 60)

Harbord includes verbal discussions and dealings that are only "partially reported" in the trade press among the discourses constituting the business side of festivals as media events. Large events with hundreds or even thousands of activities can mean that much of what constitutes the business-oriented interactions and trade rituals remains outside of the attention of the press and goes unrecognized as part of its media event.

Frandsen et al. (2022) encourage media and communication scholars to examine media events' scale, to better understand their social and ideological ramifications given "the role of media in elevating a communicative event or activity into a higher status, allowing individuals to experience a meaningful connectedness with smaller or larger groups in society and with society at large" (p. 9). This perspective on media events in relation to scale is productive for understanding the range of groups brought together by the largest, most global media industry events, and how what constitutes the media event dimension for them may not necessarily mean a national or global spotlight drawn to their activities.

On the other hand, it is worth emphasizing that the role of the press remains of the utmost importance in shaping discourses and reinforcing the cultural legitimization, gate keeping, and taste-making attached to an event's brand (see De Valck, 2016). When SXSW 2020's cancellation wrecked it financially, a 50% stake in the organization was purchased by shareholder P-MRC, a joint venture between Penske Media Corporation and MRC that now controls just about every major trade publication from *The Hollywood Reporter* and *Variety* to *Billboard* and *Rolling Stone* (Harris-Bridson & Kohn, 2021). Beyond media conglomerates investing in the production and coverage of cultural spectacle, the close relationship between festivals and press as part of a media ecosystem is also seen in the example of Rotten Tomatoes' "Critics Outreach & Grant Program" (see Figure 2.1) that partners with Sundance, SXSW, and Toronto International Film Festival on festival inclusion programs to train entertainment writers from marginalized groups (Prange, 2022). Who reports on media festivals and what gets reported on are often of great consequence. SXSW 2016's controversy around their panels on gamer culture and online harassment, for example, produced the second and third largest spikes

in all of the media coverage on #Gamergate from 2014 to 2016 (Nieborg & Foxman, 2018, p. 122). I return to this controversy in my chapter on SXSW.

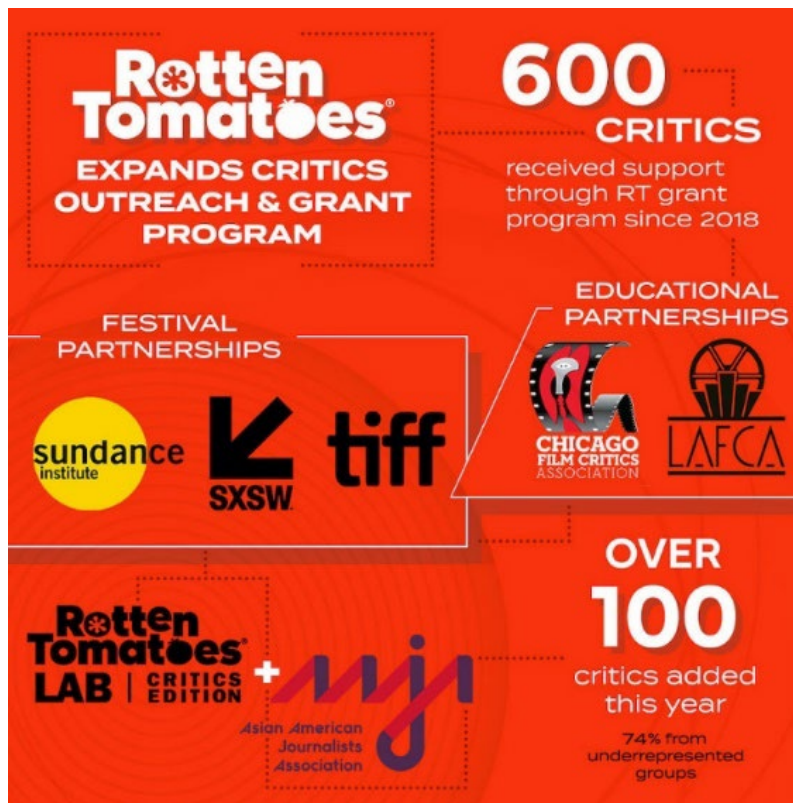


Figure 2.1: Promotional image for Rotten Tomatoes' Critics Outreach & Grant Program. Image from Prange (2022).

Frosh & Pinchevski (2018) argue that both time and control over representation are challenged when “hierarchies are less capable of making their own distinctive technocultural apparatus co-extensive with the heightened ceremonial orchestration of events as discrete, collective historical units” (p. 137). In the case of media industry events, which organizers and their corporate participants jointly orchestrate into major publicity platforms not unlike the traditional notion of a media event, media witnessing as participants add their own podcasts, videos, and social media posts online can be a source

of contradiction to well-resourced corporate PR. It also highlights the agency of the professionals and audiences present at the events in shaping events' meaning and the agendas they set. Carey (1989/2009) warns of the problems that arise when communication fails to “make the world apprehensible,” something to be described and shared with others in order to connect with them (p. 26). But there are times when this becomes unavoidable, such as when participation in the ritualistic forms of communication are revealed to be exclusionary or exploitative. This can be the case at critical junctures where material reality clashes and produces dissonance with symbolic reality. Participants witness and communicate from the bottom up in ways that cannot be ignored by those within the media industries who have power over what is transmitted through dominant channels.

Industry Events as Sites for Trade Rituals

Beyond producing texts, media industries—like all industries—must sustain and reproduce their labor. Industry events play an important role in these processes, allowing for ruptures as they legitimate new voices and messages. Events are rarely independent from corporate imperatives and funding pressures that fuel and sustain cycles of exclusion, suppression, and misrepresentation. However, their serendipitous, networked, and comparatively participatory structure make them productive sites for trade rituals that channel new voices and myriad perspectives. It is through these trade rituals that event participants, including marginalized media makers and social justice practitioners when events curate space for them, can connect with professional networks and find material support.

The outward and inward facing dimensions of industry events as media events and trade rituals often overlap and support one another. Both are part of the “industrial

reflexivity” John T. Caldwell describes in *Production Culture* (2008) as “semi-embedded” and “publicly disclosed” forms of industrial sense making and trade theorizing, respectively (p. 346). Unlike the “fully embedded” texts and activities of “intraguild, intra-association, or interpersonal interaction and dialogue among crew members,” industry events are exemplary of the semi-embedded trade rituals that “function as institutional dialoguing between media corporations and trade associations” (p. 346). In theorizing their significance, Caldwell draws on extensive field observation and anthropologist Victor Turner’s (1987) work on liminality to argue that trade rituals serve at least four purposes from their position outside of workplace routines:

... as industrial consensus-forming gatherings; as group self-reflection activities; as cooperative negotiations responding to new technology threats or economic changes; and as socio-professional networking rituals “bracketed off” from “regular” work by trade associations to serve as collective therapeutic exercises. (pp. 104-105)

My interest in production cultures is similarly oriented toward understanding the lateral engagements between disparate media makers, studios, companies, and industries that occur through trade rituals, how media production moves forward in light of social movements and technological change at moments of critical juncture. These processes can be observed at industry events as agenda setting nodes for the media industries, in the decisions made around who and what is platformed and how this challenges normative industry practices. These processes are not entirely "inward" or "outward," but work together to circulate discourses, resources, and opportunities among communities of practice within various industries. Some scholars use the term “field configuring events,” which “link field evolution at the macro level with individual action at the micro level” (Lampel & Meyer, 2008, p. 1025). However, I find trade rituals to be a better concept for

putting film festival studies in dialogue with media production as it is discussed in the scholarly subfields of production studies and media industry studies.

The networked agency of event participants, who return to industry work once an event has ended, creates conditions for ruptures that can originate or pick up speed at festivals sites when an event's politics of presence enable its trade rituals to contest the politics of production. This is particularly true for a Hollywood-centric event like the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference, which emphasizes discussing craft and forging connections that can bear fruit once participants are back in LA, or otherwise working from a distance on productions based there. If South by Southwest is exemplary of how a media event can benefit from scale, then the Austin Film Festival is evidence of the possibilities that come with a focus on hosting trade rituals for a discrete community of practice. It is a self-reflective space for writers, where discussion of storytelling approaches involve attending to identity, difference, and positionality, and by extension, the issues of equity and inclusion. In contrast, the sheer scale of South by Southwest and the numerous communities of practice it brings together holds value in terms of how this builds its brand as a marker of cultural legitimization across industries and sectors.

With these inward and outward facing dimensions in mind, I reintroduce my third research question:

RQ3: In what ways do media industry events catalyze social justice within normative industry processes?

- a. How do events' programming practices inspire social justice?
- b. How do event participants shape social justice discourses at events?
- c. How do event experiences impact the work of marginalized media professionals and social justice practitioners?

In the next chapter, I discuss my methodological approach to examining my research questions. More specifically, I will describe how I investigate the politics of

presence at South by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference through an analysis of their trade ritual and media event dimensions. The goal is to explain how industry events can function as platforms for social justice and impact the politics of production within the media industries.

Chapter 3: Methods

This dissertation applies contemporary critical theoretical perspectives to information and data collected with several research methods including ethnographic participant observation, qualitative interviews, computational analysis, and textual analysis of media artifacts.¹⁶ My core research questions are:

RQ1: What temporal and locational qualities contribute to media industry events' abilities to create platforms for social justice?

- a. How might contemporary crises such as the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement create critical junctures for societal change through events?
- b. How does location interact with event possibilities?

RQ2: How does social justice fit into the missions of media industry events?

RQ3: In what ways do media industry events catalyze social justice within normative industry processes?

- a. How do events' programming practices inspire social justice?
- b. How do event participants shape social justice discourses at events?
- c. How do event experiences impact the work of marginalized media professionals and social justice practitioners?

South by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference are productive case studies for examining these questions due to the important role they play as nodes within globally dispersed and networked media industries. The presence of social justice-related activities at each event is a phenomenon I will analyze in relation to their shared location in Austin, Texas—a city that figures prominently in the United States' partisan political battles as one of the country's most liberal cities in one of its most conservative states.

¹⁶ Institutional Review Board approval was received for participant observation on March 11, 2020 (protocol number: 2020020125). The protocol was updated to include interviews on July 10, 2020, and again on December 20, 2022 to more succinctly convey the study purpose and goals in recruitment materials for interview participants (new protocol number: 00003804).

Event communications, the trade press, and—with the assistance of computational methods—social media, specifically Twitter, contribute to a rich textual record of these events that I analyze alongside my field notes and interviews. Before describing each method in detail, I will first elaborate upon my overarching methodology. It is built on preexisting research approaches taken by media industry and film festival scholars, ethnographers of space, and case study researchers.

A CRITICAL MEDIA INDUSTRY STUDIES APPROACH

Havens et al. (2009) propose a “critical media industry studies approach” (hereafter CMIS) for accessing “the way in which institutional discourses are internalized and acted upon by cultural workers.” They recommend scholars use case studies to present a midlevel “helicopter” view of these processes, thereby providing “an important missing link between political economy’s concentration on larger economic structural forces and much of cultural studies’ analyses of end products such as media texts and audience interpretations” (p. 247). Looking up and out from my event sites, this means considering how gathering at varying scales and along different points of collective identity is shaped by the political economy of the global media industries and Austin as a place for them. Looking down and inward, it means examining the agency of communities of practice and how they create, sustain, and transform industry discourses. The value of this approach to industry research, of providing the missing link, is that it can “shed light on the ways in which members of the media industries define the conventions of production and distribution based on their assumptions of the prevailing cultural values and issues of the time,” (pp. 249-250). These “issues of the time” are concentrated at events, potentially altering assumptions and challenging cultural values in a manner significant to the conventions of production and distribution.

In his research on production cultures, John T. Caldwell (2008) follows what he calls “an integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis” that includes four discrete methods, or “registers,” that are productive for identifying relevant datapoints to the project of looking up and out and down and inward at my event case studies. These registers are: “textual analysis of trade and worker artifacts; interviews with film/television workers; ethnographic field observation of production spaces and professional gatherings; and economic/industrial analysis” (p. 4). Caldwell suggests findings produced by each method can be kept “in check” by constantly comparing them as the research progresses, thereby enabling an analysis of media industry discourses that are constructed within and across each of the data sources in an iterative process that should be familiar to ethnographers (p. 4). These same methods of textual analysis, interview, and participant observation are common in film festival studies research that examines the contemporary workings of film festivals and the festival circuit (De Valck et al., 2016), though they are almost always grounded within specific film festivals as case studies, as I am doing in this project.

CMIS Approach: Case Study Research

I examine two Austin media industry events of differing scales and scopes of programming as case studies. This suits the work of identifying and analyzing the most salient ways each festival and its attendees engage with social justice discourses. Beyond exploratory “what” questions, case study research is best for answering “how” or “why” questions (Yin, 2018, Chapter 1, “When to Use the Different Methods”). More specifically, a “multiple-case, replication design” makes any theoretically anticipated findings across cases—whether similar or dissimilar—more robust (Chapter 2, “Replication, not sampling logic, for multiple-case studies”). To this end, I replicated my

approach with both of my case studies for three years: I conducted ethnographic field work as a participant observer, monitored weekly event communications year-round, interviewed event organizers and participants, and collected Twitter datasets around event dates annually. These methods ground the integrated analysis pioneered by Caldwell within case studies to examine the discourse and conventions outlined by Havens et al. (2009). More specifically to my own research questions, it enabled a multifaceted assessment of social justice discourses and their possible material impacts beyond events, differing for each case study in terms of who gathers and the purposes for which they gather. When recognition is split from redistribution in the discourses platformed, or these discourses do not translate into resources and opportunities, I examine why not, and how outcomes that advance social justice in the media industries could be achieved in the future to close the inspiration-impact gap.

CMIS Approach: Ethnography

Both Caldwell's integrated cultural-industrial method of analysis and the critical media industry studies approach use ethnography to examine the lived experiences and the situated lifeworlds of human agents, in this case specifically media makers and other industry stakeholders. While acknowledging the importance of festivals' discursive construction as indicated by Dayan (2000) and Harbord (2002), Toby Lee (2016) argues that ethnography can account for "what was left out, and why" from such discourses as researchers embed themselves in the shifting field of a festival. Drawing on Clifford Geertz (1973) and Ruth Behar (2003), Lee explains that ethnography is key to providing the "thick description" necessary for understanding the "webs of significance" that constitute a festival's meaning and for adapting to the "unexpected stories" that are a defining characteristic of festivals (T. Lee, 2016, "Unexpected encounters, significant

webs”). In the previous chapter, I theorized the webs of significance operating through Austin’s media industry events. In the next chapter, I will further sketch out how they are situated globally and locally within particular histories. Ethnography is a means of filling in the lines and contesting them when necessary, which becomes the focus of the subsequent case study chapters.

Generally speaking, ethnography is an approach to research that is inductive, iterative, adaptable, and reflexive in respect to the ways that theory and a researcher’s positionality informs the story that is told about how researcher and research subjects alike make sense of the world (O’Reilly, 2005, pp. 1-4). The COVID-19 pandemic made an already difficult meaning making process more complex by taking the events studied online for most of 2020 and 2021, resulting in virtual events for Austin Film Festival in Fall 2020 and South by Southwest in Spring of 2020 and 2021, and necessitating the use of digital ethnographic methods during this period. Building on Karen O’Reilly’s “critical minimum definition” to account for digital mediation of the social, Pink et al. (2016) highlight a number of issues digital ethnography must address as a research practice (O’Reilly’s definition here is in quotes):

... how digital media become part of an ethnography that involves ‘direct and sustained contact with human agents, within the context of their daily lives (and cultures)’; what it might actually mean to be digitally engaged in the equivalent of ‘watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions’; and where we might want to do more than ‘producing a richly written account that respects the irreducibility of human experience’ (Pink et al., 2016, “What is *Digital Ethnography?*”)

In short, ethnographic practice must adapt to include the digital environments in which people increasingly invest significant portions of their lives, leisure, and work. As already discussed in the case of Dayan’s “written festival,” Pink et al.’s point about mediation has been a prevalent concern among scholars in terms of how festivals are

lived and experienced. Due to the pandemic and the move to virtual and hybrid events, the expertise of media and communications scholars in combining ethnographic methods like interview and participant observation with traditional media research methods like textual analysis and archival research is an advancement that can produce compelling work in an era of digitalized and platformized culture. To avoid these sources of information is to ignore crucial aspects of lived experience.

People are immersed in sociotechnical media systems as they go about their everyday lives. What makes these textual sources of data ethnographic are “the ethnographer’s self-presentation and co-presence within the field” that ultimately shape the data in ways that texts studied with other methods like content analysis do not (Forberg & Schilt, 2023, pp. 1–2). I will return to the question of my positionality later in this chapter.

CMIS Approach: Combining Case Study Research and Ethnography

In my critical media industry studies approach applied to events, I begin with the structure of case study research design, aspire to the attentiveness of ethnography in data collection, and draw on the openness of grounded theory during data analysis. My theoretical and methodological approach is not too dissimilar from the “sociocultural perspective on space and place” employed by anthropologist Setha Low (2016), which “privileges a fluid and context-dependent concept of culture, the use of ethnography as a foundational methodology, and a preference for grounded theory that emerges from the data in dialogue with dominant conceptual frameworks” (p. 4). Though R.K. Yin’s (2018) approach to case study research is inherently deductive and starts from research questions based on a literature review to guide research design and later data analysis, it does not preclude ethnography’s in-depth fieldwork at the data collection stage and

includes among its strategies for data analysis, after Glaser & Strauss (1967) and Corbin & Strauss (2015), inductively “working your data from the ‘ground up’” (Yin, 2018, Chapter 5, “Four General Strategies”). There are benefits to marrying ethnography and grounded theory. As Charmaz & Mitchell (2001) explain, “ethnographic study can connect theory with *realities*, not just with research,” while “the logic of grounded theory entails going back to data and forward into analysis then returning to the field to gather further data and refine the emerging theoretical framework” (pp. 161-162). In the remainder of this chapter, I describe the details of data collection and analysis for each method and how, after Caldwell, I work to keep them “in check” across one another in my account of social justice discourses and related interventions at my Austin case studies.

METHODS IN DETAIL

Participant Observation

Participant observation¹⁷ within media industry research is an approach that introduces the problem of access, which varies depending on factors like the exclusivity of the field site, the power held by media workers there, and the perceived legitimacy of the research and researcher (Mayer, 2008). Sherry B. Ortner (2010) has devised what she calls “interface ethnography” as one solution, “doing participant observation in the border areas where the closed community or organization or institution interfaces with the

¹⁷ Preliminary findings from virtual fieldwork at SXSW were presented at the Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS) in 2021, while a paper covering virtual fieldwork and the results of computational Twitter analysis for AFF 2020 was presented at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication (AEJMC) Midwinter Conference in 2021 and the International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) in 2021. The work on AFF 2020 was published in *Critical Studies in Media Communication* on August 23, 2023. Portions of this publication appear throughout this dissertation, but most prominently in the present chapter, Chapter 2 (conceptual framework), and Chapter 6 (AFF case study).

public” (p. 213). While Ortner describes panel discussions, Q&As, and other festival activities as encounters between industries and publics, the value of these interfaces for media workers themselves has been extensively demonstrated by scholars (Caldwell, 2008; Damiens, 2015; De Valck, 2007; Harbord, 2002; Iordanova, 2015). Interface ethnography at industry events is not only a means of accessing discourses in circulation, but observing their production as well.

Participant observation began virtually in March 2020 with the cancellation of SXSW due to COVID-19, and concluded with SXSW’s second post-pandemic, in-person event in March 2023. This three-year period covers the initial, ad hoc attempts to take festivals online, full-fledged virtual festivals, hybrid festivals, and the full return to in-person events. While AFF adopted a virtual platform only for October 2020, SXSW initially made attempts to leverage their proprietary digital platform to operate as a hybrid event. Online offerings I observed in 2022 were not well-attended, however, and by 2023 they were nearly nonexistent. Participants had opted for a return to physical gatherings in the Austin downtown. I attended all events during the study period by purchasing student badges with university research funds. I maintained transparency with the event staff and participants whom I encountered about my purpose for being there.

Participant observation was initially broad in focus to inductively investigate the politics present at these events that are, in their primary functions, cultural and commercial activities. My fieldwork at AFF and SXSW’s online iterations consisted of browsing a mix of live and on-demand conference sessions, film screenings, and musical performances. I did not have to search far to find politics. Guided by a nascent understanding of film festivals as media events and an awareness of the history of

activism at film festivals,¹⁸ I began my observations at SXSW by observing the flow of content programmed across its five streaming “channels” (see Figure 3.1). A keynote with Georgia politician and voting rights activist Stacey Abrams was just beginning as I logged on for the first time, and as I continued to watch sessions over the course of South By’s truncated five-day event, corporate and philanthropic approaches to “social impact” in the areas of diversity, inclusion, social justice, and the environment emerged as prevalent topics.

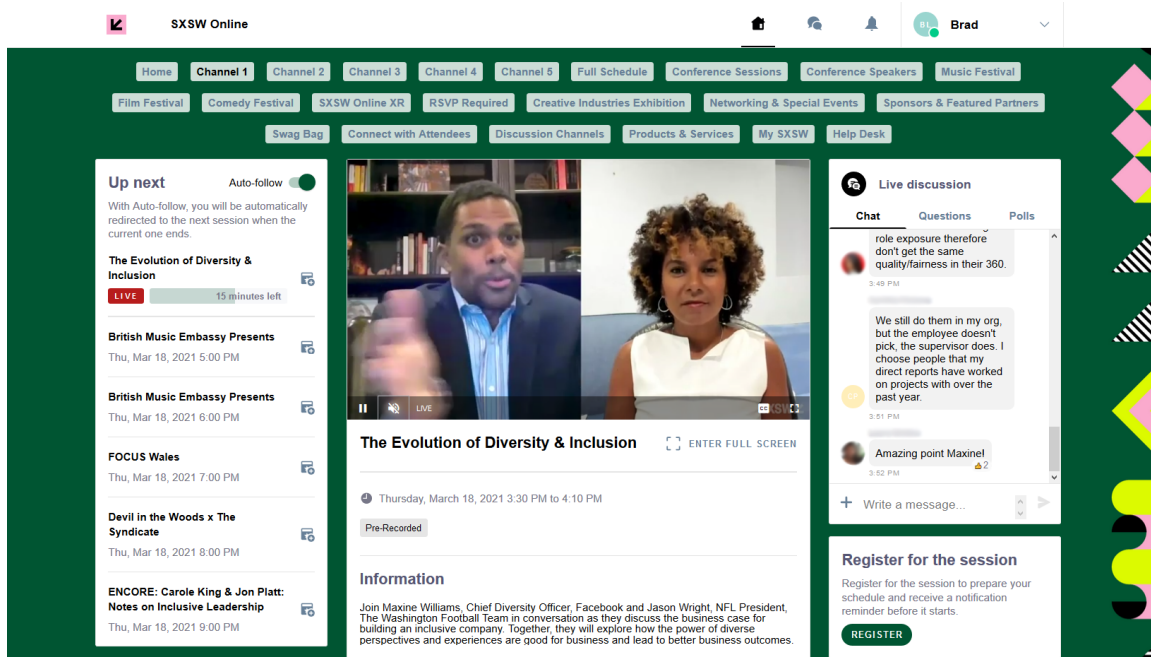


Figure 3.1: The SXSW Online platform in 2021, here tuned in to Channel 1. Screenshot by the author.

¹⁸ This dissertation is preceded by MA thesis work on cultural diplomacy at Chinese film festivals, specifically the Shanghai International Film Festival. That project introduced me to film festival studies literature on the political role of film festivals, a line of research I intended to continue as part of a comparative US-China project that was interrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic. Fortunately, Austin is a globally significant and understudied emerging media capital, with a history that uniquely situates its events within US political economy, popular and counterculture, tech and media industries, and grassroots activism, as I discuss in Chapter 4.

Austin Film Festival's virtual event was much smaller, with typically two options to choose from in each time block. Its conference sessions were structured around a mix of "A Conversation with" panels featuring prominent writers and other sessions covering different aspects of writing as craft and business. I attended sessions overtly related to identity politics, such as "Writing Sexuality in Film and TV," as well as those that featured conversations with writers from underrepresented groups. How discourse at both events became inflected with social justice at the critical juncture of the pandemic was an immediately observable phenomenon.

When SXSW and AFF returned to the Austin downtown in the second and third years of this study, I similarly prioritized the obvious spaces for discourse and connection like conference panels, workshops, screening Q&As, pitch competitions, award ceremonies, and official meetups. Based on what I saw in the flow of content at South By's virtual event, I sought out conference sessions, films, and other experiences in the program that included key terms like social justice, social impact, DEI, advocacy, and activism in their descriptions. I was immediately drawn to sessions with titles like "Game Changers: Black and Indigenous Voices in Gaming" and "Blockchain & NFTs: Environmental & Social Impact." At AFF, I repeated the approach that I took to its virtual conference, attending panels like "Writing Yourself into the Room" and "From Web to TV: A Conversation with Linda Yvette Chávez." The field work for both events took me across downtown to places like the Austin Convention Center, Paramount Theater, the Driskill Hotel, and innumerable restaurants, music venues, art galleries, and similar locations converted into festival spaces, as well as the Austin Film Society Cinema and Alamo Drafthouse Theaters located short drives away from the city center.

Fieldwork is relational, especially at industry events. Rather than observing from a distance, I participated in the interactions, networking, and trade rituals around me.

Before long, I increasingly prioritized the impromptu gatherings adjacent to official activities, focusing on privately sponsored parties and liminal spaces like queues, hotel lobbies, and unofficial festival bars. As I observed official and unofficial event activities, I noted instances where politics figured into on-stage conversations, curated media, interactions between participants, participant reception of programming, and in how the events were described to the world outside. Leveraging my badge and an introductory elevator pitch to my project that evolved from “the study of events and politics” to “the study of events and their social impact,” I approached panelists, festival programmers, awardees, and numerous other attendees who paid top dollar to come to these events with particular purposes in mind. Based on these encounters, my investigation of “social impact” further narrowed into a deductive examination of social justice discourses and how they are promoted and contradicted at festivals seeking impact. This is the norm at events in Austin, as I will explain in the next chapter in relation to Austin’s blend of futurism, counterculture, and activism.

During the temporary move to online festivals during the COVID-19 pandemic, interface ethnography became literal. Participants interacted through user interfaces, connecting across virtual event spaces and preexisting social media networks. Varis (2016) argues “there is no one-size-fits-all solution” when ethnographic approaches are brought into digital environments (p. 61). I first mapped out the virtual field sites, identifying spaces where participants interacted with event programming and each other. At AFF 2020, these included the Eventive video streaming platform, which hosted the conference’s 57 panels and featured sidebar chatrooms; a temporary Discord server organized into dozens of channels by topic and geographical location; limited roundtables and cocktail happy hours on Zoom that I did not attend; and Twitter. I describe my use of Twitter data and computational methods for analyzing it below.

The field site for SXSW 2020 was more restricted due to organizers' rushed and ad hoc attempt to pivot online in April following its cancellation in March at the start of pandemic lockdowns. The most prominent activity was a partnership with Amazon Prime Video that attempted to bring South By's selected films online, but the vast majority of filmmakers opted out due to how this wide-reaching platform might have impacted the future distribution and exhibition of their films (Hobbins-White & Limov, 2020). The virtual field site expanded significantly when SXSW returned in 2021 with a proprietary social media platform of its own (see Figure 3.1). This operated as a kind of nexus for external and preexisting platforms and applications like Instagram, Twitter, Zoom, and VRChat.

At SXSW, I interacted with other attendees in the conference session sidebar chats, virtual networking rooms that positioned our two-dimensional video feeds spatially around three-dimensional illustrated settings, and within a miniaturized replication of Austin's downtown created in VRChat (see Figure 3.2). At AFF, my interactions took place on a Discord server arranged for the virtual event, similar conference panel sidebar chats, and private group conversations on Twitter.

While the majority of my analysis in the coming chapters is based on my experiences attending the in-person events, this first year of virtual festivals was productive for learning about each festival's programming scope and approaches, the makeup of their attendees, and for forming initial impressions of the political discourses that each event platforms. While it seemed at the time that event adaptations to the pandemic would have a lasting impact, these had largely disappeared by the time I attended SXSW in 2023. Their absence seemed to only be missed by members of the disability community, who explained to me during our interviews how they appreciated

the accessibility afforded by the previously on-demand content and virtual opportunities for networking.



Figure 3.2: A parliament of owls in conversation at the virtual Paramount Theater in VRChat during SXSW 2021. Screenshot by the author.

Across online spaces, social interactions and their mediation are not easily separated. As discussed via Dayan’s (2000) written festival, however, offline happenings are similarly enmeshed with media texts, even if they are not as contiguous as they are in virtual festival spaces. My field notes include observations and reflections recorded throughout each day at the festivals, screenshots captured at virtual festivals, and photographs taken at in-person festivals. These are all important components within the ethnographic record I built out of them alongside interviews, festival publications, media coverage, Twitter data, and other ephemera collected online and offline during my observations. I describe the analysis of this data in the “Textual Analysis & Coding the Data” section below.

Semi-Structured Interviews

Ortner (2010) argues that accessing industry knowledge through interviews is possible because, in relation to the power between researcher and subject, it is a means of “studying sideways.” As she explains:

... the degree to which shared interest can become the basis for genuine cooperation is magnified when the people being studied have the same kinds of educational background as the anthropologist, the same kinds of cultural and material resources, and particularly, when they are working in the same general cultural zone as ourselves - the world of knowledge, information, representation, interpretation, and criticism. (p. 223)

Drawing on the work of Elizabeth Traube (1996), Ortner highlights common interest as members of the “knowledge classes” in facilitating the success of interviews and participant observation alike, though her interviews ended up largely separate from “interface ethnography” in her work on Hollywood because those she encountered at events were “marginal” to the industry (p. 222). This is perhaps due to her choice of field sites, or perhaps the contingency of industry event fieldwork, but either way, marginality is not a weakness for my project. I am less concerned with those holding power in the media industries than I am with those who seek to challenge or seize it. Fortunately, both the powerful and marginal are present at my case studies, and a welcoming, anti-elitist approach to mixing at the events is often described as a defining feature of what makes these events in Austin unique. Moreover, and as Ortner explains, a shared “interest” between academics and media industry professionals allows for knowledge building and promotional processes to be productive for all involved, something I experienced firsthand throughout my fieldwork and in the relative ease with which I arranged interviews for each event case study.

I conducted semi-structured interviews ($N = 33$) in 2023 with event organizers and participants who contributed to, or engaged with, social justice discourses at South

by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference. These interviews were completed three to six months after participants had last attended one of these two events. I selected this interval to allow for some impacts resulting from event participation to materialize. It also gave participants some distance from their experiences without so much time having elapsed that recall would become difficult. While new professional connections and creative ideas typically take longer to bear fruit, this three-to-six-month window was a compromise.

I gradually compiled a pool of approximately 200 potential interviewees through my interactions during participant observation at the events. I then recruited a purposive sample from this pool via email or social media depending on the contact information provided to me, with a goal of 15-20 interviews for each case study that would represent varying levels of power at the events and within the media industries. With few exceptions, all interviewees expressed active involvement in advocacy and/or activism related to social justice issues. All interviewees, apart from a few exceptions, were from groups underrepresented in the media industries.

SXSW	Primary Industry Role	Event Role
Interviewee 1	SXSW Senior Staff	Administration
Interviewee 2	SXSW Senior Staff	Programming
Interviewee 3	Filmmaker	Film Competition Winner
Interviewee 4	Filmmaker	Film Competition Winner
Interviewee 5	Filmmaker	Speaker
Interviewee 6	Filmmaker and Media Advocacy Nonprofit Staff	Attendee
Interviewee 7	Media Maker	Attendee
Interviewee 8	Media Maker	Speaker
Interviewee 9	Media Advocate	Speaker
Interviewee 10	Media Advocacy Nonprofit Executive	Speaker
Interviewee 11	Media Advocacy Nonprofit Staff	Speaker
Interviewee 12	Media Advocacy Nonprofit Staff	Attendee
Interviewee 13	Media Advocacy Nonprofit Staff	Attendee
Interviewee 14	Media Studio Executive	Speaker
Interviewee 15	Media Agency Executive	Speaker
Interviewee 16	Media Agency Executive	Speaker
Interviewee 17	Media Agency Executive	Speaker

Table 3.1: Primary industry roles and event roles of SXSW interviewees

Each case study prioritizes different industry discourses and actors given their differing scales and scopes of programming. For SXSW, I sought out a mix of interviews ($n = 17$) with media makers and social justice advocates, as well as executives and staff from media advocacy nonprofits and media companies (see Table 3.1). I connected with these interviewees through narrative change and social impact media activities at SXSW. At AFF, almost all activities are oriented toward writers. I recruited a mix of aspiring writers, established writers, and those who support their professional development ($n = 16$; see Table 3.2). I approached established writers after they spoke on panels and connected with aspiring writers in AFF’s networking spaces.

Across both case studies, these interviewees included those involved in the events’ operations and programming ($n = 4$), those with executive-level power in organizations ($n = 6$), those in ancillary areas like nonprofits who aim to advance social

justice ($n = 7$), established media makers ($n = 10$), and aspiring media makers ($n = 6$). These divisions are just a heuristic, and in many cases, interviewees had relevant experiences ranging across these areas as they moved from media studios to nonprofits, or from making media to supporting media makers. While often imprecise due to the precarity of industry work, I use “established” and “aspiring” to distinguish between those who are receiving funding and recognition for their creative work and those who are still moving towards that goal. When I thought it could help with increasing participation among one of these subgroups, I asked interviewees to share my contact information. This resulted in further interviews ($n = 5$).

AFF	Primary Industry Role	Event Role
Interviewee 1	AFF Senior Staff	Programming
Interviewee 2	AFF Senior Staff	Programming
Interviewee 3	Media Studio Executive	Speaker
Interviewee 4	Literary Agent	Speaker
Interviewee 5	WGA-East Senior Staff	Speaker
Interviewee 6	Established Writer	Previous Winner / Speaker
Interviewee 7	Established Writer	Speaker
Interviewee 8	Established Writer and Filmmaker	Speaker
Interviewee 9	Established Writer	Previous Winner
Interviewee 10	Established Writer	Speaker
Interviewee 11	Aspiring, Unrepresented Writer	Winner
Interviewee 12	Aspiring, Represented Writer	Semi-finalist
Interviewee 13	Aspiring, Unrepresented Writer	Semi-finalist
Interviewee 14	Aspiring, Represented Writer	Second Rounder
Interviewee 15	Aspiring, Unrepresented Writer	Attendee
Interviewee 16	Filmmaker and Aspiring, Unrepresented Writer	Second Rounder

Table 3.2: Primary industry roles and event roles of AFF interviewees.

Interviews averaged 49 minutes in length and were held over the Zoom video communication platform. Throughout the process of conducting the interviews and

analyzing transcripts, sensitive information was handled carefully so as to minimize any risk of harm, taking seriously how access “creates obligations” (Rutherford, 2012) to the individuals who made the decision to support my project. Their participation in this study is anonymous, and where names are used, interviewees gave their explicit consent to be identified.¹⁹ Participants were reminded at the start and end of interviews that their participation is voluntary and they could withdraw this participation at any time. Though few interviews covered all questions, I focused more or less on particular areas—The Festival Experience/Programming, Networking and Community, The Media Event, Possible Programming Interventions—depending on the interviewee and whether or not I had reached saturation for a particular question or section. Templates used for recruitment messages and interview questionnaires are provided in Appendix A.

Note on Positionality

Ethnographic research is a collaborative approach to knowledge production, leading me to participate in the same rituals that were the object of my investigation. As I listened and responded to people describe their creative projects, aspirations, organizations, and companies, those around me similarly shared their thoughts about my research questions, the concepts I deployed to make meaning out of what we were experiencing, and ultimately, the significance of my project. Throughout my onsite interactions and the interviews that followed, participants candidly shared with me their perceptions of social justice at the events. While I did frequently pause to take in the atmosphere and observe social interactions from afar, even in those instances it was impossible to separate the influence of my own presence and decision-making from what I noticed and recorded in my field notes. Though not without its own limitations, the

¹⁹ IRB approval was received for anonymous interviews (protocol number: 00003804).

computational analysis of social media discourse described in the next section of this chapter helps to contextualize what my interviewees and I experienced.

Participants' openness to contributing to my project, and in several cases, active support of it, indicates the benefit of "studying sideways" (Ortner, 2010). In most cases, this meant knowledge workers with expressed interest in social justice contributing to another knowledge worker's project on the topic. Unsurprisingly, 33 of the 46 people (72%) whom I met in person and later contacted, or who were introduced to me by one of these contacts, participated in the interview portion of the study.

While we shared an interest in social justice and membership within the same broad class configuration, I diverged from all but two interviewees in my identity as a cisgender, heterosexual white man. The increased scrutiny I faced, or that I perceived myself to face, in how I articulated and spoke about social justice and related terms in my research interactions often left me uneasy. This is not to say that reflecting on my identity was a new practice for me. I lived abroad in East Asia for seven years prior to the start of this research project, where I was reminded of my difference on a daily basis. But as I sought out people to share their experiences and insights with me, there was a low level of anxiety that I might turn people away by choosing an imprecise word or framing an issue in the wrong way. As one interviewee shared at the start of a Zoom call, they had spoken with a white male reporter in the past who did ask the "dumb" questions that would have been better answered by consulting a book.

Fortunately, as far as I am aware, my identity and how I spoke about the research never turned participants away. After each interview and many on-site interactions, I was instead encouraged to follow through and share the results once completed. I did not ask the dumb questions, I was told. Additionally, my interviewees suggested that I should view my identity as an asset to the research. When I asked about any incidents where

interviewees heard harmful rhetoric or witnessed backlash to social justice at the events, for example, the question was redirected back to me several times. These interviewees suggested that if white people were expressing such grievances, they certainly were not expressing them to people of color. Instead, the white male researcher who had spent an extensive amount of time discussing these issues with people from all backgrounds at the events might have more insight. Encounters with white participants processing social justice at the events are discussed in Chapter 5 and Chapter 6.

Computational Methods and Twitter Data

In promoting digital and computational methods to anthropologists, Albris et al. (2021) highlight three key benefits for ethnographic research applicable to my project:

(1) how scraping social media can complement ethnographic research by providing a *broader contextualization*; (2) how working with quali-quantitative methods can create ‘thick’ datasets that are non-traditional yet *ethnographically salient*; and finally (3) how fieldnotes may be recorded and processed using programming and software in order to enable more sophisticated analyses of ethnographic observations. (pp. 1-2; emphasis added)

While the qualitative data collected during my fieldwork is multimodal and not well-suited to automated analyses, the first two benefits are productive for a critical media industry studies approach. I used social media datasets collected via Twitter API to navigate my field sites and contextualize participant observation and interviews, which became “thick” and ethnographically salient when connected with these other methods.

Though it only represents a subsection of social media, Twitter’s widespread use among the “knowledge classes” (Ortner, 2010; Traube, 1996) that gather at media festivals and conferences makes it a viable source of data to gauge how the events are mediated and re-mediated online. The writers, producers, agents, journalists, and critics to whom AFF caters, for example, colloquially refer to their network on the platform as

“Screenwriter Twitter.” An examination of event mediation is all the more important when participants’ experiences diverge from my own first-hand accounts or official event narratives seen in festival publications and media coverage. Even amid mass migrations away from the platform following its acquisition by Elon Musk in October 2022, the majority of my interviewees stated they not only continue to use the platform in 2023, but one had even become a new user after being prompted to join by fellow AFF attendees.

Tweets posted around the time of the Austin Film Festival and South by Southwest were collected via Twitter API each year following the events.²⁰ The event names, acronyms, and official hashtags I saw used during preliminary searches with Twitter’s search bar were included in the queries to collect as many tweets related to the events as possible (see Table 3.3). I then conducted computational analyses on the Twitter datasets in R 4.0.3 (R Core Team, 2020). The procedures for data collection, together with the R packages and code used for data cleaning/wrangling, time series, and natural language processing, are described in a walkthrough of this process for AFF 2020 in Appendix D.

²⁰ IRB did not require approval for the use of tweets or public statements by public figures at the event. Following emerging ethical norms for publishing Twitter data (Williams et al., 2017), I received opt-in consent on Twitter from users when reproducing sensitive tweets or tweets that did not circulate widely. I present tweets anonymously unless an author’s identity is significant, in which case they consented to being identified.

SXSW Queried Terms	AFF Queried Terms
south by southwest, #south by southwest	austin film festival
#southbysouthwest, southbysouthwest	#austin film festival
#sxsw, sxsw, @sxsw, sxsw.com	austin film fest
#sxsw2021, sxsw2021, #sxsw21, sxsw21	#austin film fest
#sxswfilm, sxswfilm	austinfilmfest
#sxswmusic, sxswmusic	#austinfilmfest
#sxswcomedy, sxswcomedy	@austinfilmfest
#sxswonline, sxswonline	#aff27, #aff28, #aff29
#sxswonline2021, sxswonline2021	aff27, aff28, aff29
#sxswonline21, sxswonline21	

Table 3.3: Twitter API queried terms. I updated the year for each edition of SXSW.

I streamed tweets during AFF 2020 by using my academic access to an “elevated” developer account. While streaming in real time means tweets that are later deleted will be included in the corpus, engagement metrics are not well represented beyond retweets. This method also requires a computer continuously dedicated to the task. For these reasons, tweets for the remainder of the events were collected after the events had concluded.²¹ The time periods for AFF tweets begin five weeks prior to each year’s event in order to capture competition placement announcements. They conclude two months following the events in order to capture commentary related to script reviewer feedback. Time periods for SXSW tweets include one month before and after each year’s event. While not ideal due to the time that had already elapsed, SXSW 2020 tweets were collected retroactively in November 2022 to review conversation around its sudden pandemic cancellation. At that time, I also used this method to recollect tweets from AFF 2020 for engagement metrics and consistency across the datasets (see Table 3.4).

²¹ This change in approach became possible in 2021 after Twitter made “Academic Research” accounts with fewer restrictions available. These accounts allowed for up to 10 million tweets from any time in the past to be collected per month. This program has been discontinued.

Event	Total Tweets	Time Period	Date Collected
SXSW 2020	340,388	2/13/2020 – 6/13/2020	11/12/2022
AFF 2020	3,944	10/19/2020 – 11/1/2020	streamed
AFF 2020	7,924	9/15/2020 – 1/05/2021	11/11/2022
SXSW 2021	197,992	2/13/2021 – 4/20/2021	4/22/2021
AFF 2021	14,571	9/14/2021 – 1/03/2022	11/7/2021, 11/11/2022
SXSW 2022	540,722	2/11/2022 – 4/20/2022	3/9/2022, 4/22/2022
AFF 2022	12,106	9/20/2022 – 1/04/2022	11/11/2022, 1/09/2023
SXSW 2023	489,655	2/10/2023 – 4/19/2023	4/24/2023

Table 3.4: Total number of tweets collected for each event, time period represented in the datasets, and the dates on which each dataset was collected.

Beyond a means of social connection for communities of practice, Twitter is also heavily used, or even primarily used, by event participants to leverage their association with event brands as speakers, selected artists, and award winners for the purpose of self-promotion. Twitter is also a window into the look of media buzz that surrounds particular curated media and viral incidents, as well as a place to observe controversies as they erupt. Given my focus on the margins and carved out spaces at these events, natural language processing techniques like word clouds and structural topic modeling were not always insightful, especially in the case of the SXSW datasets. However, post-hoc sentiment analyses reveal the positivity surrounding the events as celebratory, ceremonial rituals; time series were helpful for locating periods of intensified social media conversation; and engagement metrics such as likes, retweets, and replies indicated what topics had the most reach and pop culture resonance. While the Twitter data does not always overtly make its presence known in my case study chapters, it nonetheless colored my sense of social justice discourses and action within the entirety of these events as large sites for complex social interactions. Post-hoc sentiment analyses, time series, word

clouds, and a selection of ethnographically salient tweets from among those most liked, replied to, retweeted, or quote tweeted for each dataset are provided in Appendix C.

Textual Analysis and Coding the Data

The circulation and amplification of discourses at media industry events can be either ephemeral, requiring observation and recording during fieldwork and interviews, or else accessed through the written festival of event publications, media coverage, and social media posts. The events studied also entail a great deal of promotion and correspondence with their communities and audiences before, during, and after their events. I collected these communications as they appeared in email newsletters since March 2020. News stories from trade magazines and the press were also collected over the four-year period, though not systematically or comprehensively, when encountered during observation and relevant to my research questions. I compiled these texts and artifacts into digital notebooks together with my field notes, photographs, screenshots, collected ephemera, and interview transcripts to produce an ethnographic record of the events. As I collected these pieces of information, I sketched out possible relationships to my research questions in memos to facilitate further analysis when coding the data.

Coding is a fundamentally comparative process, and within the context of ethnography, can include “comparisons between multiple incidents, experiences, actions, and individuals” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 167). I qualitatively coded in the QDA software Atlas.ti with a mixed deductive and inductive approach. I started by constructing a coding frame based on my research questions, conceptual framework, and early memos (see Table 3.5). These initial 37 codes analyzed the data in terms of how the events’ politics of presence inspired and produced impact related to social justice as media events and sites for trade rituals. They also covered the significance of events’ locational and

temporal dimensions. In relation to the media event dimension, for example, codes included “brand association” and “greenwash/wokewash.” Some codes relevant to both the media event and trade ritual dimensions appear in both categories, such as “scale,” “solidarity,” and “symbolic identity politics.”

Media Event / Inspiration	Trade Rituals / Impact	Locational / Temporal
media event: alternative public spheres	trade rituals: accessibility and cost	austin imaginary: counterculture
media event: brand association	trade rituals: approachability	austin imaginary: politics
media event: career and lifestyle	trade rituals: community	austin imaginary: technopolis
media event: curation and recognition	trade rituals: contesting norms	critical juncture: place
media event: failure as media event	trade rituals: failure as trade rituals	critical juncture: time
media event: greenwash/wokewash	trade rituals: inspiration-impact gap	global industry nodes: event networks/circuits
media event: inspiration-impact gap	trade rituals: partnerships	global industry nodes: media capital
media event: scale	trade rituals: profit motive	event background: facts
media event: solidarity	trade rituals: reinforcing norms	event background: global facts
media event: success as media event	trade rituals: scale	event background: local facts
media event: symbolic identity politics	trade rituals: solidarity	event background: imaginary
media event: virtual festival benefits	trade rituals: success as trade rituals	
media event: virtual festival drawbacks	trade rituals: symbolic identity politics	

Table 3.5: The initial coding frame with 37 codes based on my research questions, conceptual framework, and preliminary memos.

It was also my goal to remain open to new patterns emerging from the data, “to code everything [I] see *in* the data” (Charmaz & Mitchell, 2001, p. 165). This inductive approach resulted in an additional 150 codes for a total of 187 codes applied 4,068 times

to the data during the open coding phase (see Table 3.6 and Appendix B). These codes were then reviewed during a final memoing phase that collapsed them into themes. I present these themes in Chapter 5, South by Southwest and the Benefits of Scale, and Chapter 6, Austin Film Festival and the Benefits of Community, under each chapter’s “Thematic Analysis” section. Coded data relevant to Austin as the site of my case studies contributes to the historical narrative presented in Chapter 4: The Austin Imaginary.

Media Event / Inspiration	Trade Rituals / Impact	Locational / Temporal
media event: "badge" festival	trade rituals: connecting through connections	austin imaginary: attraction / performance of the imaginary
media event: backlash / resistance / fatigue / cultural struggle	trade rituals: cross industry mixing / inspiration / openness / investment	austin imaginary: cultural / creative hub
media event: clarifying and solidifying terms / agendas / ideas	trade rituals: hope machine	austin imaginary: not LA/NYC
media event: critique of media representation	trade rituals: finding tribe or friendworking or organic networking	event background: event outside austin / yearround
media event: critique of politics of production	trade rituals: influencing the decisionmakers / finding ways to be valuable	event background: local benefit
media event: media inspiring justice	trade rituals: networking for those who made it	global industry nodes: global participation
media event: segregation?	trade rituals: private sponsored / off site gatherings	global industry nodes: la/nyc participation
media event: setting discourse / behavior for event	trade rituals: profit motive / the business case for social justice	reflections: iterating on RQs and argument
media event: truth	trade rituals: ROI	reflections: research as networking and participation
media event: white and heteronormative	trade rituals: working outside / adjacent to the system / carving out space	reflections: support from study participants for project

Table 3.6: A sample of codes that emerged during open coding. See Appendix B for all 187 codes in the coding frame.

I analyzed all of the data compiled in my ethnographic record with the same coding process and coding frame. I acknowledge each source of data—interviews, participant observation, event communications and other media artifacts—presents different advantages and limitations. This is why I utilized these disparate methods in the first place. Event communications are my primary source for describing how each event presents their mission, but participant observation at the events also contributes to how I assess the presentation and reception of event goals and priorities among participants. Interviews became my primary means of gauging the impact of trade rituals for participants from marginalized groups, but at times, information shared by interviewees was also insightful for assessing the media event dimension to these events. For example, one media executive shared their satisfaction with how their messages were amplified by SXSW as a “brand partner.”

This notion of SXSW as brand partner is important to understanding the participation of many large corporate entities and how they tap into social justice language at the present critical juncture. The following tables provide examples of how I applied the codes “media event: greenwash/wokewash” (Table 3.7) and “media event: solidarity” (Table 3.8) to SXSW data collected via the different methods described in this chapter. At this level of discourse production, labeling activities one way or the other requires an assessment of the speaker or actor, their intentions, their framing of issues, their level of investment in solutions, associated risks they face, and more. Making these assessments in light of the definition of social justice presented in the previous chapter resulted in codes applied as follows:

Participant Observation	Interviews	Event Communications
<p>183:10 ¶ 33 – 43 in <i>Day 3 – McDonald’s Latinx Filmmaker Meet Up</i></p> <p>Q: Why is it important for McDonald’s to do this? Investing in the Latino community?</p> <p>A: That name and that brand has rose with us.</p> <p>The McDonald’s PR gets in the way of the meetup, at least for the first 20 minutes I’m there.</p>	<p>256:17 ¶ 513 – 521 in <i>Interview 3</i></p> <p>In general, I do think the programming team does a good job, but I do feel like there are times when they are definitely kowtowing to a corporate culture that says, ‘Okay, because this person works at this studio, we’re gonna let this through.’</p>	<p>79:1 ¶ 2 in <i>Final day to join us at the #IncFoundersHouse</i></p> <p>Radical Recruiting, 2:05 PM <i>Sponsored by Charles Koch Foundation</i></p> <p>If you’re having trouble finding talented, motivated, and diverse people—one of the biggest challenges for fast-growth companies—you might be looking in all the wrong places. Join the Charles Koch Foundation for a conversation on recruiting from untapped talent pools and non-traditional sources.</p>
(Taken from my field notes)	(Taken from an interview transcript where the interviewee describes social justice in SXSW’s programming)	(Taken from a March 2022 email sent by Inc. Founders House)

Table 3.7: Examples of the code “media event: greenwash/wokewash” applied to SXSW data collected via participant observation, interviews, and event communications.

Participant Observation	Interviews	Event Communications
<p>51:5 ¶ 5 – 7 in <i>Day 3 - Lizzo</i></p> <p>"Trans right are human rights." - Lizzo</p> <p>She re-platforms the festival's emphasis on trans rights, as well as on abortion rights.</p> <p>"I'm changing things on the cultural level... but there are people in charge who can change things on the systemic level and they're letting us down."</p> <p>(Taken from my field notes)</p>	<p>255:20 ¶ 285 – 293 in <i>Interview 12</i></p> <p>One of my friends prepared to make remarks, acknowledging the legislation that's happening, and things like that, too. And I think if it was in any other part of Texas that wasn't as open to having those conversations, it would be uncomfortable.</p> <p>(Taken from an interview transcript)</p>	<p>25:1 ¶ 2 in <i>A focus on the Black Community at SXSW 2022</i></p> <p>In honor of Black history month, highlighting BIPOC sessions at this year's event across 'the many industries that converge at SXSW'</p> <p>(Taken from a memo summarizing a February newsletter)</p>

Table 3.8: Examples of the code “media event: solidarity” applied to SXSW data collected via participant observation, interviews, and event communications.

Chapter 4: The Austin Imaginary

INTRODUCTION

Media industry events function as crucibles for intense circulation of people, of capital, and of media and messages. Austin is useful for contemplating the importance of place for events because it fits the idea of a "media capital" (Curtin, 2007) as commonly discussed by media industries scholars, while its events are exemplary of the notion of festivals as industry nodes as articulated by film festival researchers (Iordanova, 2015). This chapter, and my project more broadly, put these two theoretical strands in conversation with one another. I understand them as two interconnected layers within global media circulation (see also Straubhaar, 2007), events being more ephemeral and malleable when compared to the relative stability of media capitals as network nodes. The two can overlap, as in the case of Austin and SXSW; however, they also can exist separately, as with the relationship between Hollywood and Sundance. For both media capitals and event nodes, the focus is on global flows of media, but also people, ideas, capital, and at a slower rate, materials, infrastructures, and *opportunities to create*. Events and their locations are both social constructs (Appadurai, 1996) and fundamentally material phenomena (Sassen, 1991).

While nascent digital platforms for networking from a distance benefited from pandemic disruptions, I witnessed the shortcomings of these formats while observing the Austin Film Festival and SXSW in 2020 and 2021 (see Hobbins-White & Limov, 2020; Limov, 2023), as well as their rapid return to traditional offline events from late 2021 to the present. As of 2023, offline attendance has returned to pre-pandemic levels. Location and opportunities to physically engage with other people, it would seem, remain important to understanding the nature of industry events.

In this chapter, I theorize how the imaginaries surrounding events and their locations attract and support certain creative networks, in turn shaping their unique contributions to multipolar media industries. This includes how local culture, history, and politics are perceived and retold within cities and at events. While communities of practice gathering in Austin bring expectations grounded in their knowledge of event circuits through which their industries operate, how they imagine Austin also enables events to advance certain programming priorities and platform certain conversations. It shapes participants' performances and ephemeral encounters with each other, as well as their contributions to discourse at the events. This has ramifications as these participants bring their newfound knowledge, connections, recognition, and resources to bear on their media production in Austin, New York, Los Angeles, and elsewhere (see Illustration 4.1).

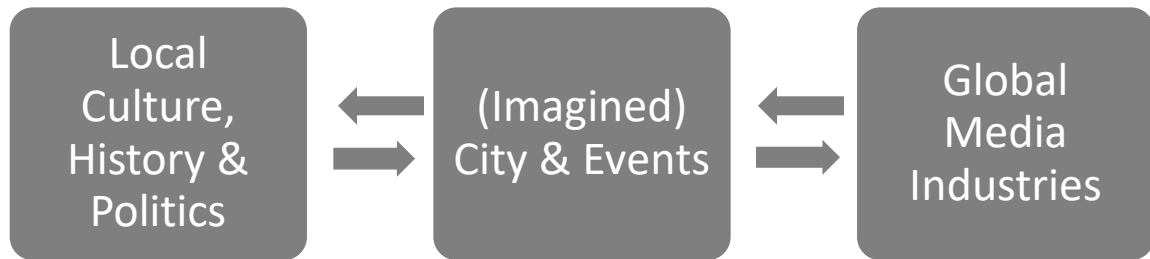


Illustration 4.1: How media industry events and cities (as “creative cities” or “media capitals”) are imagined through relational processes between local factors and globally networked industry production.

Popular perceptions of Austin derive from its decades-long history of progressive activism and confrontations with the conservative state government of Texas, as well as its world-renowned countercultural scene that burst into pop culture consciousness starting with its music in the 1970s. These perceptions, together with public and university investments to foster a local tech industry, make Austin attractive as a creative

city (Florida, 2012) and site for media industry events, even in an era of digitalization and platformization.

The “Austin imaginary” created through these historical threads signifies a particular blend of culture and politics that attracts a globally networked, corporate, and professionalized culture to its events with promises of openminded explorations, casual social interactions, novel sensory experiences, and cutting-edge ideas for solving society’s problems. SXSW, AFF, and other local festivals like Austin City Limits for music and Fantastic Fest for genre film and cult cinema are key to projecting the imaginary of Austin as a hub for creativity that is widely described as “weird” (Long, 2010). The ways in which this weirdness is understood and performed in the city and at its events encourages a mix of political interventions that vary in the degree to which they are aestheticized, coopted in service to capital, or resistant—which itself is a term that means something very different to a filmmaker screening their cinematic critique of corporate-led environmental degradation, and a tech entrepreneur promoting a start-up that promises industry disruption. The global relevance of event nodes for drawing attention and designating value brings corporate and activist participants alike to media industry events, where displays like Shell House and its greenwashing share space with cash-strapped media makers and nonprofits who, as I discuss in the next chapter on SXSW, constantly reflect on whether the thousands they pay to participate matches their perception of this participation’s value for their work.

Austin’s history has produced an imaginary leveraged for branding purposes by the city and its events alike, which mutually benefit each other. However, this imaginary elides certain histories and key realities on the ground, indicating internal contradictions to its progressive orientation that align it more with progressive neoliberalism than social

justice. The politics of recognition, while championed, are often split from the politics of redistribution.

In this chapter, I begin by triangulating the place of media capitals like Austin within globalized media industries and then discuss the importance of festivals to the circulation of media and ideas about media production. The media industries operate in networked ways through media capitals, while festivals function as industry nodes; both are subsets of global cities as distinct spatial formations that structure the global economy. Next, I outline how Austin's counterculture and tech scene construct an imaginary that attracts certain industries, residents, and participants for its festivals and industry events. Finally, I discuss the political contexts surrounding these events in the heart of Texas and how they, in turn, influence the broader media industries. This chapter makes the case that locality retains crucial importance for the media industries in how creative labor and capital accumulate in space, with nodal points of contact becoming increasingly important for geographically dispersed media industry production, as well as this production's aesthetic, commercial, and ideological commitments.

GLOBAL INDUSTRY NODES

Global Media and Networked Media Capitals

The media industries are global. Whether we consider how films from the United States have been produced and exhibited abroad for decades, creating and exploiting favorable business environments to dominate box offices and theatrical releases worldwide (Miller et al., 2005), or the Eurocentric international film festival circuit that defines taste for cinema as art (de Valck, 2016; Falicov, 2010), or video streaming platforms like Netflix that seek to source local language film and television from around the world for their audiences around the world (Basilico & Raimond, 2016), the

entertainment options available to audiences from outside their localities are numerous and diverse. As these examples suggest, however, certain global centers of production within powerful states have historically dominated media flows and thereby structured what media represent. Beyond entertainment, there are imbalances in how information tends to be transmitted from “transnational” news agencies in the Global North to audiences residing in the Global South (Boyd-Barrett & Rantanen, 1998; Masmoudi, 1979; Meyer, 1989). Even as globalizing social media platforms have transformed the production of news, entertainment, and other information flows to afford more participation, these platforms remain centered in the Global North and operate according to new logics of power and accumulation that some have critiqued as constituting “platform imperialism” (Jin, 2015) or “digital colonialism” (Kwet, 2019).

I have marshalled these examples to suggest “global” is not synonymous with “universal,” nor does it inherently mean equitable and inclusive participation in the production of media. The relative power of nation-states in influencing how media globalizes remains as relevant as ever (Flew & Waisbord, 2015), as are particular concentrations of what Michael Curtin (2007) calls “media capital” in certain cities within countries. Media capital alludes to capital in both the economic and geographical senses of the term, “a concept that at once acknowledges *the spatial logics* of capital, creativity, culture, and polity without privileging one among the four” (2007, p. 23; emphasis added).

The production of media flows is shaped locally at the level of cities and their countries by differences in media capital: their accumulated infrastructures, investments, creative labor, media policies, as well as their distinct histories of agglomeration and accumulation that produce cultures attractive to the many forms that media capital takes. Apart from the obvious example of Los Angeles, and Curtin’s focus on Chinese media

capitals like Hong Kong (2007), other cities that have been studied include Bollywood and how it has been imagined as “*the* Indian global media industry” (Punathambekar, 2013, p. 3), the “Hollywood North” of Vancouver as a site for runaway production (Tinic, 2005), Havana before the Cuban revolution as a center for Latin American broadcasting supported directly and indirectly by the US (Rivero, 2009), and Miami as the new “Hollywood of Latin America” that came after (Strover, 1998). While national and subnational policy play crucial roles in the emergence of media capital, as these examples indicate, it is also a transnational phenomenon.

According to Curtin, media capital is a valuable concept in that it shifts focus to location and “the dynamics of accumulation, agglomeration, and circulation” (2007, p. 10), an application of a broader academic discourse on cities and globalization popularized by scholars like Saskia Sassen (1991), David Harvey (1982/2006), and Manuel Castells (1996). Early on in globalization theory’s spatial turn, Sassen (1991) argued the expansion and dispersal of the global economy meant the concentration of specialized activities within major cities to coordinate and govern new worldwide systems of finance and production, leading to the unprecedented urban formation of the “global city.” While assembly lines and many corporate services were being relocated to cheaper labor markets, the global city became a command center and site of constant innovation to address the challenges of this dispersal, with nonbank financial institutions and advanced corporate service firms overtaking corporations and commercial banks in prominence and power (p. 126). Sassen notes the centrality of information and communication technologies to these processes, with those cities that were already centers for telecommunication commanding “an almost absolute advantage,” though global cities still require “major investments in fixed capital and continuous incorporation of innovations” (p. 20).

This point about “fixed capital” like telecommunication infrastructures highlights a fundamental observation about capitalism in industrial and postindustrial eras. According to David Harvey (1982/2006), Marx made scattered observations in *Capital* and *Grundrisse* about “the incredible concentration of productive forces in urban centers and in correlated changes in social relations of production and living,” which Harvey concisely summarizes by referring to cities as “the collective workshops of capitalist production” (p. 417). It is this notion of capital fixity that Sassen takes from Harvey in her conceptualization of global cities to improve upon accounts of globalization and global flow that heretofore remained at the level of abstraction, arguing “global-economic features like hypermobility and time-space compression are not self-generative” (Sassen, 2000, p. 217). Returning to the concept of media capital, the question to ask in spatial terms is why a city like Los Angeles ascended to prominence when media capitals with developed infrastructures already existed on the East Coast. And important for this dissertation, what does Hollywood’s rise suggest about Austin’s emergence as a global city and media capital in the present day? What can be said about, as Harvey might put it, the social relations of production and living within Austin that has attracted the infrastructure and labor necessary for the city to become, at once, the live music capital of the world, a tech node, and a center for independent and alternative film and media production?

Curtin (2007) illustrates how the processes of accumulation, agglomeration, and circulation worked to produce Los Angeles as a media capital through the rise of the studio system and the technical specificities of cinema as a new medium (see Figure 4.1). In his account, Los Angeles was chosen over existing creative centers like Chicago and New York due to numerous spatial considerations like its bright and temperate climate that suited the needs of early film technologies and the crews who operated them, the

diverse shooting locations and cheap real estate readily available in California, and a creative workforce that gradually emerged as seasonal work became permanent within the built environment of Hollywood film studios (2007, pp. 11-14).



Figure 4.1: An outdoor film set at Vitagraph Studios just east of Hollywood, showing a film shoot in progress, 1917. Photo from USC Libraries – California Historical Society Collection.

More than a hundred years later, development in the technologies and practices of production, distribution, and exhibition have entirely eliminated these original economic benefits to doing business in Southern California. However, just as telecommunications centers had “the absolute advantage” in becoming global cities due to their specialized ability to facilitate financial flows and produce innovations that could secure their dominance and competitiveness, Hollywood’s century-old production culture has sustained it as a media capital. In both emergence and longevity of media capital, Curtin highlights the importance of creative labor:

... agglomeration of labor encourages path-dependent evolution, such that small chance events or innovations may spark the appearance of a culture industry in a particular location, and clustering then engenders a growth spiral, because creative labor's migration to the region in search of work further enhances its attraction to other talent. (Curtin, 2007, p. 17)

Thus, even as capital may be hypermobile, and labor migratory, there are dimensions of fixity that produce, sustain, and grow media capital. However, just as critical junctures in the historical development of a city can lead to a growth spiral that concentrates media capital, so too can they lead to the disintegration of media capital. For example, the Cuban revolution in 1959 marked the end of Havana as a hub for commercial broadcasting in Latin America, with the resulting migration of creative labor, Yeidy Rivero (2009) argues, helping to build other regional media capitals like Rio de Janeiro and Miami (p. 289; see also Strover, 1998). When it comes to media capital, the relationship between what is concentrated spatially and what circulates is not linear with investment and labor as inputs and media products as outputs. Media capitals are networked and relational to one another; creative labor can relocate and media products are often produced through the coordination of this labor across numerous locations, as well as policies necessary to facilitate these flows.

This emphasis on the attraction of creative labor is helpful for thinking about Austin and related mobility of labor around festival networks and globally distributed production. The emphasis on fixed production facilities has lessened, but for as long as production involves collaborative creative work and financial investment, gathering to build professional relationships and find opportunities or inspiration through curated programming will remain integral processes for the media industries. Describing the Austin Film Festival, one interviewee emphasized geography as a crucial part of its draw for writers that are concentrated on the US coasts: "You don't frankly need another Hollywood Conference in Los Angeles, and most of the LA types wouldn't come to one

in New York because we're not the industry town. So this is sort of— it's neutral ground.” Another interviewee, who has attended SXSW many times over the years representing different companies and organizations, put the city’s draw more bluntly: “It’s Austin. It’s weird. It’s Texas. You know? It’s not New York, Miami, LA.” Large media companies like Viacom CBS and Disney who are drawn to South By, this interviewee added, “think young, fresh, cool, tech.” As I will discuss in this chapter, these descriptors are equally imagined to apply to Austin as a whole. For example, South by Southwest often quantifies and reports the value of the buzz it generates as a means for the city to build its own brand connected to this shared imaginary (see Greyhill Advisors & SXSW, 2019).

Global Media and Networked Industry Events

The circulation of media capital can be thought of as layered²²—an idea exemplified by the workings of media industry events like film festivals, conferences, and trade shows. Their associated activities bring together media industry audiences and professionals in a manner that compresses the space-time of decisions and transactions beyond those theorized within global cities. They temporarily agglomerate decision-makers, creative labor, capital, and the press in intense, yet ephemeral, ways overlooked by concepts like fixed capital or labor migration. They constitute a “translocal space” (Low, 2016) that runs at times through media capitals (Tribeca and New York City) and at times apart from them (Sundance and Hollywood). A range of metaphors have been used to make sense of how they interrelate, from circuits to networks to rhizomes to archipelagos (see Loist, 2016). What all these have in common is that the festivals within these networks are said to benefit in different ways from network effects as part of a

²² For more on global media flow as layered, see Straubhaar, 2007.

global phenomenon that now includes more than 10,000 periodically held events (FilmFreeway, n.d.).

Many scholars like Marijke de Valck (2007) understand the festival world in terms of a division of labor that separates a core circuit of “major” film festivals, which function as key markets and media events for global art cinema, from the mass of other festivals that tend to serve local or thematic functions, or else work to bring new filmmakers and films into the circuit from its periphery (p. 39). Building on Thomas Elsaesser’s (2005) observation that festivals add value and set agendas, de Valck defines agenda setting in relation to festivals as “the dynamics between unequal opinion-makers and their products that results in the transfer of opinions into dominant topics,” and describes value addition as “when these dominant topics are credited with jury awards or media attention” (2007, p. 145). Pierre Bourdieu’s (1986) work on taste, distinction, and symbolic forms of capital are embedded in this understanding of value addition (see de Valck, 2014, 2016), with cultural capital constructed and then distributed as filmmakers and their films are selected, compete, win awards, and generate media buzz. These levels of distinction and recognition all hold value for filmmakers that translates into the economic capital to fund their future work.

The agendas set for film festivals, and by extension the global cinema economy for which it generates buzz, do not stop at the level of distribution and exhibition. The film festival, Dina Iordanova (2015) argues, “is transforming from primarily a display site of completed films into an important factor that often triggers the very cycle of a film’s conception, financing, development, production, and circulation” (p. 7). This is reflected particularly in my Austin case studies, where I examine competitive pitching platforms, funding initiatives, educational programs, industry partnerships, and panel conversations. Industry participation is variegated and constituted of more than just

screening completed productions in juried competitions with the goal of selling and buying films. However, Jordanova's attention to film festival transformations requires further extension to account for contemporary circumstances of media industry production.

What is salient and unavoidable, in the United States at least, is the increasingly multimedia orientation major festivals have adopted. SXSW's Film Festival, as of 2022, has officially rebranded as the SXSW Film & TV Festival. Tribeca Film Festival in New York is now known simply as Tribeca Festival and covers "film, TV, immersive, games, talks, audio storytelling, and more!" (Tribeca Festival, n.d.). Austin's events were already uniquely positioned to accommodate, and lead, these broader industry developments. As I discuss in the following chapters, Austin Film Festival has been programming around television since the mid-1990s, and South by Southwest has prioritized various screen and computer media, such as video games, for about as long.

Widespread shifts in mission and role across festival networks and circuits are an inevitable result of closer integration of festivals with the media industries and their ongoing attempts to evolve with contemporary media practices. This may be especially true for festivals in the United States that do not benefit from extensive public funding historically enjoyed in places like Europe (de Valck, 2007, p. 108). Said funding allowed events to continue their focus on film as a medium and artform as they represented national interests linguistically and culturally, thereby perpetuating a particular mode of production that sustains global art cinema through the mechanisms of selection, recognition, financing, and distribution already described. Beyond the interventions of governments, nonprofits, and academic institutions that support the specialization of film festivals and art house theaters, and the emergence of a limited number of niche streaming platforms like OVID.tv or MUBI (Smits & Nikdel, 2019), the ontological

categories of “film festival,” “filmmaker,” and “cinema” fall apart under economic pressures, replaced by festivals for “creatives,” the industries in which they work, and their storytelling.

Festivals must adapt in order to attract the involvement of industry professionals, media corporations, companies, and other organizations that tell stories through a range of media forms brought closer together by the digitalization and platformization of media and media work. Within festival spaces, agenda setting as “the transfer of opinions into dominant topics” involves more than new directions for film culture and its aesthetic or political interventions. Similarly, adding value to “dominant topics” extends beyond awards and buzz to include the distribution of capital and other networked labor and technological resources that can shape production within the media industries. The distribution of these resources in a manner that aligns with social justice, at a critical juncture where corporate spokespersons have voiced a commitment to doing just that, is an area where performative gesturing can be replaced with material action. Executives’ perceptions about what is or is not profitable is being challenged, and the profit motive itself is increasingly accompanied by corporate social responsibility frameworks.

Fortunately for major festivals, it is not difficult to attract the participation of a range of stakeholders, including those from the media industries. In her theorization of “the festival-as-non-profit,” Ragan Rhyne (2009) discusses how many (European) festivals have adopted “an administrative structure that replaces direct governmental control with more subtle regulatory features and allows corporate interests to capitalize on festival events with a minimum of investment” (p. 20). This model, which adapts cultural management to a Post-Cold War, neoliberal era of diminishing state involvement and the corresponding appearance within global cities of a “third sector of cultural

management,” understands festival agendas as the result of conflict and negotiation reflecting various motivations and a range of stakeholders (p. 20).

Building on Janet Harbord’s identification of major discourses that circulate at film festivals (2002, p. 60) with an attention to cultural policy and the third sector, Rhyne’s key stakeholders in the material and discursive construction of a film festival include: “1) filmmakers and producers, 2) journalists, 3) the film industry of financiers, lawyers, distributors and studios, 4) tourist and ancillary industries, and 5) policymakers, funders and festival managers” (2009, p. 17). This list could be expanded to include creatives and media companies more broadly, as well as fans and audiences beyond cinephiles. What’s important is that Rhyne’s theorization, which she also considers to be a methodological intervention, attends to local specificity within a global phenomenon similar to Curtin’s conceptualization of media capital.

Bringing together the above theorizations of media capitals and film festival networks is productive for understanding transformations in media production and those who direct them. Circulation involves the flow of media and those who make it, but also ideas about what media should be made and how it should be made. This circulation is accelerated and, more importantly, directed, curated, and politically constrained through festivals that balance a range of stakeholders, or “unequal opinion-makers,” that include media producers who want to advance their work aesthetically or challenge the status quo politically, but also corporations seeking publicity and city governments attempting to boost their global profile, increase tax revenues, and attract desired talent pools. The overlapping nodes of event and city are inflected in one another, shaped by and shaping broader processes of agenda setting and value addition in the media industries from their spatial positions. Media festivals can thus be understood as institutions in all of their complexity, important for any analysis that attends to the economic realities of festivals

as media industry nodes within particular cities and their political possibilities as platforms for—among many discourses—social justice.

The first research question I posed in the introduction to this dissertation asked:

RQ1: What temporal and locational qualities contribute to media industry events' abilities to create platforms for social justice?

- a. How might contemporary crises such as the pandemic or the Black Lives Matter movement create critical junctures for societal change through events?
- b. How does location interact with event possibilities?

I now turn to the locational half of this question, on how place interacts with event possibilities for platforming social justice in creative production, while keeping in mind the importance of the post-2020 critical juncture for these event-location interactions. Following a working definition of imaginary, I will describe Austin's rise as a center for tech, the appearance of its countercultural scene, tensions within its brand of progressive politics, and the political antagonisms between city and state that continue to shape politics at the events analyzed in the remainder of this dissertation. These dimensions inform how Austin, its events, and their agendas are imagined by their participants in terms of what I call "the Austin imaginary."

IMAGINING AUSTIN

Defining Imaginary

Regarding the relationship between a city and its events, Julian Stringer (2001) explains how "film festivals market both conceptual similarity and cultural difference," which are generated by a city's "self-perceptions of the place it occupies within the global space economy" (pp. 139-140). How Austin perceives itself and is imagined in relation to other cities, or the Austin imaginary, is key to what becomes possible for its

festivals and media industries as they attract participants. Beyond its official slogan as “live music capital of the world,” Austin is often referred to as the “Silicon Hills” in popular discourse (Zimmerman, 2013). It has been discussed by scholars as a “technopolis” (Straubhaar et al., 2012), a prototypical “creative city” (Florida, 2012), and “environmental city” (Swearingen, 2010), while “Outlaw Country” and “The Third Coast” are metaphors applied to its music and film scenes, respectively (Long, 2009; Macor, 2010). These designations allude to how the city is imagined as a boom town for start-ups and tech innovation, as well as a hotbed for creative experimentation, independent production, and political activism.

I understand Stringer’s notion of a city’s situated self-perceptions within global space as something that goes beyond the city to form an imaginary that is shared by those it attracts, whether they stay permanently or for the brief period of an event. I adopt the perspective of Arjun Appadurai (1996) on global cultural flow here, which he describes in terms of five dimensions: ethnoscapas, mediascapas, technoscapas, financescapas, and ideoscapas (p. 33). In other words, flows of people, media, technology, capital, and ideologies, which I have already mentioned in relation to Austin as a media capital. But what makes Appadurai’s conceptualization in terms of “-scapes” helpful is that it foregrounds the subjective, or imagined, nature of these flows. After Benedict Anderson (1983), he argues these -scapes construct “imagined worlds” from various globally situated positions. As Appadurai explains:

... they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually

navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer. (p. 33)

In the following sections I will describe Austin's history, political situatedness, and some of its social formations. The Austin Imaginary as a perspectival construct is something that is not only shared, but even self-fulfilling as the city and its events market certain ways of being and interacting that are then enacted by participants when they arrive in town.

The perspectival constructs that form how Austin is imagined relationally are also grounded in material reality. Austin's "advantages" as a media capital, to use Sassen's phrasing, originate in its particular history of development and growth that led to the agglomeration and ongoing accumulation of tech, music, film, and other media industries in the city. This growth was shaped by political economic forces within Austin as, first, the Texas capital and, second, home to the state's flagship public university. Meanwhile, the gradual emergence of a progressive counterculture put the city at odds with much of the rest of Texas and the south. Historian Andrew M. Busch (2011) succinctly summarizes the political and economic drivers of growth in 20th century Austin as including:

... the postwar Sunbelt shift that brought jobs, capital, and federal investment to Texas and the South; the turn to post-Fordist "flexible accumulation" in capitalist production during the 1970s that greatly favored Austin's nonindustrial landscape; the university's ties to nascent information technology businesses; and the New Deal welfare state, which provided the initial capital for Central Texas' infrastructural advancements that allowed modernization and stability in the region from the 1930s on." (p. 405)

It is a story that has been told by academics from a number of angles at this point. In what follows, I draw on their work to describe Austin's emergence as a center for technology, counterculture, and progressive activism. The evocation of this history and

sense of place in the city (see Long, 2010) contribute to a “weird” Austin imaginary that shapes the activities and performances of event attendees.

Birth of a Technopolis

Many of the political and economic drivers listed by Busch are essential to becoming a “technopolis,” which University of Texas researchers at the IC² (“Innovation, Creativity, Capital”) Institute first defined as a city “that interactively links technology commercialization with the public and private sectors to spur economic development and promote technology diversification” (Smilor et al., 1989, p. 50). The IC² Institute itself represents one such initiative, though planning goes back to the Austin Area Economic Development Foundation’s “blueprint of the future” from 1957 (Humphrey, 1997, p. 25). Through intentional planning and public-private initiatives, Austin was able to first attract chip manufacturers with federal investment in local research, which in turn eventually brought other technology companies and the software and internet companies of the dot-com boom in the 1990s (Straubhaar et al., 2012, p. 12). While IBM, Dell, and AMD arrived in these early years, numerous companies like Indeed.com, Oracle, Vrbo, and Tesla now have their headquarters in Austin. In the city center, Google’s sail-shaped building looms over the iconic Lady Bird Lake.

Within this history, a crucial, illustrative moment came in 1982 when MCC (Microelectronics and Computer Technology Corp), the first for-profit research consortium in the United States, selected Austin as its home over Atlanta, San Diego, and the North Carolina Research Triangle. Combined public and private efforts were successful in drawing the consortium, and its arrival marked newfound attention and increased acceleration for Austin as a center for technology (see Gibson & Rogers, 1994). Incentives that helped Austin to win out over its competitors included land leased at \$1

per year for ten years and \$5 million to subsidize building costs, as well as heavy investments made by the University of Texas at Austin itself, which spent nearly \$25 million to bolster its engineering and computer science programs (Herrera, 2018). But what further set Austin apart was the “quality of life” it promised (Frontain, 2020), a feature of the city that has continued to attract new businesses and consortiums to the area in the time since. While MCC has long since dissolved, Austin’s growth has continued. The city ranked first among US metro areas in population growth as a percent of total population from 2020-2022 (see Table 4.1).

Net migrants as a percent of total population 2020-2022
50 largest metros

	2020 population	Net migrants 2020-2022		Percent of 2020 population	
		Number	Rank	Percent	Rank
Austin MSA	2,299,994	94,764	5	4.1%	1
Jacksonville MSA	1,612,764	61,480	10	3.8	2
Raleigh MSA	1,417,587	53,640	11	3.8	3
Tampa MSA	3,187,378	118,073	4	3.7	4
San Antonio MSA	2,568,358	71,664	9	2.8	5
Orlando MSA	2,680,313	73,844	7	2.8	6
Phoenix MSA	4,869,678	132,099	2	2.7	7
Charlotte MSA	2,668,915	72,151	8	2.7	8
Dallas-Ft. Worth MSA	7,665,875	204,465	1	2.7	9
Nashville MSA	1,996,681	40,638	13	2.0	10
Houston MSA	7,140,749	126,586	3	1.8	13
Atlanta MSA	6,103,261	81,267	6	1.3	15

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, Population Estimates.

Table 4.1: Austin’s population growth ranking from 2020-2022. Table from Ramser (2023).

Rise of a Countercultural Scene

As the Austin technopolis developed economically with government and university support, in the 1960s and 1970s the city put a regional twist on the

counterculture emerging in places like San Francisco and New York's Greenwich Village (Long, 2009, p. 213). Austin became the epicenter of outlaw country and "cosmic cowboys" (Shank, 2012; Stimeling, 2011), while interactions with the New Left student organizing based at the University of Texas inflected this counterculture with a green politics that carried forward Austin's New Deal era progressive political culture (Moretta, 2020). The result is a weirdness that Joshua Long (2010) describes as "an ideological undercurrent that seems common among so many in the city—a 'vibe' of eccentricity, creativity, and insouciant expressionism that has lingered since the city first witnessed its countercultural emergence in the late 1960s" (p. 22).

According to Long (2010), an Austinite who conducted over 100 local interviews as part of a doctoral dissertation that would later become the book *Weird City: Sense of Place and Creative Resistance in Austin, Texas*, there are a number of events and places agreed upon by locals that played formative parts in the evolution of Austin's counterculture. Chief among these is the so-called "Golden Age of Austin" that saw the doubling of enrollment at the University of Texas from roughly 20,000 to nearly 40,000 from 1960 to 1970, which outpaced the city's own rapid growth, as well as the founding of the Armadillo World Headquarters music club in 1970. The Armadillo acted as a "symbolic catalyst" for a counterculture that "married the hippie and the rednecks" (pp. 25-26), bringing together two seemingly dichotomous ideologies:

On one side of the divide was a white, conservative, cowboy independence customarily embraced as traditional Texan. On the other side of the dichotomy was a progressive, protest-happy Bohemianism appearing everywhere from UT campus to the grassy knolls of Zilker Park. (Long, 2010, p. 28)

Inside the Armadillo there was free expression, free love, and plenty of music, weed, and beer (pp. 26-27). Outside of the Armadillo there were student protests against

the Vietnam War and racial segregation, which the arrival of alternative publications like *The Rag* sought to unite with the counterculture (p. 26).

While this era has long since passed, the countercultural vibe has remained and adapted to a city that in 2020 was four times the size it was in 1970, prior to its high-tech boom (Humphrey, 2023). The blending of these elements, tech and counterculture, are described by Richard Florida (2005, 2012) in his enamored accounts of Austin. One particularly illustrative example is an anecdote from 2001 when Florida moderated a panel at the Austin 360 Summit, a conference that gathered local leaders from the private and public sectors. Florida posed the question “Is Austin losing its soul?” to his CEO and venture capitalist panelists, who responded with what seemed to be perfunctory, distant expressions of support for the local music and cultural scenes. This led Florida to interject about how “creativity is multidimensional”:

“If you really want to know how important this is,” I said, “don’t ask your fellow high-tech CEOs or the mayor or the head of the Chamber of Commerce. Ask the guys in the band!” I gestured grandly to the musicians seated at the edge of the stage, who looked like the members of Conan O’Brien’s late-night ensemble. Then one of the panelists clued me in. The guys in the band, now grinning broadly at me, were not local grungers. All of them were high-tech CEOs and venture capitalists themselves. (2012, pp. 158-159).

The idea is that creativity does not exist in siloed off artforms and disciplines, but rather, “all forms of creativity feed off each other” (2012, p. 159). It is this kind of thinking, as well as the blending of countercultural and corporate energy, that has become associated with Austin and is especially prevalent at South by Southwest, which I discuss in the next chapter. For now, I will give a bit more attention to the so-called “local grungers,” moving from the music scene to the film scene and then on to Austin’s progressive political scene.

Austin's film scene developed adjacent to the music scene and high-tech industries, with a growing number of independents choosing to work in the city. Alison Macor (2010) has catalogued some of their stories episodically, from Tobe Hooper and *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* in the 70s to Richard Linklater and *Slacker* in the 90s to SXSW and the rise of "Mumblecore" in the 2000s. Its place as a destination for indie cinema continues in the 2020s, with the state of Texas ranking second behind California in terms of the total number of horror films it has produced. State legislators also increased the Texas Motion Image Industry Incentive Program from \$45 million to \$200 million in 2023 to keep the state on par with rival locations for media production outside Hollywood like Georgia and New Mexico (Carver, 2023). Multiple production studios under construction in 2024 will bring hundreds of thousands of square feet of production space to the Austin area (Al-Shaikh, 2024).

As South by Southwest has globalized, turning outward from Austin toward the broader media industries, a local counterpoint continues to exist in the Austin Film Society (AFS), which was founded in 1985 by a group of cinephiles that includes film director Richard Linklater and cinematographer Lee Daniel, SXSW co-founder Louis Black, UT-Austin professor Charles Ramirez-Berg, and Austin Community College professor Chale Nafus (Austin Film Society, n.d.). Now operating as a not-for-profit, AFS has worked with the city to support local media production through its 20-acre Austin Studios production facility that claims an economic impact amounting to 700 productions, 8,000 jobs, and \$2.1 billion over the 22 years since its founding in 2000 (Austin Film Society, 2022). AFS also provides free and low-cost educational offerings through its Austin Public community outreach programs, as well as hundreds of thousands of dollars in grantmaking that supports local media makers whose projects are regularly featured at festivals in the city and across the country like Tribeca and

Sundance (Austin Film Society, 2023). As a nexus for local filmmakers and cinephiles alike, AFS hosts a constellation of community festivals at the AFS Cinema that include the Austin Asian American Film Festival, Cine Las Americas International Film Festival, which programs Latin American and indigenous films from the Americas (see Cheyroux, 2019), and Indie Meme Film Festival, which programs South Asian and Iranian cinema.

The diversity reflected here in these community festivals is not something that has only come with recent migrations of minority communities to the city who adopt and feed into the Austin imaginary. Rather, various groups have made generative contributions to the counterculture prior to any “Golden Age.” I presented the history of Austin’s (counter)cultural development as I have above to reflect how this story is typically mythologized within the Austin imaginary. But at the roots of Austin’s artistic creation are groups and grassroots efforts often left out of this narrative.

For example, no discussion of Austin’s development as a music mecca can ignore the role played by the Black music scene. In particular, there is the Victory Grill music club that predated the Armadillo by nearly three decades. Established in 1945 to give Black soldiers a place to drink and socialize upon returning to a still racially segregated Austin following World War II, Victory Grill became an important stop on the “Chitlin Circuit” of venues across the country toured by famous Black musicians that were not accepted within white spaces. B.B. King, Billie Holiday, Chuck Berry, James Brown, and many other famous blues and rock’n’roll artists played Victory Grill to crowds that also included white Austinites (Milam, 2024).

The history of Austin’s film scene can similarly be challenged. While the Austin Film Society looms large in local tales, Scott Dinger of the Dobie Theater played an important role by letting Linklater and company use one of his screens when the society was first starting out (Black, 2003). The Dobie Theater was also the site of the Austin

Gay and Lesbian International Film Festival (aGLIFF), which in 1987 became the first film festival to appear in the city, predating both South by Southwest's Film Festival and the Austin Film Festival by seven years. Within a city that lacked a gay district, aGLIFF pioneered the kind of community-fostering off-screen events, panels, parties, and collaborations with organizational partners that the festivals I discuss in this dissertation have become known for (Smith, 1997a; Hepola, 2000). These two examples, Victory Grill and aGLIFF, highlight the extent to which the Austin imaginary is a construct centered around a white and heteronormative position. The same can be said about Austin's history of progressive political organizing.

Limits to Austin's Progressivism

Beyond tech and cultural production that includes music and film, the remaining definitive piece of how Austin's counterculture is remembered and imagined is its history of rebellion and activism, and environmental activism in particular. In the 1960s, Austin's environmentalists began a decades-long battle against the environmentally destructive development practices accompanying the city's rapid growth that came to be known as the "growth machine" (Swearingen, 2010). This organizing came to a climax with the Save Our Springs (SOS) movement and its Green Machine political campaigns in the 1990s that transformed city governance of the environment (Swearingen, 2010, p. 8). William Scott Swearingen (2010) argues that the movement is responsible for creating "the environmental meaning" of Austin as it garnered popular support and "made the natural environment a central symbol of the city's quality of life" (p. 6), and by extension, sense of place.

The idea of "quality of life," mentioned briefly when I discussed MCC's selection of Austin as the location for its research consortium, requires further examination. It is a

crucial component within the discourse on how creative labor accumulates within cities, whether approached as global cities, media capitals, or creatives cities. Richard Florida (2012) coined the term “quality of place” to assess this concept of what makes a city attractive to workers in spatial terms, looking specifically at three dimensions:

What’s there: the combination of the built environment and the natural environment; a proper setting for pursuit of creative lives.

Who’s there: the diverse kinds of people, interacting and providing cues that anyone can make a life in that community.

What’s going on: the vibrancy of street life, café culture, arts, music, and people engaging in outdoor activities—altogether a lot of active, exciting, creative endeavors. (p. 281)

Quality of place spatializes Florida’s infamous “3Ts of Economic Development”—tech, talent, tolerance—and translates into commercial value how Austin’s sense of place is imagined and its history remembered through its counterculture scene, activist movements, and technopolis approach to development.

The 3T framework makes Austin a productive example for discussing the inherent contradictions between this dimension of “tolerance,” or “who’s there,” and the accumulation of tech infrastructure and labor. As Busch (2011) puts it, “the important question to ask is, whose sense of place? As materialist urban scholars continue to demonstrate, cities are paradigmatic manifestations of uneven capitalist development, which creates disparate senses of place” (p. 407). This is also the main topic of Joshua Long’s *Weird City* (2010), which argues that an attractive sense of place depends upon authenticity. Ironically, as the book’s case study on “Keep Austin Weird” rhetoric of the early 2000s suggests, Austin’s countercultural authenticity has been threatened by wealthier, creative class arrivals in search of the very authenticity they are destroying by displacing locals as cost of living rises. It is a shift worth pondering in terms of its impact

on the musicians, artists, media makers, and other local communities of practice Austin has built up as a media capital over several decades. Does the city's creative labor transform from weird to bourgeois through these developmental processes? Are day jobs in tech now required, as with the band of CEOs in Richard Florida's Austin 360 Summit story?

While these are important questions, this understanding of sense of place has been critiqued by Busch—and later Long himself—for eliding racial history in a manner similar to the case of countercultural production. Austin remained segregated through the 1960s, long after city planning first started protecting and developing the environment for the white population by concentrating local industry pollution in minority communities in East Austin (Busch, 2017). Once environmentalism had become part of local (white) identity from the 1990s onward, it was up to East Austin activist groups like PODER (People Organized in Defense of Earth and Her Resources) to fight back against environmental racism and the idea of the environment as something external and oriented toward leisure (Busch, 2017).

Similarly, during the New Left activism that “brought together the progressive politics and cultural permissiveness that make Austin ‘weird,’” organizing activities remained compliant with segregated spaces and turned a blind eye to racial discrimination (Moretta, 2020, pp. 278, 291). As progressive as Austin wanted to believe itself to be, even changing the name of West 19th Street to Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard involved a protracted battle due to resistance from white property owners that went on for over a year (Barnes, 2018). Eliot M. Tretter (2016) has specifically critiqued the University of Texas' role in the growth machine along these same lines of racial displacement, segregation, and gentrification, while Straubhaar et al. (2012) have

addressed the digital divide that this history produced. While Austin may have historically been “progressive,” it was a deeply racialized progressive politics.

Blue City, Red State

The post-2020 critical juncture as it appeared in Austin marked a point of racial reckoning for its progressives. The city made national headlines in 2020 when Austin City Council voted to cut and reallocate funds away from the Austin Police Department following local Black Lives Matter Protests (Venkataramanan, 2020), meanwhile voters elected a “progressive prosecutor” as their new district attorney who promised to put an end to the enforcement of low-level drug offenses and prosecute police misconduct, both of which are issues that disproportionality impact people of color (Barajas, 2020). For a brief moment, it seemed as if Austin’s politics would reflect a commitment to social justice that was as focused on material progress as it was the acceptance of difference, mending the split between a politics of recognition and a politics of redistribution.

The backlash was immediate. Governor Greg Abbott and Texas Republicans quickly responded to local police reform efforts with a symbolic “back the blue” pledge in 2020 and “back the blue” legislation in 2021, which freezes property tax revenues for Texas cities that decrease their police budgets (McCullough, 2020; Office of the Texas Governor, 2021). This effectively prevents the reallocation of funds to policing alternatives. At the end of 2021, Austin voters returned to the ballot box to again vote on police reform, but this time they were made to decide whether to increase, not decrease, police department funding beyond what had already become a record budget approved for 2022 (Fechter, 2021). In the two years that followed, state legislators proceeded to outlaw transgender healthcare for minors and make abortions illegal under nearly all circumstances (Fortin, 2023; Méndez, 2023).

Austin’s media industry events are embedded within these city-state, progressive-conservative political battles. For instance, South by Southwest released an official condemnation of Texas Governor Greg Abbott’s order designating gender-affirming care as child abuse (KVUE, 2022). In their statement, which came amidst calls to boycott the event or for South By itself to relocate, a South By spokesperson explained that “Austin has always stood for progressive values. Moving SXSW out of Texas would damage Austin more than it would the state. Austin is part of SXSW’s DNA, and we intend to stay and fight, and to continue to use our platform to further the progression of human rights” (Blackstock, 2022). Meanwhile, at the Austin Film Festival that year just days before November 2022 elections, John August and Craig Mazin thoroughly criticized Abbott and state leaders during a live taping of their podcast *Scriptnotes* in a packed ballroom at the Stephen F Austin Hotel. Acknowledging that the Austin Film Festival is a nonprofit organization that cannot have a political agenda, the screenwriter-podcast hosts promised a fun game of movie trivia with the audience in lieu of politics (August, 2022):

John: In this 2019 hit, a family’s serene beach vacation turns to chaos when their doppelgangers appear and begin to terrorize them.

Craig: Meanwhile, in 2022, Texas families with trans and nonconforming kids have their lives upended when this governor ... instructed the Department of Family and Protective Services to investigate medical treatments of transgender adolescents, such as puberty blockers and hormone injections, as quote unquote, “child abuse.”

Kelly: That would be Us and Greg Abbott.

Craig: There we go. He’s on fire, guys. Right about now, the people that did mention to us that we should be less political are having serious regrets.

John: Craig, we’re only saying facts.

Craig: That’s true.

CONCLUSION - ATTRACTION AND CONTRADICTION

South by Southwest and the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference have their origins in Austin's countercultural scene, which is known for its openness and eccentricity. At the same time, both events are embedded within industry networks and corporate cultures where social justice is often addressed performatively, or else with deference that compartmentalizes it off from core decision-making spaces and processes as an important concern. This makes for a complex politics of presence at the events as they seek to inspire their participants and create social impact. As two events on the doorstep of the Texas Capitol, they also find themselves caught between liberal and conservative political antagonisms. At times event organizers lead these responses as with SXSW's response to Abbott's order, or else participants use the events as platforms to do it themselves as in the case of the *Scriptnotes* AFF live taping and its "movie trivia".

Bringing the Austin imaginary and contemporary tensions together with Curtin's concept of media capital, we can say Austin is defined by contradiction, whether locally in terms of bold expression and cultural permissiveness opposite racism and gentrification, now exacerbated by the "sustainability fix" for urban growth (Long, 2016) and conservative backlash to social justice movements, or else in its encounters with the outside world as old, "authentic" Austin meets a global, "creative" Austin attracted to its perceived authenticity. These contradictions shape how social justice finds a platform at the city's festivals and media industry events, for which sense of place has become something that is projected and imagined to not only draw a workforce, but participants for these events (see Figure 4.3).

Austin's rise as a global node is thus the story, as Curtin might put it, of a city's accumulation of capital and creativity, together with the agglomeration of diverse media

and tech industries, that can only be understood through careful consideration of culture and polity that has produced it as a countercultural hub. It is a space of collisions. The circulation of this image perpetuates it as such, with gathering for live events from the beginning being a central part of the process. Now a media capital with a globally recognized experience economy driven by its calendar of festivals, Austin enjoys a robust event infrastructure downtown even as the streets remain packed with the unhoused and rally after rally occupies public space opposite the Texas Capitol's manicured lawn. At events like SXSW, countercultural Austin and technopolis Austin attract a blend of progressivism and progressive neoliberalism. They shape the political imaginary within and beyond the city, for better or worse.



Figure 4.2: A booth at the SXSW 2023 Creative Industries Expo. Photo by the author.

Chapter 5: South by Southwest and the Benefits of Scale

INTRODUCTION

Each year in August, South by Southwest invites the public to browse programming proposals submitted in the summer and vote on what conversations they would like to see when its annual event returns the following March. This “PanelPicker” community voting ultimately results in 30% of what SXSW curates, while an advisory board, “a group of 200+ industry experts from around the world,” provides further feedback in selecting an additional 40% of the programming. SXSW staff handles the final 30% as they “work to fill any gaps in relevant subject matter, striking a balance between new and veteran speakers” (SXSW, 2020).

The system is designed to allow for intentional curation while simultaneously responding to industry needs and remaining open to novel or marginalized topics. In 2015, however, the process led to a scandal when two panels related to the misogynistic online harassment of the #GamerGate movement were cancelled by South By due to unspecified threats of violence (Abad-Santos, 2015). The first panel, titled “Level Up: Overcoming Harassment in Games,” planned to discuss technical and social solutions to harassment and abuse experienced in gaming communities. It was selected by community voting through the PanelPicker platform (SXSW, 2015). The second panel, “SavePoint: A Discussion on the Gaming Community,” was curated directly by South By staff after the PanelPicker submission period had ended and thus did not involve community voting (Chu, 2015). Purported to be focusing on “the current social-political climate of the gaming community, the importance of journalistic ethics in video game journalism, and the future of the gaming community and the industry” (Paul, 2015), the panel was submitted as a response to “Level Up” (Chu, 2015). Following blowback over the

cancellations, SXSW announced it would invite speakers from both panels and other experts for an Online Harassment Summit to be held during its event in March. It would have strict security policies and checkpoints to address safety concerns.

In a demonstration of South By's power as a media event, the scandal quickly became a national headline in October 2015 that produced the second largest spike in news coverage related to Gamergate, even though the incident came a year after the movement first appeared. A third, though smaller spike, came when SXSW held its Online Harassment Summit in March 2016. Nieborg and Foxman (2018), who identified these patterns, counted 34 articles published on October 27, 2015 when the panels were cancelled—the highest daily count found between June 2014 and May 2016. They give this platforming a central significance within the longer-term journalistic resistance to Gamergate:

The initial attacks provided a template for characterizing other modes of mainstream gender-based harassment, and the canceled panels tied those modes to the wider phenomenon of online misogyny and trolling as well as for an expansion and reintroduction of Gamergate. Thus, *SXSW offered mainstream journalists a wider frame in which to encounter Gamergate*, despite the fact that the movement was already a year old and individual stories of its targets had already been explored in depth. Gamergate became shorthand for broader instances of mediated misogyny. (pp. 121–123; emphasis added)

I present this example of SXSW's Gamergate fiasco at the outset of this chapter because it succinctly illustrates how the politics of presence and scale at a major event like SXSW shape its possibilities as a media event. The incident reveals how particular happenings from among the thousands of activities programmed each year can become newsworthy, transmitting their messages beyond the event. Scale means a wide range of programming, much of which goes unnoticed, but also impact when something resonates. Relatedly, the importance of those who pushed back against the cancellations cannot be

understated. Scale brings attention to the role of not just event curation, but participant agency in directing public attention toward platformed issues. This is true even when these discussions occur in sparsely attended conference rooms tucked away from the central draws for the majority of event participants.²³

It is important to stress that the value of SXSW's politics of presence differs for those who attend in person. In this particular example of Gamergate and the Online Harassment Summit, the curation and platforming has value in terms of not just its newsmaking potential, but its productive possibilities as the site of trade rituals, or perhaps more aptly here in this particular case of cross-sector collaboration on a broad social issue, as a field-configuring event. It is important to acknowledge that despite its largely absent audiences, the summit did gather stakeholders from major tech companies like IBM, Facebook, and Google, as well as advocacy organizations including the American Civil Liberties Union and a host of other policymakers, academics, and experts (SXSW, n.d.-a). At the summit, they defined and recognized online harassment against women as an issue (D. Lee, 2016), raised awareness around it (O'Brien, 2016), and discussed nuanced legal, policy, social, and technical solutions that a single news article would struggle to capture, such as federal legislation later introduced by panelist Katherine Clark, a Congressional Representative from Massachusetts (Machkovech, 2016). In thinking about the political possibilities of these spaces and public attention to them, South By's Gamergate scandal and the Online Harassment Summit that followed present a contrast between participatory, popular processes hijacked by online mobs, and civil, though undeniably and decidedly elite, exchanges that occur on the ground within

²³ As indicated by the BBC's disappointed headline, "SXSW 2016: Little impact from isolated online abuse summit" (D. Lee, 2016).

credentialed spaces where consensus among decision-makers and media producers can form.

Taking the Online Harassment Summit as an opening example, we see how the value of SXSW's politics of presence and its dimensions as a media event and site for trade rituals stems from the massive scale of its programming and attendance that can accommodate day-long summits, CEOs, and congresspersons. This also applies to the media industries and media production, with entire tracks of programming devoted to film, television, XR, and games, to say nothing of their interactions with technology, policy, business, and other aspects of the Austin megaevent. What is unclear from news coverage of the Online Harassment Summit is the long-term impact its participants experienced due to their attendance and the connections and resources it afforded them. Yet people participate due to the SXSW brand's association with what they perceive to be quality ideas, media, music, technology, and potential business partners or collaborators. Were the interactions of the industry experts, government officials, and other stakeholders productive for coordination and collaboration in addressing the problem of online harassment? What about for other communities of practice and stakeholders gathered around their respective social justice issues?

These are difficult questions to answer, though it is what I seek to do in this chapter on SXSW as a platform for social justice in creative production. While the value of South By as a media event is easily comprehensible, this value is a potentiality complicated by the messiness of the event's massive scale and the range of ideas, media texts, and activities that fall under its broad scope of programming around innovation, inspiration, inclusion, and impact, which together drive its mission to define and produce progress toward a constantly reimagined future. The industries South By gathers are not necessarily progressive, but the openness of the politics that can occupy these key terms

means that there is a place at the event for causes pushing for a form of social change that prioritizes social justice. While there is no shortage of stump speeches from politicians and corporate PR touting diversity, equity, and inclusion activities, there are also opportunities to “sneak in” transformative discourses and resistant media due to the sheer size of South By and the openness of its mission. It is a space that can be acted upon by individual participants and communities of practice, even as some companies make vague, progressive appeals with their brands to greenwash and wokewash their images through affiliation with SXSW.

While South By’s capacities as a trade ritual may at first appear to be diluted by its scale, and it indeed has drawbacks compared to more industry-specific or community-specific events like the Austin Film Festival I discuss in the next chapter, participants benefit from the network effects of this scale for building weak ties (Granovetter, 1973) while also, in some cases, “carving out space” for their own professional or identity-based communities. In this chapter, I describe the available inter-community experiences, crucial connections with new and old colleagues that are especially possible when communities of practice reach a “critical mass” of presence at the event, and door-opening brand association that keep media makers and social justice advocates coming back year after year, in spite of high costs and unresolved accessibility issues. At times these participants speak the corporate language of profit to push for change from under the broad and profitable banner of “diversity,” another ambiguous term, while at other times they move to create alternative structures and mechanisms for change.

In what follows, I begin by providing a description of SXSW's activities with a focus on its brand: how it is marketed, how it is imagined, and why it attracts social justice organizations and advocates among the more obvious communities of filmmakers, musicians, technologists, and media and tech industry professionals. Next, I discuss key

themes that emerged from my ethnographic record of observations and interviews collected from 2020 to 2023 (see Chapter 3: Methods in Detail), in particular focusing on patterns related to SXSW's politics of presence: how it curates in solidarity with marginalized communities and social justice movements as a media event, enabling it to raise awareness and set industry agendas, but also how participants leverage the platform themselves, at times sneaking in resistant discourses that run counter to dominant ideologies. I then examine how SXSW functions as a site of trade rituals that directly impact the politics of production by facilitating connection with peers, resources, and opportunities. Here, again, the politics of presence in terms of *who* participates in the event is a point of departure for analyzing these trade rituals. This participation is often most meaningful in the spaces that particular communities of practice “carve out” for themselves, gathering outside of the event’s main attractions yet nonetheless reaching a “critical mass” of participation to be meaningful. In the case of South By’s featured speakers and creatives, this brand association has value for their careers and projects that they take away after the event has ended. Finally, I discuss South By’s limitations as a platform for advancing social justice in media industry production: how the event’s scale makes meaningful connections difficult at times, how the dominance of neoliberal consensus politics often leads to what I call “conditional solidarity” on social justice issues, and how accessibility issues and exorbitant costs keep the most marginalized communities from participating in the first place.

INSPIRATION, INNOVATION, INCLUSION, IMPACT – SXSW’S ORIGINS AND SCOPE

In this section, I discuss how SXSW originated and what led to its current global scale and broad, cross-industry scope of programming. I describe the breadth of this

programming, as well as its objectives and targeted participants, while keeping my attention trained upon my second research question:

RQ2: How does social justice fit into the missions of media industry events?

Openness in South by Southwest’s forward-focused, future-oriented programming around inspiration, innovation, inclusion, and impact means there is room for a politics of presence that can accommodate popular demands for social justice at the critical juncture of a post-pandemic, post-2020 racial justice protests moment. However, participation at South by Southwest centers on an elite, educated intersection of the professional class, knowledge class, and creative class, who are drawn by the promise of valuable information and connections that can advance their careers, support their projects, and enrich their lifestyles, including how they act as political subjects in the world. This influences the forms social justice takes at its event, as well as how event participants approach social justice within the norms of their industries.

SXSW History and Current Activities

SXSW emerged in 1987 as a music festival and industry conference with 15 panels, workshops, and sessions. It featured 177 artists on 15 stages at venues around the city, including Liberty Lunch, Alley Oop’s, and Antone’s (the same venue that hosted Shell House in 2022 as described in the introduction to this dissertation). A film festival and “interactive” conference for new technologies followed in 1994, by which point the music festival had quickly grown to 482 artists across 30 venues (SXSW, n.d.-c). Though film and interactive took seven years to appear, SXSW CEO Roland Swenson recounts their presence from the beginning in his mythologized origin story for the megaevent that is presented on the SXSW website, a story that begins with cofounders Nick Barbaro and

Louis Black (Dolph Briscoe Center for American History, 1997), among others, at Austin's alt weekly, *The Austin Chronicle*:

[In 1986], a small group of people in Austin, Texas began a series of long discussions about the future of entertainment and media. The meetings were in the offices of *The Austin Chronicle*, and participants were sworn to secrecy. A fundamental opinion shared by the group was that the local creative and music communities were as talented as anywhere else on the planet, but were severely limited by a lack of exposure outside of Austin. Music was the uniting factor, but the group had a catholic taste for art and ideas. Inclusiveness and reaching for new things were core values. The solution being discussed was an event that would bring the outside world to Austin for a close-up view. As the key ideas were formed, recognition grew that Austin was not the only city where this was an issue. For a local event to bring the world to Austin, it needed to have value everywhere. A name was sought that was not restrictive in its concept. (SXSW, n.d.-c)

In this origin story—granted it is one told with the 20/20 vision of the present—we see a mission that has in many ways been realized by 2020-2023, the period studied in this chapter. There is the curation of art and ideas across all forms of entertainment and media, a focus on the new or excluded, and global aspirations for the event's reach. While the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 threatened SXSW with bankruptcy and resulted in the laying off of a third of its full-time staff (Charpentier, 2020), the aforementioned 50-percent stake purchase in SXSW by P-MRC Holdings kept the organization afloat (Harris-Bridson & Kohn, 2021). In the time since, SXSW has returned to a pre-pandemic scale of operations, with the local economic impact in the Austin area for 2023 estimated at \$380.9 million and the valuation of its coverage in global media estimated at \$213 million (Greyhill Advisors & SXSW, 2023, p. 4). It is indeed large and international, with 1 in 4 badge holders prior to the pandemic attending from abroad (Boisseau & Forrest, 2022), a number that sat at 21.49% of attendees from 126 countries outside the United States for 2023 (SXSW, 2023d). As a SXSW Film Community Newsletter from July 2022 soliciting PanelPicker submissions put it, “as a speaker, you’ll receive a

platinum badge for the event, and a global platform for your ideas” (SXSW, 2022a). South By, we are told in these communications, is a platform offering a “groundbreaking experience where creative professionals from around the world gather to share their art and expertise” (SXSW, 2022b).

The language used by SXSW in its communications and marketing is intentionally, and necessarily, broad. As a megaevent with multiple festivals sharing a conference that “celebrates the convergence of the technology, film, and music industries” (SXSW, 2021b), speaking about it as a whole requires the use of open terms that scholars and practitioners often despise, like creatives and content, or in the case of this dissertation, the terms event, media, and media makers rather than festival, films, and filmmakers. Even if such terminology may be imprecise, it is the language used by South By when curating and describing its “cool convergent content,” as well as the language adopted by the creative professionals and “industry leaders” it gathers each year (SXSW, 2022c). As I will discuss, this openness is also what enables a host of opportunities for a politics of presence that supports social justice within and across its gathered industries.

South by Southwest’s scale—which nearly every person I interviewed felt was overwhelming in both positive and negative senses of the term—might be best described, joked one of them, as *Everything Everywhere All at Once*. The name of this film, which won seven Academy Awards after its premiere opened the SXSW Film & TV festival in 2022, continues to be riffed on by attendees and staff alike. “SXSW is taking form, and that form is Everything Awesome All the Time” begins a marketing email sent out in January 2023 (SXSW, 2023b).

But there is truth to the humor. In 2023, SXSW drew approximately 345,066 attendees, with the conference hosting 1,484 sessions at the Austin Convention Center and nearby hotels to a total audience attendance of 76,015 online and offline (SXSW,

2023c, pp. 2-3). SXSW Interactive, the tech portion of the event, occurs within the scope of the conference, driving attendance figures and business interest in the conference. SXSW Pitch, for example, boasts funding amounting to over \$23.2 billion for the 647 companies that have participated since 2009, 93% of whom received this funding and 17% of whom have been acquired by large companies like Meta, Apple, and Google (PitchBook & SXSW, 2023, p. 5). The SXSW Innovation Awards competition, also under the conference, “honors the year’s most transformative and forward-thinking digital projects from across the United States and around the world” (SXSW, 2022f).

Festival curation and other programming outside of the main conference further balloon South By’s scale. The SXSW Music Festival, for its part, curated 1,577 music acts from 60 countries on 78 stages for concert audiences amounting to 151,940 attendees, while the SXSW Film & TV Festival, with an audience of 68,071 attendees, screened 111 feature films, 83 shorts, 22 TV projects, and 32 XR projects from 34 countries that included 145 world premieres at 7 theaters across the downtown area. And there was more programming beyond that. The SXSW Comedy Festival featured 52 performers, the SXSW Creative Industry Expo tallied 57,006 attendees, and SXSW EDU, a separate conference for educational professionals that takes place during the four days prior to the main SXSW event, saw an additional 1,013 speakers and 8,004 attendees in-person and online.

In addition to all of these media event activities, which were reported on by 3,150 members of the press in attendance, were 272 official parties and special events to create even more opportunities for networking, connection, and discourse (SXSW, 2023c, pp. 2-7). While these numbers may be huge, they do not even include the hundreds, if not thousands, of unofficial activities and gatherings that take place each year during the

more than one week-long event. And it all occurs within a relatively dense downtown area where most locations are less than a mile away from the convention center.

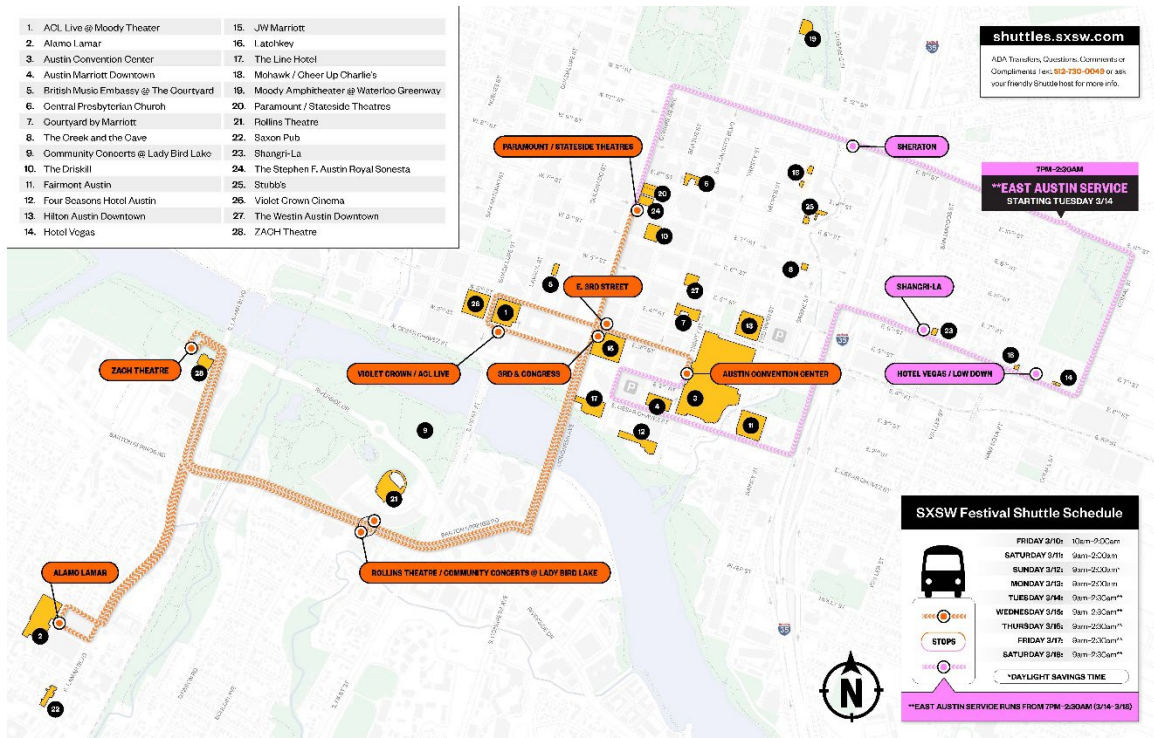


Figure 5.1: Shuttle routes for SXSW 2022. The furthest location from the Austin Convention Center, Alamo Draffhouse South Lamar on the far left, is approximately two miles away. Sponsored party houses dot the streets immediately adjacent to the ACC, which in recent years have included Australia House on Rainey Street to the south, South Asian House on 4th Street to the West, and Shell House on 5th Street to the north. Image from SXSW (2023f).

Everything, everywhere, all at once—at least for a week. The goal is an event with massive scale to facilitate cross-pollination between industries, which in turn catalyzes their convergence and leads development within each industry. The Film & TV Festival, for example, markets itself as an “unparalleled experience at the forefront of discovery, creativity, and innovation” that curates all forms of visual media, but still

provides “the game-changing buzz every filmmaker dreams about” when premiering a film at a major festival on the international film festival circuit (SXSW, 2022d). When soliciting festival submissions, this same Film & TV community newsletter promoted relevant conference programming like XR sessions and panels under the “Creating Film & Episodics” and “Film & TV Industry” conference tracks. The conference is pitched to these filmmakers as “an opportunity for the global community of digital creatives,” as readers are made to re-identify, “to learn cutting-edge ideas, discover new interests, and network with other professionals who share a similar appetite for forward-focused experiences” (SXSW, 2022d). At SXSW 2023, the large range of industries and professionals to whom SXSW marketed its event can be seen in the diversity of conference tracks, which remained similar over the three years of my study.

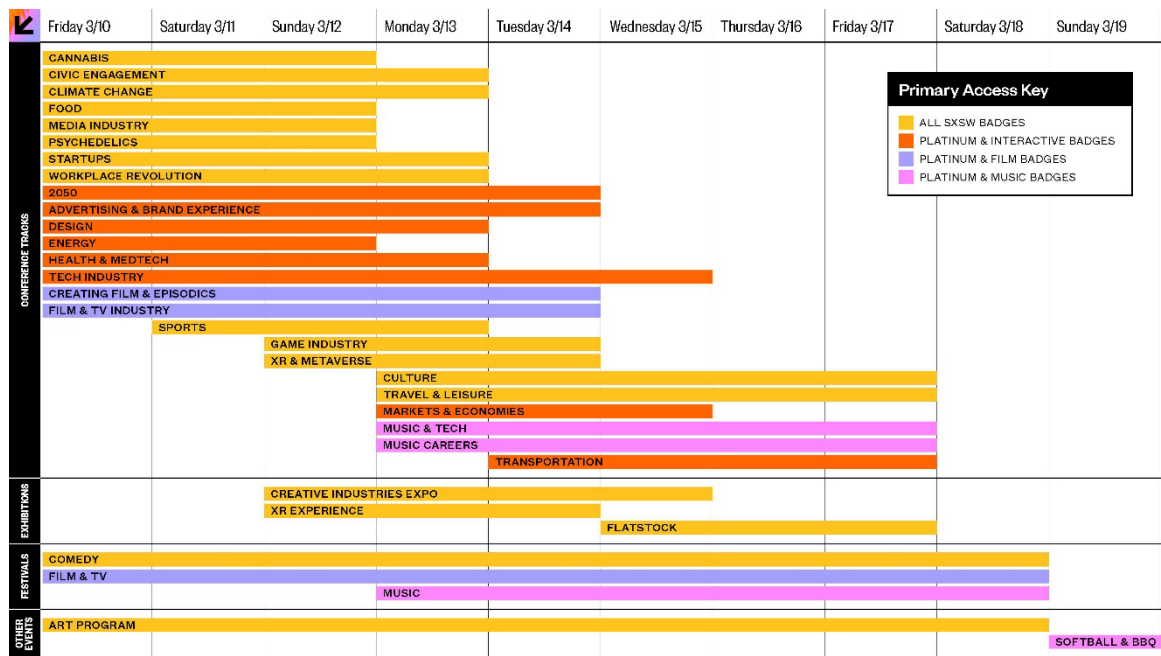


Figure 5.2: SXSW 2023 program broken down into conference tracks, festivals, exhibitions, and other events. Image from SXSW (2022p).

A Lifestyle and Career Development Event for Creative Professionals

SXSW's business mantra, which I heard repeated multiple times by festival spokespersons throughout this study, is "SXSW helps creative people achieve their goals. SXSW helps you take your career to the next level" (Boisseau & Forrest, 2022). For the global professional or digital creative who works in the tech and media industries, beyond the abovementioned opportunities for exposure and networking, SXSW also makes an attractive, if ambiguous, consumer appeal: "If your goal for the new year is to learn more about the trends of tomorrow from some of the world's most brilliant minds (all while mixing in dozens of amazing artists and scores of standout films for good measure), then you need to attend SXSW 2023" (SXSW, 2022e). The conference has programming on tech, film, and music associated with the three main festivals that might provide career-advancing knowledge and interaction, but it also has tracks on food, travel, and civic engagement to guide attendees on what they should eat, where they should go, and how they should vote or donate their money (see Figure 5.2). There are art installations to explore, stand-up comedy sets to wait in line for, and many other activities that promise a good time.

While these experiences might help attendees to see a creative or business problem in a different light, or possibly bond with a future collaborator, the odds are that they will not bring attendees any closer to making their films or funding their startups. But these career or project-defining moments *might* happen. And when combined with industry or field-specific panels, networking opportunities, mentor sessions, and career development workshops with other attendees who skew toward a demographic of mid-career graduate degree holders with six figure incomes (SXSW, 2023d), there is justifiable value. "Join the world's best and brightest" a digital banner on a 2022 marketing email reads (SXSW, 2022g). "28% of attendees are in executive leadership

roles,” reads another that year (SXSW, 2022h). SXSW also helps with this, offering early career badge discounts to young professionals who have graduated in the past two years (Cruz, 2023). For everyone else, SXSW provides guidance on pitching your expense as a business trip, such as “Why your boss should send you to SXSW” statistics that include the 68 meetups, 40 workshops, and 9 pitch events at SXSW 2022, or the claim that “9 out of 10 registrants achieved their goals in 2022” (SXSW, 2022i). SXSW is for those at the intersection of the professional class, knowledge class, and creative class, to support their careers and enrich their lifestyles, and it actively programs for and seeks out these participants.

“I” Words and Creating the Future

In the overview of SXSW just presented, I have quoted a great deal of the marketing language associated with how SXSW builds its brand. To attract participants who represent the best and brightest leadership and expertise on global and convergent creative industries, who want to keep up with industry trends and advance their careers, companies, or projects, South By brands itself in this marketing as “new,” “groundbreaking,” “game-changing,” “cutting edge,” “transformative,” “forward-thinking,” and “forward-focused.” In other words, programming at SXSW is united by not only an appeal to global digital creatives and business professionals, but a focus on the future and how these industries are adapting to it, or more optimistically, creating it with novel new ideas and an entrepreneurial, problem-solving spirit. It is a purpose succinctly captured in SXSW’s slogan for 2024, “where the world’s heading” (SXSW, 2024a).

Related to SXSW’s focus on solutions, progress, and the future, there are a few ambiguous “i” words that particularly stand out in its programming and marketing. Most

directly related to this future-building project is “innovation,” enshrined with its own award competition within the tech festival as I mentioned earlier, though it also drives curation in the Film & TV Festival and Music Festival toward more avant-garde and experimental work. “Impact” is another key term, one meaning different things to different event attendees. Among executives, investors, and startup founders, in particular those participating in SXSW Pitch, impact is understood in terms of money raised and money earned, the billions in funding received and stories of successful acquisitions. Add “social” to the front of impact and the keyword now has relevance for the nonprofits, politicians, and socially conscious creatives that SXSW attracts. But importantly, it still draws the attention of business participants as well, for whom social responsibility, ESG (environmental, social, and corporate governance), and DEI (diversity, equity, and inclusion) have become crucial considerations in a post-2020 world, in particular for the “forward-thinking” leaders the event attracts.

When thinking about impact in the context of SXSW, the related “i” word of inclusion comes to the fore, even if it may seem at times tacked on, or retrofitted as was perhaps the case in Swenson’s mythologized South By origin story. It is precariously situated within the corporate nature of the festival, constantly facing co-optation in the form of wokewashing and performative gesturing promoted as “ground-breaking” progress. And yet, as I noted in Chapter 1, SXSW “doubled and tripled and quadrupled down on [DEI] for 2022” (Boisseau & Forrest, 2022). And in the “About” section on the SXSW Conference homepage, the event pitches the conference as proof that “the most unexpected discoveries happen when diverse topics and people come together” (SXSW, n.d.-b). Such language is not entirely PR spin. While not every person I spoke to would agree, one participant from a social impact media organization had these terms in mind

when I asked them to describe the SXSW experience: “I think hectic, busy, diverse. Those are words that come to mind.”

Closely related to innovation and the notion of discovery is a final “i” word, “inspiration,” which can guide innovation and link it with (social) impact. More than any other concept, it directs South By’s curation and programming, as repeated again and again during the Opening Remarks session for SXSW 2022. Here, its centrality to the event’s purpose and the construction of attendee expectations was concisely presented: “Inspiration from events like SXSW gives us energy. Inspiration from events like SXSW gives us optimism. Good things can happen when creative people get together.” Months later, it remained a crucial term that was used to start building interest in the following year’s event: “We can't wait to see you next spring where we can learn, discover, feel inspired, and build a better future” (SXSW, 2022j).

Beyond event marketing, SXSW PanelPicker submissions present a valuable picture into the topics responding to South By’s call for “future-focused, solutions-based speaking proposals” (SXSW, 2022i). For example, among PanelPicker submissions for SXSW 2022, the event reported that "future" appeared 627 times, "better" 230 times, "trends" 114 times, "innovation" 393 times, and "inspire" 122 times (SXSW, 2021a). During my own exploration the following year of PanelPicker for SXSW 2023, I found similarly popular results for key terms related to the focus of this dissertation on social justice in creative production, with searches returning 254 results for "inclusion," 117 results for "justice," 215 results for "equity," and 162 results for "activism" among panels submitted for presentation at SXSW and SXSW EDU.

A PLATFORM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE? – THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Throughout this thematic analysis section of the chapter, I will critique SXSW's politics of presence by drawing on my observations and interviewees' experiences as compiled in my ethnographic record of the event from March 2020 through March 2023. Specifically, I will explain how SXSW platforms social justice discourses as a media event, or the ways it seeks to *inspire* with the discourses it produces or intervenes in. I then turn my attention to *impact* on the politics of production, or the ways South By as a site for trade rituals provides marginalized media makers and social justice practitioners with professional connections, material resources, and new ideas originating in its platformed discourses. Investigating these two dimensions, media event and trade ritual, will illuminate the extent to which a media industry event can close the gap between inspiration and impact when it comes to social justice being represented by, and advanced within, the media industries. I will keep in mind recognition and redistribution as constitutive parts of social justice as I assess activities across these two dimensions.

I addressed RQ2 in the previous section describing South By's mission, scale, and target participants. Social justice appears alongside numerous other future-focused and change-oriented goals, as well as career advancement for participants as an event priority. With these observations in mind, I now move to my third research question, which asks:

RQ3: In what ways do media industry events catalyze social justice within normative industry processes?

- a. How do events' programming practices inspire social justice?
- b. How do event participants shape social justice discourses at events?
- c. How do event experiences impact the work of marginalized media professionals and social justice practitioners?

In answering the first two parts of this research question, I will examine event curation and participant action in terms of how they relate to social justice and solidarity

with marginalized groups at the level of discourse produced by South By's media event. How SXSW as a platform for social justice is shaped by the curatorial strategies of the event itself, or what I describe as curating in solidarity from above, necessitates a look at the kinds of films and other media selected, as well as the panels, speakers, and artists invited.²⁴ As my examples will show, programming from above and participant action from below, the second part of this research question, are intertwined in producing discourse at the event. For the purpose of analysis, I will attempt to separate the two, addressing them one by one in the subsequent subsections "Inspiration – Curating in Solidarity from Above" and "Inspiration – Discourse in Solidarity from Below."

Following my discussion of discourse at South By's media event, I turn to its trade rituals. In the subsection "Impact – Support for Advocacy and Industry Participation," I respond to the third part of my research question by investigating the impact created for marginalized media professionals and social justice practitioners by South By's opportunities for connection, community, brand association, and industry influence. Finally, I discuss the constraints that limit SXSW as a platform for social justice in creative production in the subsection "Impact – Barriers to Progress."

"I" word-related discourses constructed by SXSW and its participants are open in their visions for progress, allowing for the inclusion of transformative ideas and projects, even those that produce conflict at the level of economic, material agendas. However, social justice is inherently constrained by dominant neoliberal discourses that prioritize business solutions and career-oriented, philanthropic individual action. While at times achieving the recognition of difference, these efforts often fall short of—or resist—redistribution. Thus, a place for solidarity in the event's politics of presence is essential

²⁴ Panelists are quoted and paraphrased from field notes taken live during each year's event. Panel transcripts were consulted to review the context and accuracy of quotes when available.

for inspiring action and producing impact in ways that advance social justice in creative production. This solidarity is possible as participants leverage what South By's media event and trade rituals have to offer in spite of their constraints, meanwhile "sneaking in" resistant ideas and "carving out" space for their communities of practice.

Inspiration – Curating in Solidarity from Above

My analysis here will explore the extent to which agenda setting on the part of the festival's curated program translates into solidarity with marginalized communities at the level of inspiration. In other words, how South By amplifies discourse as a media event. But first, as several interviewees reminded me, I must stress that SXSW is not a social justice festival and neither does it market itself as one. What I hope to show is how the programming's broad focus on innovation, inspiration, inclusion, and impact attempts to move society toward a more inclusive and democratic utopian future from a range of political positions, and that together with the event's massive scale and mainstream orientation, creates opportunities for programming and action in solidarity.

There is an openness to SXSW's politics that is sufficient to coopt the cooptation, so to speak. This is especially the case when "weird" aesthetics are packaged together with solidarity. Boots Riley's anticapitalist digital series *I'm A Virgo*, for instance, the story of a 13-foot-tall teenager in Oakland coming of age amidst tenant union organizing, firsthand encounters with corporate greed, and popular resistance to police brutality, premiered at SXSW 2023 before ironically starting its run on Amazon Prime Video, one of the largest corporate streaming services. As part of the marketing around the premiere, the 13-foot-tall puppet used in the show was driven around Austin in a hot pink convertible (see Figure 5.3). *Everything Everywhere All At Once*, the multiverse family

epic by Daniel Kwan and Daniel Scheinert (“Daniels”), has also been praised as a critique of racial, heteropatriarchal capitalism since opening SXSW in 2022 (Poll, 2023).



Figure 5.3: The cast and crew of *I'm a Virgo* gather around a 13-foot-tall puppet in a hot pink convertible before the show's premiere at SXSW 2023. Photo by the author.

Regarding the tension between collectivism and individualism within the political discourse under the SXSW banner, Ondi Timoner's documentary *The New Americans* captures a libertarian perspective also common at South By, indicting a corrupt financial system as it follows a number of characters who have profited from the chaos around the rise of cryptocurrency, the 2021 Gamestop squeeze, and the decentralized financial power of r/WallStreetBets. It strongly appeals to event attendees who value nonconformity and disruption, values prevalent within the Interactive Festival in

particular. While the inherently competitive, free-for-all underpinnings of this thinking remain in tension with solidarity as a competing value for meeting the challenges of the future, it is one of many threads gathering at South By around its “i” word brand. These threads do not always come bundled neatly together, however they do overlap and intersect, produce dissonance and resolution to varying degrees as part of the media event’s agenda setting processes.

It is the platforming of social justice in terms of recognition and redistribution that I will identify in relation to SXSW, meanwhile critiquing examples where programming falls short or runs counter to social justice under the event’s progressive language of inspiration, innovation, inclusion, and impact. While there are perfect, or near-perfect examples of solidarity in the curatorial decisions of the event, such as the 2022 panels “Reimagining Justice in America” or “Decolonizing the Film Industry Pipeline,” which I will return to later, such examples of solidarity should be understood as participant-driven outliers amidst programming that more often sits slightly left of the neoliberal consensus, even if right-wing trolls on Twitter paint SXSW with a broad, socialist brush. Of course, the values and aesthetics falling under South By’s “i” words and orientation toward the future also create plenty of space for, as noted, libertarians and business elite.

Inspiration is never neutral. Given SXSW’s stakeholders, programming is driven by a mix of creative trends, political priorities, and corporate money. This places certain limitations on solidarity, a tradeoff to the benefits of its scale. In reflecting the neoliberal consensus, politics at South By overtly align with the Democratic Party platform. The connections are often explicit, with Barack Obama speaking in the final year of his presidency and members of the Biden administration participating throughout the post-2020 period of my study. For these Democratic leaders, South By holds agenda setting possibilities as a media event attracting the participation and attention of the media, tech,

and adjacent industries it gathers. In 2022, for example, Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg and Secretary of the Interior Deb Haaland made appearances, with Secretary Buttigieg as a featured speaker for the conference’s transportation track and Secretary Holland interviewed by trans activist Charlotte Clymer as part of a session titled “Auntie Deb’s Guide to Equity & Inclusion.” For audiences at the Film & TV Festival, clips from these and other world leaders’ talks featured prominently in prescreening daily highlight reels to emphasize South By’s significance within global affairs.



Figure 5.4: U.S. Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg promoting President Biden’s recently passed bipartisan infrastructure law. Screenshot by the author from SXSW (2022o).

The participation of world leaders is a salient part of the atmosphere at SXSW, lending a further sense of importance to the event. This may run counter to a reputation born from weirdness, but maybe not. “I think it’s hilarious the EU is here,” I overheard a woman walking behind me say outside of the convention center one afternoon. However,

with the influx of capital and rapid growth of the Interactive Festival, to say nothing of the attention of policymakers worldwide being drawn to emerging technologies like cryptocurrencies and artificial intelligence, the participation of these leaders is hardly surprising. Media technologies have also become critical components in the political campaigning and organizing these leaders depend upon to be elected and push for legislative and policy change. One example of the direct link between political organizing and the tech industry at SXSW 2023 was the participation of fundraising platform ActBlue, which had a booth in the Creative Industries Expo and hosted a panel under the civic engagement track of the conference, “Turning the Page: Breaking Barriers and Building Power.” Open rhetoric across the event around using technology to make the world a better place, to “be allies, be champions, be changemakers,” as a 2023 XR experience winner put it, also makes participation attractive to political leaders, at least those from the center to the left of the political spectrum.

Event programmers tend to amplify progressive and partisan positions that align with the neoliberal consensus. At SXSW 2022, issues that were prevalent in official communications included support for trans rights, reproductive rights, and Ukraine. These took the form of activities such as a keynote with Planned Parenthood CEO Alexis McGill Johnson, fundraising and merch to benefit the *Kyiv Independent* and Ukrainian relief efforts in collaboration with the GlobalGiving platform for charitable donations, and new panels like “Addressing Our Transgender Health Crisis” added at the last minute in response to anti-trans policy and legislation in Texas.

During the welcoming remarks for SXSW 2022 that highlighted these issues alongside the many films, performers, musical acts, and other inspirational experiences on offer that year, Chief Programming Officer Hugh Forrest asked the audience, “Do the people in this room, people in this community, have the power to change Ukraine?”

Texas? Yes, yes, I think we do. I think the people who come to SXSW can help move the needle forward on both of these issues.” South By accomplishes this, he explained while staying on brand, with innovative thinkers and creative endeavors, and by inspiring one another with new ideas, new sounds, new thoughts, and new opportunities. Other safe political topics featuring at SXSW during my study were the partisan wedge issue of book bannings in libraries and schools across the United States, with 2023 featuring a banned book library exhibit sponsored by cosmetics retailer Lush (see Figure 5.5), as well as opposition to genocide when it is distant enough from US foreign policy positions in the present, like a 2023 XR Festival featured project that explored the legacy of the Cambodian Genocide.



Figure 5.5: Banned books exhibited at SXSW 2023. Photo by the author.

At its worst, the link between neoliberal consensus politics and South by Southwest's programming priorities of inspiration, innovation, inclusion, and impact appears when the topic itself is US foreign policy. Here, innovation and impact are channeled through the lens of public service and take the form of investments in National Defense, the use of Defense money, or support for the CIA with new technologies. All are permissible within the scope of politics at SXSW, which programs panels like "Investing in America: Why VCs Bet Big on Defense" and "Using Defense Money to Grow Your Unicorn." One 2023 panel in particular, "Spies Supercharged: Tech and the Future of CIA," drew a tremendous amount of attention on Twitter, with more replies than any other tweet in my dataset for that year ($n = 1521$), yet few likes ($n = 487$). Similarly, former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi used her panel "The Future of Global Democracy" in 2023 and the #SXSW brand to bolster support for NATO/US sanctions against Russian oil, garnering over 3,000 likes.

At its best, curating in solidarity at SXSW means boosting social justice advocacy and activism that is already emerging, helping it to circulate, catalyzing it. SXSW Online 2021, for instance, responded to the political and cultural moment reflected by the George Floyd protests and television shows like HBO's *Watchmen* (2019) with panels including "Who Controls the Past: The Tulsa Race Massacre" and "Array Crew – Disruption Through Diversity." ARRAY Crew is an online platform created by filmmaker Ava DuVernay to connect productions hiring crew members with women, BIPOC, and other below-the-line professionals who are underrepresented in the media industry. It is backed by the social justice art nonprofit, ARRAY Alliance.

A particularly clear example of SXSW's capacity to curate in solidarity was seen at the 2023 Film & TV Festival. Its awards ceremony recognized numerous films and other media that covered "polarizing topics," as one director on stage described their

film. Award winners included *Breaking Silence*, a short documentary on advocacy around D/deaf and disabled incarceration, as well as Narrative Feature Competition winner *Raging Grace*, a film humanizing undocumented migrant Filipino labor in the UK and featuring bold critiques of colonial legacies and the persistence of white supremacy in British society. There was also Narrative Short Competition Special Jury Award winner *Flores Del Otro Patio*, which tells a story about Colombian queer activist opposition to destructive and exploitative coal mining in their country.

The award ceremony itself was very “South By,” with a rowdy crowd hollering and shouting out their emotions as overwhelmed award recipients dropped the formalities and composure one would expect to see at an Oscars or Golden Globes. *Breaking Silence* cast members communicated with the crowd through an ASL interpreter to ecstatic cheers and applause in a heartwarming moment of recognition for the advocacy work that they do in prisons. Special Jury Award for Animation Directing winner Tom CJ Brown (*Christopher at Sea*) thanked SXSW for providing a platform for the LGBTQ community, a community he said was under attack, and Documentary Short Competition winner Sean Wang (*Nǎi Nai & Wài Pó*) thanked the Asian American filmmakers who came before them, like Daniels, and all who are making community around cinema. *Raging Grace*’s director and producer, Paris Zarcilla and Chi Thai, used the opportunity to share that their film was an outlet for the rage felt over Filipino health care workers dying on the front lines during COVID and anti-Asian hate in the UK, the frustration over how “we need permission to be angry, to rage gracefully” in processing trauma. They proclaimed the goal should be for their community and all BIPOC “to move into a place of pride and happiness.” When receiving his award, director of *Flores Del Otro Patio* Jorge Cadena similarly redirected attention from himself to Colombian activists, the “social leaders” fighting against coal mining expansions in their country. As these words

shared by filmmakers on the awards stage suggest, much of what makes SXSW a great platform for social justice are the discourses produced and actions taken by its participants.

Inspiration – Discourse in Solidarity from Below

In the previous section, I discussed how South by Southwest's focus on inspiration, innovation, and impact, together with the participation of business elite and world leaders, results in programming that tends to align with neoliberal consensus politics. I also noted how the ambiguity of these values also leads to programming in support of social justice and in solidarity marginalized groups. In this section, I turn to the second part of my third research question, which examines the influence of participants on event discourses. I will discuss the ways event attendees used these programming opportunities, leveraging South By as a media event to platform social justice discourses. They accomplish this by sneaking in resistant discourses, or otherwise working within the possibilities afforded by deference politics as a productive starting point for social justice and just representations in media industry production.

Leveraging the Media Event

South by Southwest as a media event unfolding is palpable everywhere you look in March: bobble-headed mascot versions of Nicholas Cage wandering up and down Congress Avenue near the Paramount Theater to promote the premiere of his film *The Unbearable Weight of Massive Talent* in 2022; a troupe of nuns in blue habits gathered outside the convention center, riding a mechanical bull on Sixth Street, and seen roaming throughout the rest of the downtown area as part of a marketing activation for NBC Universal Peacock's *Mrs. Davis*, a television show premiering at SXSW in 2023; a

director whose work is featured in the XR experience suddenly pulled away from me mid-conversation in order to sit for an interview with a podcaster who, I am told, is a prominent influencer in the extended reality industry; journalists and editors from trades like *Script Magazine* and *Hollywood Reporter* mingling with media makers at meetups and happy hours; speakers taking time to tweet out about their panel as it happens to associate themselves with the SXSW brand in promoting themselves to a larger audience online—examples abound of participants attempting to capitalize on South By's purported global media valuation assessed at \$339.6 million in 2019, pre-pandemic, and at \$213 million in 2023 (Greyhill Advisors & SXSW, 2019, 2023).

The anticapitalist coming-of-age satire *I'm a Virgo*'s hot pink convertible and 13-foot-tall puppet in 2023, noted earlier, is one such attempt to leverage the media event for marketing. The buzz around its premiere circulated across the spaces I found myself in that year, shared as an example of the power festival premieres can have in boosting media makers from underrepresented groups. “Write Now: Rewriting the Women in Comedy Narrative Meet Up” Speakers Thai Randolph and Candice Wilson Cherry, who are the CEO and Executive Vice President of Kevin Hart's Hartbeat Productions, highlighted *I'm a Virgo* as an example of how to successfully generate buzz for a project by leveraging industry events for publicity. They discussed it in relation to Hartbeat's “Women Write Now” fellowship for Black female comedy writers, and how their own “celebratory cycle” focuses on the fellows' completed work, where Hartbeat first premieres their short films to packed festival audiences and parties in order to get the fellows networking and to generate desired buzz, before next adding the shorts to Peacock's streaming catalogue and supporting their fellows in their push for bigger projects.

Beyond the Film & TV Festival, other SXSW participants also sought to leverage the media event. The value, or at least the perceived value, of the elite—though typically not large—audiences gathering in its many conference rooms often leads to selecting South By as the platform for releasing announcements and launches with varying degrees of officiality. “This is our official announcement to the world,” one startup representative joked during Q&A for the panel “Digital Infrastructure for Collective Impact” when asked whether their platform for networking among community organizations was already available or not.

IllumiNative, a nonprofit social justice organization with a mission to “build power for Native peoples by amplifying contemporary Native voices, stories, and issues to advance justice, equity, and self-determination” (IllumiNative, n.d.), was one narrative change organization present in 2023 to promote their media advocacy and entertainment work. This included the panel “U.S. Indian Boarding Schools: The Stolen Generations,” which sought to circulate the findings of the then recently released Federal Indian Boarding School Initiative Investigative Report and its story of the United States’ cultural cleansing and genocide of Native American peoples. The panel featured IllumiNative founder and executive director Crystal Echo Hawk alongside Bryan Newland, the Assistant Secretary of Indian Affairs at the US Department of the Interior, whose office authored the report, as well as Deborah Parker from the National Native American Boarding School Healing Coalition, which contributed to the report, and Edgar Villanueva of the Decolonizing Wealth Project. In closing remarks for the panel, and after an audience member during the Q&A had disrespectfully taken the conversation entirely off the topic of the boarding schools, the panelists stressed the importance of everyone gathered in the audience for disseminating the report and IllumiNative’s related *American Genocide* podcast, especially the “influencers” in the room.

In the course of my analysis, a lot of awareness emerged around problems, their systemic nature, even their roots within a capitalist system, as well as attempts at inspiration directed toward solving these problems. Calls to action put forth by speakers on stage like Echo Hawk tended to remain necessarily within the frameworks of the industries that South By participants operate in and think through, or else those of other existing structures like collaboration between public, private, and third sector actors and resources. Solutions were often discrete and focused, such as bringing diversity into the board room or funding underrepresented filmmakers, with action by the event itself largely staying at the level of inspiration, highlighting a belief in the power of storytelling to raise awareness. However, in some instances, there were explicit calls for direct political action, such as the protest at Shell House I described in Chapter 1, or speakers who shared the details for a trans rights rally at the Texas Capitol organized by GLAAD in 2022, or other instances where those on stage provided the audience with resources to act in support of trans youth and reproductive rights, such as sharing Texas Governor Greg Abbott’s phone number at the end of a panel. There were also generalized calls to “strike and win” or “overcome race,” as when speaker Heather McGhee presented on her concept of the “solidarity dividend” and its role in opposing powerful interests. But, more often than not, calls to action were industry or community-specific and meant to guide longer term, sustained action. In the next section, I elaborate on how these calls produced discourse resistant to both the politics of production in the media industries and the political ideologies this production tends to reinforce.

Sneaking In Resistant Discourse

I have noted the prominence of a neoliberal consensus politics at South by Southwest, but also that the scale of the platform enables diversity of opinion, a “big

tent” of ideas as South By spokespersons describe it. Yes, there are the platitudes of national leaders, and the superficiality of corporate DEI proclamations, but there are also critiques of these discourses. For instance, after the premiere of *I’m A Virgo*, NPR television critic Eric Deggans moderated a Q&A with the cast and crew on stage (SXSW, 2023a). Curious about the “framework” for the show, Deggans asked Director Boots Riley to elaborate: “so is it like the struggle for Black excellence to survive in a white-dominated world? Is that what we’re talking about?” To which Riley replied with a description of a creative process and worldview aligned with an empowering yet collective notion of solidarity:

What we’re talking about—because those end up becoming catch phrases, that kind of don’t mean much, cause, you know, you could have Colin Powell, is he Black excellence? You know, he was down to bomb and kill and murder people, right? So, what I’m talking about is a struggle that defines Black folks in the United States and in the world, and that struggle has to do with the economic system that we’re in.

As he spoke, members of the audience inside the packed theater cheered, laughed, and applauded:

And our struggle for liberation, and for freedom from that, has to do with us being aware of what’s around us and how the world works, and having an analysis of that, that can help us figure out who to work with, who not to work with, and what it is that means freedom. Does it mean freedom if we get a Black billionaire? No. What means freedom, what are those things? And that’s what my work tries to talk about. (SXSW, 2023a)

Elsewhere at South By, when interviewed as part of a Featured Speaker panel, Riley described the significance of getting involved with grassroots organizing after a childhood obsessed with comic books, that his justice-oriented mindset would have otherwise led him to becoming a cop if he had not found himself involved in political organizations participating in farmworker labor struggles in central California.

In his comments at both his screening and panel, Riley expressed a community organizer mentality with grounded, contextualized talk of specific issues, and specific strategies to address them, a mentality that could be found in pockets throughout the event in the years I attended. It was the dominant perspective among the climate action crowd; a perspective that was theoretically informed, but also built on a concrete, empirical foundation and intertwined with the lived experiences of the communities they represent and advocate for. These activists and advocates seemed to reappear at one another's panels and other social justice or organizing-related programming at the conference, a dynamic I will take up further in the following section on trade rituals.

In some instances, community organizing became the specific topic of the conference, as with the 2022 session "Beyond Protest: Creating Policy Change Through Social Movements," a panel featuring then recently elected US representative for Texas Greg Casar in conversation with grassroots leaders Maurice Mitchell from the Working Families Party (and formerly the Movement for Black Lives), as well as Tania Unzueta Carrasco from Latine rights organization Mijente. The organizing approaches they shared were nothing groundbreaking for those familiar with strategies and tactics like relational organizing, issue campaigns, and power mapping, but interestingly, these very same tools found a platform in panels about diversifying workforces. In one case, a panel covering investment funds and financial advisors discussed organizing shareholders with these same community organizer strategies and tactics to pressure corporations and financial institutions to place social justice before maximizing profit.

Apart from a community organizer approach, with its prioritization of lived perspectives within oppressive systems, another means of challenging values and, as Riley put it, the empty "catch phrases" constraining social justice at South by Southwest is the presentation of historical perspective to pull values down from abstraction. On the

“Reimagining Justice in America” panel, for instance, History Professor Khalil Gibran Muhammad of Harvard University noted how the narrative of settler colonialism only brings the problem of systemic racism up to the 1960s, that for the most recent half century we need to talk about racialized policing and mass incarceration that continues today. There are ongoing ethnonationalist political projects that appeal to white supremacy and fear of racialized Others, he explained, from Richard Nixon’s Southern strategy to Donald Trump’s talk of ending “American carnage.”

Within this historical context, Professor Gibran Muhammad directly criticized the values underlying neoliberal consensus politics and emphasized the importance of fighting for “the words that we want to see,” words that oppose the “catch phrases” maligned by Riley. He gave the example of Harvard Business School eschewing words like “empowerment” and “equity” due to how they allude to something collective and imposed, which goes against what he described as a liberal, merit-based, individualistic ideology that most benefits American business. Conjuring James Baldwin in reminding the audience that “we cannot change the things we aren’t willing to face,” Dr. Gibran Muhammad questioned the very sort of calls for unity and bridging the divide that are often expressed by Democratic leaders featured at SXSW, rebuking the notion that if we accepted things as they are everything would be okay. Elsewhere at SXSW, Human Rights Foundation took a similar historical approach by screening a short film about the CFA Franc, a currency controlled by France and still used by 15 of its former colonies in Africa. Part of the panel “Fighting Back Against Monetary Colonialism,” the video set up a discussion among the speakers on how the French government has the ability to devalue the CFA Franc for its own economic benefit as part of a financial system they criticized as constituting “monetary colonialism,” another powerful word for naming and facing a particular systemic injustice.

Within the broader political discourses platformed at South by Southwest, participants also challenged constraints on social justice as they arise specifically within the media industries' politics of production. At "Killing John Smith: Indigenous Women Storytellers," Native media makers described the importance of not filming certain cultural activities out of respect for them, or how they remain accountable to their communities as they fight for their authentic and appreciated representation on screen. On a separate panel, "Business of Accessibility & DEI in Entertainment," media executives spoke to the importance of adding A(ccessibility) and B(elonging) to the DEI letters of diversity, equity, and inclusion. Intuiting the precursors of solidarity, a solidarity that does not devolve into deference politics, one executive encouraged the audience to go beyond their own identities and communities and be active in learning about and understanding others as well. "I have to show up the same exact way for a queer story as for an indigenous woman story," they explained. In the social media era, the process is not as difficult as it might have once been. "Go to Twitter and follow someone who doesn't look like you," they added, recommending the audience "tap into" other communities to understand how to realize more genuine forms of inclusion.

In addition to learning and empathy as avenues for arriving at social justice, other panels saw speakers stress the importance of reflexivity, collaboration, and empowerment in the politics of production. In the next section, I will discuss these moments and how these speakers presented a series of areas of escalating, interconnected dimensions of solidarity, encouraging South By's participants 1) to reflexively work from their distinct positionalities with awareness of sociohistorical context and alternative vantage points; 2) to create opportunities, when holding the power to do so, for those with relevant lived experiences to contribute to projects; and 3) to not just include, but even better, empower underrepresented and marginalized people to be able to create, not just be consulted.

Some calls to action were directed at working within existing systems, while others aimed to work outside or adjacent to them.

Deference Politics as a Representational Starting Point

At South By, I witnessed numerous instances where panelists and attendees expressed dissatisfaction with the status quo around representation and were greeted with affirmation. Speakers maligned disempowering narratives around climate change, ongoing inadequate representation of women in film, and decades of video game storytelling where the only people of color seemed to be Orcs or Drow, with players in many cases forced to be settlers and harm indigenous people. During a Q&A in one of these sessions, an audience member did not so much ask a question as use their time at the mic to proclaim “stereotypes and fetishizations are everywhere. Look at your work.” I heard panelists repeatedly make similar statements, such as the need to get beyond making media for the white male gaze and to consider alternatives to “traditional” storytelling. In an earlier section, I mentioned how *Raging Grace* Director Paris Zarcilla discussed going beyond trauma in storytelling to arrive at joy, and even rage, when receiving awards for the film. At one of its screenings, he tore into the lack of representation for the Filipino community in the UK, criticizing stereotypes of the “good Asian” as seen in famous stories like *The Jungle Book*, a story authored by the same man who wrote *The White Man’s Burden*. The goal for him and others is, instead, to tell stories that can capture “a fire reignited.”

Those with control over representation within the politics of production have historically exoticized and dehumanized marginalized groups, thereby reflecting and perpetuating societal domination (see Said, 1978). Notwithstanding their shortcomings in effecting systemic change, when it comes to representing human experience, deference

politics (see Táíwò, 2022) can be impactful and, ultimately, in service to collective action. When those with epistemic privilege (Toole, 2019, 2022) into marginalized experiences are given the tools to represent those experiences and envision possible futures, the resulting cultural encounters become precursors for solidarity. But this still requires caution. Identity politics (see Taylor, 2017), when they devolve from intersectional solidarity into symbolic identity politics, are not a sound foundation for a democratic society, nor are they sufficient for the collective project of attenuating social injustices. It is necessary to collectively participate in the construction of a world in which we are all expected to belong and thrive. In this context, deference politics can be productive as a starting point for awareness and understanding of who we share the world with.

In the collective project of worldmaking, calls for improvements in representation offer the outlines of a map or trajectory for those working within the media industries who might not have lived experiences relevant to the stories they are involved in telling. For example, when a person asked the room at the “Write Now” meet up about how to approach writing a world you are not a part of, in other words how to approach a project when a writer does not match the script, they were told it comes down to “authentically being able to relate to the challenge of being an Other.” Calls for reflexivity were also made during 2022’s “Decolonizing the Film Industry Pipeline” session, where filmmaker professor Iliana Sosa encouraged the audience to think through and, more importantly, answer two critical questions related to their positionalities: “Who’s making documentary films and why?” Her co-panelist, fellow filmmaker professor Ya’Ke Smith, further added that when setting out on a new project, it is important to reflexively ask, “Why do you want to make it” and “Why do you want to be the one to make it?” The answer to these questions may ultimately be that a media maker might not be the right person to tell a

story, especially at a historical juncture when reparative representation is needed, a topic I will return to in the next chapter. But learning enough to be able to make that decision, and effectively supporting those who can tell that story, is essential to being part of the solution.

Ideally, those with power in the media industries would adopt a reflexive approach to the decisions they make and take the time to learn about the communities a given project concerns, especially their experiences over time that have shaped them and continue to shape them. Fewer missteps in arriving at plausible and empowered representations are likely when the act of representation is approached as a collective project and those with control over resources act with a reflexive awareness. While there are examples of this, like the handful of speakers quoted in the last few sections above, this reflexivity and awareness are far from always being the case. Unfortunately, a lot of the action related to social justice in the media industries does not go beyond exercises in deference politics. As a filmmaker on the “Killing John Smith” panel pointed out, action comes from a place of “How can I do the least amount of work?” It is crucial for filmmakers to demand a presence and help to bring in others when they have the means to do so, this filmmaker explained, but “you see people doing the bare minimum...they are really just trying to check a box.” Outside of film productions, within corporate media spaces more generally, I heard from interviewees how DEI efforts create separate structures for representation within companies that paradoxically segregate and disempower underrepresented communities, removing them from rooms where they could actually be heard and provide input.

This box checking culture was challenged at South by Southwest. On the “Business of Accessibility” panel, one executive stressed that they want to hear a greater commitment from studios, that when projects with a “representation commitment” are

greenlit, they also come with accompanying marketing budgets to ensure their success. At the “Empowering Community Action Through Inclusive Stories Meet Up,” host and Picture Motion CEO Brian Walker stressed the importance of “brain trusts” and collaboration with those who have lived experience, starting from the early development stages of a project in order to avoid simply box checking when a media company wants to add “x” to a film. But, in general, he noted that it is becoming less and less necessary to “hide the avocado in the brownie” and executives are more open to the importance of representation on screen and within the production process. The panelists of the “Business of Accessibility” session echoed this point, noting how casting calls are now worded as “casting authentically transgender” or “casting authentically disabled.” This was not the case previously, as discussed in recent academic scholarship (see Martin, 2018). And yet, here we have a similar industry conference conversation among studio and media company heads calling, strongly, for this “authentic” casting and sets that are accessible for crew and talent.

Elsewhere, away from the panels of media executives and corporate professionals, an Indigenous filmmaker was less optimistic about industry commitments to improving how her community is represented, instead arguing that it is something that must be fought for:

I don't want to be the angry Native woman in the room, where people are just like 'we don't want to work with her,' but sometimes we do have to dig our heels in... it piles up, and there's that one thing that happens, and you're like, okay, this is it, I've reached my point, and we just have to do that strong advocacy work. In my experience, sometimes people really do come around, and other times it's unwillingly. They do it, but they don't really understand, they don't really get it.

For this filmmaker, the solution lies in empowerment, that just representations will not be possible until members of their community are directly involved in greenlighting, funding, and distributing projects. At the very minimum, and similar to

other calls, the filmmaker explained, “We need to be there from concept. If we’re there from concept and we’re partnering from concept, then we’re not coming in to try to fix something.” The problem, however, is that the investments necessary are rarely being made to realize this shift from consultant to empowered creator. Boots Riley, in his featured speaker session, described his experience when insisting that he direct the music videos for his hip hop group, The Coup. “If you direct the video the budget is here,” he recounted the record label saying, putting his hand down low to the ground, “If you let somebody we trust direct the video, the budget is here,” he went on, now with his hand held over his head.

Diverse executives, I heard again and again, are required. This means, as a startup founder on the “Future-Proofing Diversity in Gaming” panel explained, moving past not only symbolic action and words, but even going beyond “throwing dollars at a community” to “support of folks looking to create a change” and “support that opens doors for the next generation.” A video game industry advocate argued with a similar logic during 2022’s “Game Changers: Black and Indigenous Voices in Gaming” panel, explaining that “the needle moves based on how many of us are employed at any given time.” While game studios want to “sprinkle some of that Black cool” on games like *Fortnite*, “it’s not equity, it’s not building with them, it’s not the same thing,” they said. Outside of corporate contexts, these calls for access and development were repeated. “I don’t see climate justice without professional development for those who really need to communicate their stories,” argued a climate activist on the 2022 session “How are You(th) Showing up for Climate Action?” Regarding the film and media industries, “Decolonizing the Film Industry Pipeline” speakers emphasized that classroom structures and dynamics replicate themselves in the industry. “If we lose them at the beginning, then that’s never going to happen,” filmmaker and professor Miguel Alvarez explained

regarding students having the confidence to pursue a career that could end with them as studio heads. Beyond the privilege of those studying film and media within university programs, this logic was also applied to youth programs and community engagement by speakers across the conference.

In one Q&A, panelists came out together against a question about how to make Black and Indigenous stories speak to everyone, instead arguing that the goal should be to think smaller and create for these communities, for creatives of color to serve their own communities first. One panelist mentioned how the community organizations they work with actively resist such a universalizing, whitening logic. Another simply suggested that the problem is “more about the searcher rather than the maker.” There needs to be intentionality in seeking out these stories in the first place, the panelists argued, rather than expecting content to fall into our laps.

While many continue to work within these existing systems as opportunities allow, others are focusing more on alternative avenues that may work alongside traditional channels of media production but may also work outside of them (see also Christian, 2018). I mentioned the example of ARRAY Crew, the free platform featured at SXSW Online 2021 that connects women, BIPOC, and other underrepresented below-the-line professionals with opportunities for work. During my time observing South by Southwest, there were numerous other calls for new infrastructure. Not just more representation within existing companies, but starting new companies as a proposed solution. “Gotta take advantage of what is available to us,” one panelist put it, encouraging crowdfunding as a viable option as well. Others noted grants and pools of money made available by organizations like IllumiNative and Sundance.

Impact – Support for Advocacy and Industry Participation

In the previous sections of this thematic analysis, I drew examples from my years attending South by Southwest to describe the discourses that are platformed, amplified, and catalyzed by the event and its attendees, as well as the ways these discourses reflect dominant neoliberal values that constrain solidarity, or in resistance to them, give voice to alternative collective projects. In what follows, I describe how SXSW participants experience the event's scale and cross-industry scope, including the benefits to be found in networking with "adjacently related" industries and dynamics as attendees move from confusing crowds to smaller, networked circles and community-specific spaces. As I will show with examples in this section, circles and spaces are most valuable when communities reach a "critical mass" at the event, at which point they are large enough to "carve out" meaningful spaces for themselves that run counter to the event's dominant ideologies, even if they remain decidedly elite. As a result, there are opportunities to influence powerful decision-makers. In lieu of such success, association with the brand remains valuable in and of itself as a form of social capital for those who participate at South by Southwest in a recognized capacity.

The Experience on the Ground

South by Southwest is overwhelming, as my interviewees reminded me time and again. The event is big, very big, and this often leads to strange interactions. One year while picking up my badge in the hangar-sized registration hall, I overheard a conversation at the reception window beside me. A registrant was explaining to the volunteer receptionist what her organization does, prompted when the volunteer misrecognized the organization's name: "Oh, like the dating app?" "No, not a dating app. A social impact nonprofit." Or when, in a hotel elevator on my way up to an official

music festival happy hour, a man in a suit, his face glowing, asked if I was at the conference for the transportation track. These are the kinds of collisions that SXSW prides itself on, and while they might lead to interesting conversations—in all the ambiguity that term entails—these interactions, my interviewees told me, typically do not lead to much in the way of direct value for their media careers or projects.

With the chaos, however, comes a massive scale that attracts greater participation among those within particular communities of practice and others that may be “adjacently related” to the media and entertainment industries like policymakers and nonprofit workers, which I was told leads to new, relevant connections that go beyond the reunions with familiar faces typical at other media festivals and conferences. One media advocate from a narrative change nonprofit described this benefit of scale to me in relation to the interactions around a 2023 conference panel, “Accessibility in Film as a Tool for Advocacy.” The panel was tied to an earlier mentioned short film award winner for that year, *Breaking Silence*, and covered representation and advocacy around experiences with incarceration among D/deaf people and people with disabilities:

It’s always XYZ executive from XY studio. It’s this filmmaker or director. And oftentimes conversations like this feel like they’re happening in a vacuum or an echo chamber. But to be able to go out and then meet all these different kinds of folks who are adjacently related and have these different interests for different reasons makes it feel more impactful, and that we can take away more from it, too.

South By’s social collisions can be beneficial, at least when participants maneuver themselves into the right places. At times, however, the scale of SXSW results in all-out traffic jams and trainwrecks. When I stepped out of that hotel elevator onto my floor, leaving that transportation enthusiast behind, I found myself in a thickly packed lobby, taking several minutes to realize the crowd was actually the line for the music happy hour I had decided to check out on a whim. A day in downtown Austin for SXSW might be

spent mostly in line, whether queuing up for a buzzy film premiere, a celebrity’s panel, a corporate-sponsored party, or even just a food truck in an attempt to eat, but it can also mean moving constantly from one small, rich gathering to the next, as was the case for many of the narrative change advocates, social impact producers, and related media makers I met at activities like the “Accessibility in Film” panel that featured *Breaking Silence*.



Figure 5.6: People wait in line for Doodle’s NFT marketing activation at SXSW 2022. Photo by the author.

Experiences with overwhelming crowds and convivial community spaces are not mutually exclusive, often flowing together as new friends made in line for a film or panel of shared interest lead to new introductions, smaller circles at larger parties, or community-specific spaces tucked away from the central draws that attract the largest crowds. It is an experience that can be exciting, but at times frustrating. As one filmmaker and advocate told me about their attempt to go with the flow, “You go out and see something at 11, and then you come out, and it’d be like 5. And it’s like, where did the whole day go?” When they described feeling overwhelmed at SXSW, many of my

interviewees stressed the importance of attending South By with a clear plan for who they would meet and what activities they would check out, something the event itself frequently reminds its participants to do in the weeks before the conference and festivals (SXSW, 2024b).

SXSW's event atmosphere is often referred to by staff and attendees alike as the "vibe." While this word is not unique to SXSW or Austin, its excessive use in this particular context is notable. In my interviews, a number of interrelated words returned again and again as I continued to ask interviewees about their experiences and what they thought of the event, the city, and their respective (or even interconnected) atmospheres. As should come as no surprise given the Austin imaginary I described in Chapter 4, "weird" loomed large among the terms shared, but other words related to a countercultural atmosphere like "whacky," "funky," "quirky," "experimental," and "independent" were often used, as were others more descriptive of a high energy like "electric" or "buzzy," with all of these often linked to "fun."

SXSW is place where, on a street like Red River, musical acts perform out of the backs of U-Hauls for crowds wandering between the nearly dozen or so official venues that line the street and pump bass out into the city air. Swerving between them are pedicabs—a driver in cheetah print and a cowboy hat here, another wearing a gorilla mask there, some cabs lit with neon—blasting music of their own as they cycle past the crowds and walls covered in ads for new TV shows coming to streaming services like Showtime or Amazon. It is an event where a screening of the 2022 narrative feature competition winner *I Love My Dad*, purportedly based on the director and lead actor's own life experience of being catphished by his father, leads to an awkwardly hilarious and memorable Q&A where the director is joined on stage by the father, for whom the screening was his first time seeing the embarrassing incident's exaggerated retelling in

the film. It is the kind of conference-festival megaevent where a climate justice advocate has the chance to get their hair cut by a *Queer Eye* cast member, or attending the world premiere of *Evil Dead Rise* means leaving with a bag of blood-red candy straw entrails and a cheese grater magnet as souvenirs.

Leveraging the Trade Rituals

Across my interviews with South by Southwest attendees, words like “platform,” “venue,” and “hub” were used to describe the event as a space to be used and acted upon, often in the context of defending South By when the programming itself or actions of other participants fell short of their expectations or were deemed less than ideal. As a hub, ultimately, it gathers communities of practice relevant for my interviewees’ work, bringing them back year after year. Of course, the communities differed depending on the interviewee. South By, I was told, is able to reach a “critical mass” of relevant stakeholders and community members, whether this means social impact practitioners, fellow storytellers committed to narrative change for social justice, policymakers, or media makers from underrepresented groups, communities, or identities to which my interviewees themselves belong and with whom they would like to build community. Again and again, in nearly every interview, my interviewees not only described how they found people at South by Southwest who were important for their work, but almost all of them immediately shared their experience networking when prompted at the start of the interviews to describe what the experience of attending South By was like in general, day-to-day terms. This is the main selling point of SXSW, one highlighted by spokespersons and festival communications at every opportunity. “Good things happen when you bring together highly creative people and mix them with great entertainment,

great food, and great weather in a great city,” Chief Programming Officer Hugh Forrest emphasized during 2022’s welcoming remarks.

Networking and connection are what attendees sign up for, help to sell, and perform of their own volition in a self-fulfilling social dynamic at SXSW. “Let it happen,” frequent South By attendee and 2023 Documentary Spotlight director Ondi Timoner advised women filmmakers gathered at 2023’s “Film Fatales Meet Up,” encouraging them to explore across industries and artforms, meet new people, and be inspired, even by the tech conference. “Get involved in all of that as well. Let the adventure happen.” The push to network was made particularly strongly by speakers on the 2023 panel “Future-Proofing Diversity in Gaming.” “I look forward to seeing some of your faces and saying, ‘Hey! I remember you from South By!’” one of them said. “Do not leave this conference or this space without meeting at least three people!” pressed another in her final remarks. I will return to this topic of setting event expectations and behavioral norms in greater detail in my next chapter.

In addition to direct interactions that come with attending meetups and panels, equally notable are the promises attendees make to help one another connect with people they “should definitely meet.” However, as captured by the openness of terms like “hub” and “platform,” networking is very unpredictable. Finding the right person and successfully building a new connection that can be productive for a career or project depends on the serendipity of chance encounters with that right person, or others already connected to them. For example, an activist media producer I interviewed described how South by Southwest introduced them to a frequent collaborator through a purely coincidental encounter at a Hollywood studio’s party house where a third individual, an intermediary, overheard my interviewee talking about the work that they do. This intermediary then invited my interviewee to attend their panel, which would feature a

speaker working on the same issue area. Even though my interviewee never spoke to that intermediary again, they attended the panel and met their collaborator who has become invaluable to their work and sense of professional community. “The communities that thrive within the space do more than the festival does,” they added.

The possibility of meeting a TV showrunner on a shuttle bus, an angel investor at a climate action meet up, or a studio executive at a filmmaker happy hour—all of which I witnessed—or connecting with any other person in a position of power relevant to a SXSW attendee’s work or career goals, leads to many paying a high cost of admission that can amount to thousands of dollars for a badge and thousands more for lodging and other expenses. Each year, I met numerous individuals gambling for serendipitous, career-defining encounters: self-identified “baby creators” at the “Content Creators Meet Up” who “shelled out” the money to come in hopes that the platform could launch one of them; a young actress and her mom who flew in to Austin from New York City to network, but hadn’t had much luck at that night’s filmmaker’s happy hour; even a software engineer who had recently quit their job and was at South By to explore whether there were any opportunities to develop software for a climate action organization, a job that would hold a greater sense of purpose for them in line with the values they hold.

What makes these and other goals of SXSW participants realizable is the informality and approachability of social interactions at the event, something apparent to me during my time on the ground and confirmed by my interviewees. South By is a “t-shirt and jeans” festival, as one social impact professional described it to me, a pithy shorthand for the kinds of interactions and level of (in)formality that made the others I interviewed smile and agree when they heard it. The approachability could be due to the tech influence, another mused.

Whatever the origins—though I argued in Chapter 4 that the city and its imaginary play a crucial role—approachability is a quality of networking at South By that I personally experienced when freely walking up to anyone and everyone who might be able to share insights valuable to my study. This was the case even when they would have reason to brush me off, as when I arrived extremely late to a climate justice session, already concluded, with no idea who the speakers were. After listening in for a few moments and then pitching my project, these speakers shared encouraging words and led me to a reception later in the week where I met many more climate advocates and activists. “Introduce yourself to someone! The culture at SXSW has always been a bit like the first day at a new school,” we are told by a featured speaker in a Conference Community Newsletter (SXSW, 2022m). On the whole, the analogy holds true. The only time I was treated coldly during my three years of observation was when I approached a group of fellow academics.

Of course, approachability does not mean access to the event in the first place. South by Southwest is an expensive event to attend. People do return year after year, even those within the advocate and activist communities I followed, but the decision to “shell out” in pursuit of value that is hard to measure is often made only after weighing perceived benefits against costs of attendance that continues to rise. In Chapter 2, I discussed how film festivals often constitute alternative public spheres, especially when they serve particular identities or communities that are marginalized by the dominant culture and its norms. In the case of South by Southwest, it might be more accurate to say that the event is an elite public sphere, or to think of it as a collection of networked professional communities that come together for a time at this industry node, rather than at the grand scale of publics.

The value of South By's trade rituals for careers and projects do sometimes make themselves visible to an observer. While being inducted into the SXSW Hall of Fame in 2022, Nonny de la Peña, founding director of Arizona State University's Narrative and Emerging Media center in Los Angeles, joked about "poaching" students she had met that week for projects on storytelling with emerging technologies. At 2022's "Game Changers: Black & Indigenous Voices in Gaming," the lead for Unity Technologies' "Unity for Humanity Program," Paisley Smith, was present to connect with game creators around the grants and support that the company had to offer. At 2023's "Business of Accessibility & DEI in Entertainment" panel, Head of US and Worldwide DEIA Content at Amazon Studios & Prime Video, Jerome Core, boosted Easterseals, a nonprofit dedicated to equity, inclusion, and access for people with disabilities. With their representatives sitting in the audience, Core told the audience to "remember Easterseals is a service provider" and to reach out to them with any questions they may have around making their productions more accessible. But apart from a few examples like these, ascertaining whether South By's attendees obtained the value they hoped to receive is a question that requires speaking to attendees themselves.

In my first several interviews for this case study I began to hear the term "ROI," return on investment, used as interviewees reflected on their time at South By and identified specific instances where they received the value they had come for, a value they often needed to quantify and justify for their profit-seeking companies and "KPI" (key performance indicators) oriented nonprofits that had paid for them to be there. It is a term I then introduced in the remainder of my interviews, and which proved useful to help participants think through how, ultimately, they had benefited. Examples they shared ranged widely depending on the industry or issue area of the interviewee. One disability advocate described to me the value they found in a productive conversation with a media

executive, where they proposed to the executive, who was working on a medical horror concept related to the topic of gaslighting, that the story could be powerfully explored through a “crip,” or disability, lens. In another instance, they were able to connect a disabled cinematographer they had met, who suffered from social anxiety, with others in the disabled filmmaker community, which in turn helped them to secure entry into an industry fellowship program. In describing these and other experiences, this interviewee summarized the value of South By for them in terms of opportunities to intervene in the “huge disconnect between creatives and the industry and change makers,” where they can act as a “liaison between the industry and creatives...creating a pipeline to answer the question of ‘Where are the disabled creatives? Why can’t we hire them?’” Another media advocate-activist, when prompted about “ROI,” mentioned how they were able to find their own interviewees for multiple podcasts episodes during their week at South By. Separately, a media executive similarly stated that they had already worked with two people they met at the panel they spoke on, that “We actually brought someone in to work on one of our sets.”

Many interviewees spoke in terms of business relationships forged or investments obtained. For instance, I spoke to a handful of people who had organized various meet ups and parties at South By in 2022 and 2023. One explained to me how hosting an event at South By demonstrated organizational capacity and led to multiple clients, meaning their participation translated into real, hard economic value for their organization. “All year you see those relationships mature,” they told me, “so your manager will also see their ROI.” Another shared how their gathering secured funding for several projects in a matter of hours as nonprofits and investors around their issue area were brought together. There is a lot of fun to be had at South By, I heard repeatedly, but the main goal is to get to know people well enough to decide if you would want to work with them in the future.



Figure 5.7: Filmmaker happy hour over Congress Avenue and East 7th Street at SXSW 2022. Photo by the author.

This is what makes SXSW valuable as both a media event and site for trade rituals. While a panel might attract a massive crowd, and recordings are usually uploaded afterward to SXSW’s online platform, more often than not there is an intimacy, and again, a welcoming approachability to the experiences and encounters South By affords, backed by association with a globally recognized brand that attracts a critical mass of participation.

Finding Community and Carving Out Space

In more specific terms, and often contrary to SXSW’s encouragement of cross-industry mixing, advice around networking shared by panelists and featured speakers is usually worded in terms of finding a community of peer collaborators—a “tribe.” “It’s so

important to create a peer group,” attendees gathered for the “Women Write Now” meet up were told, “so much comes through tribes of creators. Look around—those are the most powerful connections to be made.” During panels throughout the conference, the advice reappeared time and again. “Find folks that look like you, find your tribe and then make your own stuff,” one media executive remarked to close a panel. In the run up to SXSW 2024, South By organizers posed the question of whether large gatherings or small groups are ideal for networking at the event and shared the responses of 12 scheduled speakers in a Conference Community Newsletter. While several of these speakers highlighted how larger gatherings facilitate more “intimate” opportunities for connection, they gave unanimous support for small groups: “Smaller gatherings are best for meaningful conversations”; “Quality over quantity, every time!”; “Smaller is good for me – I’m shy AF” (SXSW, 2024c).

The importance of working together as a community of peers was expressed by media makers and social impact practitioners themselves. “This week I’ve built an amazing tribe. Thank you,” Carolina Costa shared when accepting the ZEISS Cinematography Award at the 2023 Film & TV Festival Awards Ceremony. Industry events like SXSW are one way to find people on the same level as you, explained a producer I met at a film premiere party. Indeed, I met dozens of people who worked on the festival’s selected films at various happy hours and parties. In fact, throughout my time at South by Southwest, I met communities working on accessibility and disability representation, even the D/deaf community itself, brought together by screenings and panels around the short film *Breaking Silence*. I found myself among “tribes” of Texas filmmakers, groups of climate advocates and activists I have already mentioned repeatedly, as well as other communities of narrative change and social impact media makers and industry professionals. Among them, I entered into various identity-based

communities that overlap with these in layers of intersecting social webs. I will return to this topic of finding a community of peers—or what I call “horizontal networking”—in the next chapter on the Austin Film Festival.

When it comes to this form of networking at SXSW for marginalized media makers and social justice advocates, what is most salient is how it appears in relation to the megaevent’s scale, with its broad programming scope, endless spectacle, and general affirmation of neoliberal consensus politics. There are pockets of alternative and counterhegemonic (if still largely elite) spaces being “carved out” at SXSW, as one social justice event curator described it to me, for communities of practice working on social justice issues, or else for identity-based communities pushing to improve their representation at the event and within the media industries at large. Some examples in 2023 include the “Empowering Community Action Through Inclusive Stories Meet Up,” which was sponsored by the social impact agency Picture Motion, as well as South Asian House and the especially popular Muslim House, which packed the Hideout Theater and had a crowd spilling out from its doors during its session “Combating Anti-Muslim Hate and Disinformation Through Storytelling.”

These spaces are not always, or even usually, flooded by attendees. At the bare minimum, one SXSW staff member told me, a panel whose speakers all come from an underrepresented group is inherently valuable, regardless of turnout, because it helps to bring a more diverse crowd to the conference on the whole. As I observed, however, even poorly attended conference panels were a valuable opportunity for the panelists to build their relationships with one another, in many cases never having met in person prior to the occasion. Even at the most sparsely attended sessions, there always seemed to also be at least a handful of meaningful interactions with the audience taking place. I saw people

working in the same industry or large, multinational company meet for the first time and discuss avenues for collaboration on impact within their existing corporate structures.

Within these spaces at South by Southwest where social justice was platformed, the look and feel of the experience was somewhere halfway between an academic conference, where everyone, just about, is a speaker, and a festival, where most everyone is a part of the audience. A media executive I interviewed stressed the value of these spaces, noting that given the tremendous amount of options for how to spend one's time, simply showing up for a given topic, issue, or community involves a great deal of "intentionality." These are spaces for "micro 10-15 minute conversations," a startup founder from a group underrepresented in their industry told me. For them, speaking on a panel is less about reaching an audience and more about building relationships, "to invite companies that we're working with, or companies that we want to work with, or media and brand agencies that support companies that want to get into [our industry]."

Entry into these networked communities is especially important when navigating a large-scale event like SXSW. Planning can only get you so far, and many of the people I met and interviewed would rely on word of mouth, especially from trusted members of their communities, to expand their peer networks and find relevant activities to participate in. For the uninitiated, flyers, social media, and the official schedule all circulate a firehose of information (See Figure 5.8). Word of mouth leads to the natural gathering of professional communities within the vast scale of SXSW as communities form and reconnect, joined by others who want to cross over or engage with communities other than their own. Through these chains of word-of-mouth recommendations, certain communities can be seen coalescing across the event and expanding within "carved out" spaces of their own at larger gatherings.

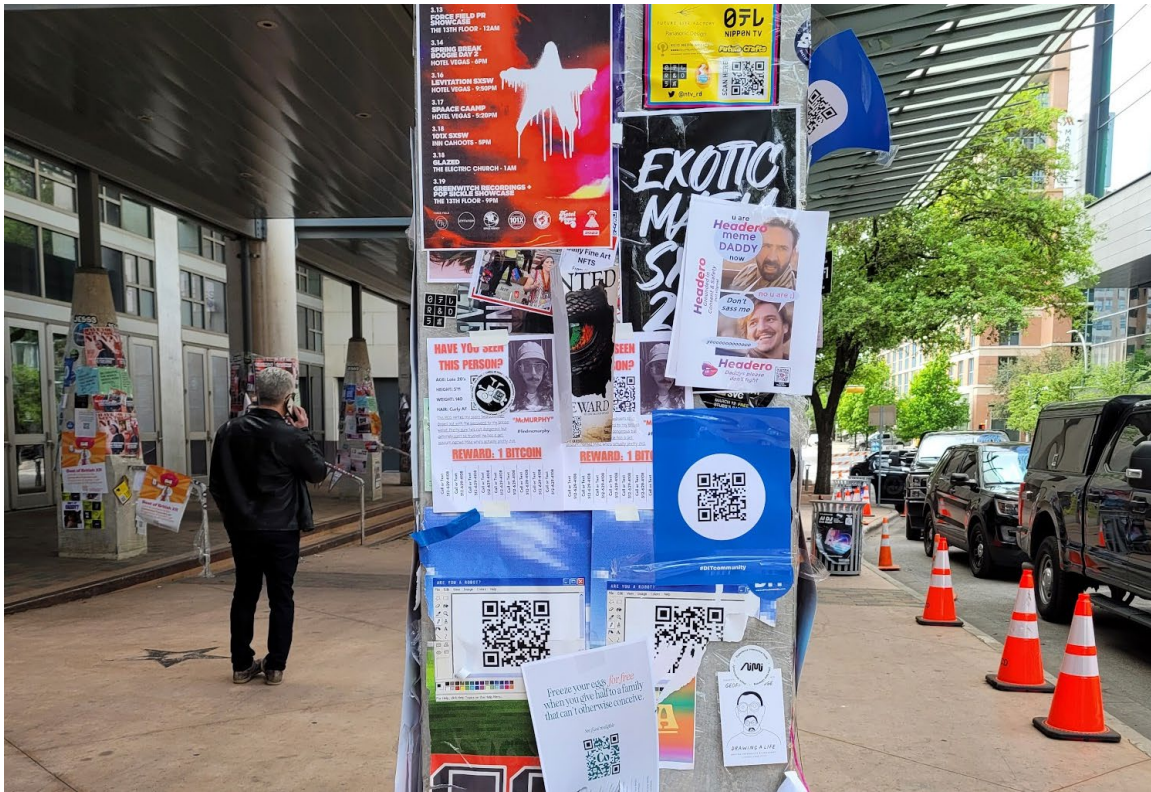


Figure 5.8: Pillars outside the Austin Convention Center covered in promotional flyers and QR codes. Photo by the author.

This word-of-mouth process is particularly crucial when it comes to unofficial parties that are not listed on the SXSW schedule, such as Picture Motion’s mixer in 2022 that brought social impact practitioners, media makers, and reproductive justice nonprofits together to build local and national community around the impending Dobbs decision and anti-abortion legislation in Texas and across the country. In effect, a shared issue area united these communities of practice and made for an impactful gathering. I only learned about it the following day, however, given that I was still working my way into these communities at the start of my fieldwork in 2022 and could not yet benefit from “Who’s at SXSW?” social media threads, or community group chats like the massive, max capacity ones used by attendees from Brazil that have over 1,000 members

in some cases. Nonetheless, the Picture Motion mixer was recommended to me repeatedly that year as I grew my network, and later mentioned by multiple interviewees as an example of the kind of impact South by Southwest is capable of having on one's professional development and network building, even when that impact comes from an unofficial activity.

The majority of interviews for this SXSW case study were completed in the summer of 2023, right as many of my interviewees were preparing speaking proposals for the coming year, or were beginning to vote on proposals that had been submitted to South By's PanelPicker platform. And yet, due to the costs, several were on the fence about whether or not they would actually attend. "I would not be able to justify going every single year," one person from a Latine media advocacy nonprofit told me, "it's too expensive and I think there would be diminishing returns." They described how the experience was valuable this time as a means of connecting in person with collaborators from other nonprofit organizations and the industry, given that they had started this particular job during the pandemic.

I heard this point multiple times in my interviews, that gathering informally in Austin with virtual collaborators, building "community" with them, was very beneficial. In some cases, these in-person meetings led to new projects with the same people, even though the only thing that had changed was the ability to have more sustained, and informal, contact and conversation on the ground at the "hub" of South By. For communities of practice within the media, tech, and other creative industries that SXSW attracts, interactions with professional peers are not as common as one might expect. "I'm always surprised, Brad, how many people don't know each other," Sue Obeidi, director of the Muslim Public Affairs Council (MPAC), who sponsored Muslim House, told me. A filmmaker based in Los Angeles shared a similar perspective, that while South

By “gives you the opportunity to meet people from all around the world in incredible ways,” ironically the people you end up spending your time with were never so far away: “sometimes it’s like your neighbor that you might never interact with—but you will interact with at South By cause you’re both here.” The event as a space and culture for interaction, for trade rituals, makes all the difference.

While this kind of community building might be insular, leading to criticisms of “echo chambers” and “preaching to the choir,” one social impact professional argued to me that, in a world that is growing more fragmented, the fracturing of power is essentially a good thing, that “people who have traditionally had to be only in mainstream spaces now are creating their own subspaces in these mainstream arenas.” Thinking about these meet ups, parties, and other gatherings at SXSW in terms of the consensus-building interactions of trade rituals, exchanges even in such “echo chambers” can be productive. “Folks are able to meet the people they need to meet and build on ideas that are preexisting from attending places like South By,” a media advocate explained to me. In addition to ideas, another interviewee stressed to me the importance of these spaces for promoting language they use to discuss their issue area, “getting that language into the Zeitgeist, getting folks to hear that out loud.” Obeidi took this thinking around sharing language and ideas and applied it to the role of the identity-based community spaces:

When you’re at a festival, you’re also attracting people outside your own community that have an affinity to the subject matter, so it attracts other underrepresented communities to come to your event because they’re dealing with the same plight. It gives them an opportunity to say, ‘Well, let’s see how the Muslims are doing it.’

A filmmaker I interviewed, who attended South By on behalf of a nonprofit organization and did not have a film in the festival, shared how their trip to the South Asia house was a highlight of the week, a place where they were able to make the

connections necessary to get a documentary film project funded and into production with the help of producers they met there. “It just took a couple of conversations to get to know these people, and you know, things blossomed from there post-festival,” they said. On how the networking within this identity-based community differed from the others they experienced, they described the connections and interactions as more organic, natural, and less “purpose-oriented.” I will return to this difference in the next chapter when discussing “friendworking” in relation to transactional networking, and how it is facilitated by common ground like shared identities. What is significant about this mode of networking at SXSW is that South By’s scale attracts not only media attention through association with its global brand, but also the participation of decision-makers and financiers to whom members of these communities can make appeals.

Brand Association and Influencing Decision-Makers

Obeidi measured the value of hosting a South By venue in terms of positioning and name recognition, that is, ensuring “the industry sees us as the go-to Muslim organization. The community sees us as that.” Representatives from other organizations I spoke with described how value could be measured in the number of opportunities they received to consult on media projects related to their issue area. In either case, speaking at South By, or having your media work selected by South By, was described to me by a few interviewees as coming together with a certain “cachet.” It’s “a recognized brand, like around the world,” an award-winning filmmaker told me when discussing how South By opened the door to screenings at other festivals for their film. In fact, speaking with my interviewees about the SXSW brand led some of them to regret not featuring their conference sessions and accolades more prominently on their websites. A startup founder

I met also confirmed the value of the brand association, telling me that, as they build a name for themselves, association with SXSW “is a stamp of validity.”

With validity comes influence, and the extent to which South By attendees perceived they could exert influence on powerful decision-makers in their industries was another way they measured the value of their participation and the importance of the event. “Let’s just say [events like South By] don’t exist. How hard would it be to get our messaging across? If they didn’t exist, you’d be cold calling studios,” Obeidi explained to me. I earlier mentioned that when I attempted to visit Muslim House myself, it was too packed for me to enter the theater venue where it was hosted. This, Obeidi suggested, is also a means of exerting industry influence. “Let’s say hypothetically you were an executive at Hulu,” she said, “and you came and couldn’t get in. And you were like, ‘Oh my gosh! What did we miss?’ You wouldn’t have that if you didn’t have the festival. It almost legitimizes our work when mainstream Hollywood sees the success.” For some of my interviewees, whose organizations work on advocacy across convergent industries, I was told that their targets were the “industry gatekeepers” brought together by SXSW’s global, cross-industry scale. This was important for their decision to come to Austin: the fact that for entertainment *and* digital media *and* the arts *and* academia, among other influential narrative-producing industries and sectors, “South by Southwest is a place where that audience, it exists, and all across the board.”

The award-winning media makers whom I spoke with, and in a few cases interviewed, emphasized how being recognized in an official capacity took interactions that had already been welcoming and elevated them to a higher level of interest and opportunity, to say nothing of securing further exhibition for their projects at other festivals. On the other side of the power equation, one media executive active in South By’s social justice spaces who I interviewed articulated the value in similar terms, that

they were able to connect with people, groups, and nonprofits in person, both those they had worked with before and those they had not, and that they have since kept in touch with them and intend to work with many of them when suitable projects come through their studio's production pipeline. Things were on hold, multiple interviewees pointed out, due to the WGA and SAG-AFTRA strikes that were ongoing when I conducted my interviews.

At South by Southwest, you often start building rapport before you even really know who you are talking to. One year I met an advertising executive, and before I had even mentioned my project, he said what had struck him the most was the social justice programming, which starkly contrasted with the business-oriented nature of the advertising conference track where he spent most of his time. As another example of the influence that is possible, he said what he heard from the panelists gave him the know-how to pitch ideas that could address in concrete ways the abstract, top-down directives given by his company's leaders to improve equity and inclusion. Speaking on the importance of the approachable atmosphere at South By, another executive who sat for a full interview explained to me that they want to not only learn, but be partners with advocates and media makers in narrative change. They emphasized how the event atmosphere and culture at SXSW are conducive to that:

When you meet in these really informal situations, you're able to break down [the] barrier really quickly. And it's like, no, like, I'm actually here. I want to know what you want to hear and what you want to see, because that allows me to amplify that while we're in the room, and trust me, I'm going to say I got it from you... I met this person. They said X, Y, and Z, here's their website. Here's this—and so you create that level of trust that I don't think you create anywhere else when you're meeting in more formal settings.

When premieres, activations, and other attention-grabbing stunts fail to draw media attention, or the opportunities to network fail to produce a career-defining

connection, South by Southwest is still about association with a brand and amplifying that brand in mutually beneficial relationships. For its part, South by Southwest can say that they care about social justice, climate action, or any of the other issues brought to its hub by the communities of practice it attracts. At the same time, for those who participate, it offers legitimacy for their organizations and credentials for their representatives. “There’s a level of legitimacy that, you know, a big festival like [South By] adds to an organization,” one media executive said to me when discussing vetting processes. At South By, material necessity brings together startups, media companies, nonprofits, emerging filmmakers, and more in pursuit of the value that comes with the brand, even if it is only to make them “hip” within their industries. Regardless of how successful their experience may be in the end, the brand association remains.

Impact – Barriers to Progress

Much of what my interviewees identified as barriers to advancing social justice in media industry production related to decisions made within corporate spaces beyond festivals. Companies will “keep you on the hook,” a media advocate told me, promising investment and making statements like, “All of our stuff is really about DEIA. It’s about accessibility. It’s about changing the production space. It’s about all of these sorts of things,” without acting on their words. There is apparent recognition, but no action in redistributing opportunities. One of the award-winning filmmakers I interviewed had also become disenchanted with the media and entertainment industries, frustrated that being recognized by South by Southwest did not, at least at the time of our interview, translate into a distribution deal due to their films’ content being deemed radical. Beyond disillusionment with the media industries at large, however, the attendees I interacted with also identified barriers within South by Southwest as an industry platform itself.

These barriers mainly pertained to its cross-industry scale that can make meaningful connection difficult, its role in reinforcing normative industry values and approaches to social justice, which places limits on solidarity, and finally, the interrelated problems of the accessibility and cost of the event.

Scale as Problem for Connection

I have explained at length how South by Southwest pushes for creatives and professionals from different industries to interact with one another, that this vision for the experience, they feel, is the key to meeting the challenges of the present and to forging a better future. But such cross-industry breakthroughs were not typically experienced among the media makers, narrative change advocates, and social impact practitioners I observed and interviewed. “You can tell by the way people are dressed which section of South By they're going to,” an activist filmmaker explained to me, “It's very clear: these are the tech Bros, these are the filmmakers, these are the music folks. There is a clear delineation, and you can see it when you go in the hotel elevator, you can see it, you know, walking through the conference.” This is not a problem, of course, given the value found in, instead, staying within one’s professional community as described in the previous sections of this chapter. As noted, it is SXSW’s scale and global brand recognition that can attract a critical mass of a given professional community to make the trade rituals it hosts valuable. This limitation is true at least for the media industry professionals it gathers, though cross-industry collaborations within SXSW Interactive between the tech industry and other industries focused on entrepreneurship and startups, such as those related to climate or transportation, may stand to benefit from the cross-pollination approach to programming. This, however, is beyond the scope of the current research.

While South By attendees are free to explore a range of experiences—films, conference panels, live shows, comedy sets, marketing activations sponsored by participating brands—they seem to do this most often with other attendees from their own industries or communities of practice. This is due, at least in part, to the perceived lack of value in spending too much time with people who cannot offer any sort of creative collaboration or business opportunity. For instance, a filmmaker I interviewed described his interesting, but nevertheless inconsequential, encounters with video game developers:

I met a ton of people in the video game industry. And I love video games. I'm a big fan of *The Last of Us*—make sure that goes into the research. But no. We have great conversations. But there was a certain point where it's like, I'm not gonna work in video games, you're not gonna work in film, nice to meet you. You know? And it didn't end as abruptly as that, but after a certain point it's like, hey, nice to meet you, exchange social media information, and that's pretty much it.

When it comes to impactful networking, South by Southwest's scale can work against its operation as a hub. I earlier noted how my interviewees described South By's scale as overwhelming, that it is chaos and crowds, or as another filmmaker put it, "there are years where you can come to South By and it is so big that you can also get swallowed up in it all." This especially becomes a problem for powerful decision-makers at the event, who have to pick and choose where to go with their limited time while being flooded with invitations. SXSW has a schedule, with many meet ups, houses, activations, and other networking opportunities listed among its several thousand activities, but there are also the many unofficial parties and gatherings that advertise and solicit attendance through social media. This can make finding impactful connections difficult, an executive told me. "I got a lot of LinkedIn things once it was announced I was there," they explained, "and it was hard to sift through, like, who should I actually talk to cause the

time is really precious... Canadian Embassy is like you should come, and I'm like, why am I going to the Canadian Embassy?"

At times, South By's scale also works against smaller communities when they do not reach the critical mass necessary to be as impactful as they otherwise might have been. One person from an underrepresented group at SXSW Interactive expressed frustration due to how South By had attracted him and a "crew" of 15 to 20 others who share his industry and identity, but without necessarily curating an experience that could enable their success and grow that community's participation at the event. He framed the issue in terms of identity: "South By is a great event if you're in the circles, right? If you're in the tables of people that are investing and spending dollars, and for a lot of reasons, that a lot of people are aware of, generally speaking, that's just not multicultural audiences."

The "hub" metaphor is apt for describing South By's hands-off approach to running the event, a necessity when there are thousands of activities scheduled and organized in collaboration with hundreds of organizational and individual partners who take responsibility for their success. I attended several meet ups during my two years on the ground post-pandemic. When I had the chance to ask one of these meetup organizers about the process, they explained to me that "When they gave us the meetup, it was great, but I don't think they invested a ton into the infrastructure of us as organizational partners. They were just like, here's a room, do what you do, and you have an hour type of thing."

While this approach produced many great experiences for the people I met each year, as well as those I later interviewed, I also learned how these meetups and other spaces for connection are precarious and often transient. For example, the Asian Pacific Filmmakers Experience, a house that was involved with a lot of the promotion and events

around the premiere of *Everything Everywhere All At Once* in 2022 and provided panels and networking opportunities for the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, did not pull together the funding necessary to return in 2023. One media advocate I interviewed was disappointed by this, and by South By specifically, explaining that “to come off of the huge press and promotion that *Everything Everywhere* got, and for South By to be able to say, like, ‘Hey, we hosted this premiere,’ and then for that very same cultural house to not get funding the year after is unfortunate.”

Corporate Values and Conditional Solidarity

Social justice in industry contexts is typically conditional on profit, on the wealthy donors who structure philanthropy, and on values within neoliberal consensus politics, namely, the notion that solidarity must be earned. Examples of the profit motive as a force bounding solidarity are numerous at SXSW. There is, for example, SXSW 2022 Opening Speaker Priya Parker’s keynote “On Gathering,” focused on the importance of meaningful connection, conflict, and transformation when coming together as communities and organizations. “The last two years have been a moment of reckoning—societally and in every institution I know,” she explained, describing heightened political tensions around issues like systemic racism. Throughout her talk, and in line with SXSW’s own efforts, she foregrounded solidarity with Ukraine, women losing their right to abortion, and trans people. As a conflict resolution expert and corporate consultant, however, she also expressed an anti-union stance. She advised corporate leaders in the room to accept a degree of conflict in their workplace gatherings, or “healthy heat,” as they engage in “organizational design change” to preserve hierarchy while addressing burgeoning concerns around distributions of power in organizations. She warned the audience that dysfunctional HR departments are “the vehicle toward

unionization.” Other examples of the profit motive include the 2022 panel “Blockchain & NFTs: Environmental & Social Impact,” where BIPOC and Global South communities were largely discussed in terms of how profit could be extracted from them in the process of allegedly producing social impact. Or, when I was mingling with the climate action crowd and the opportunists flocking around them, I was told by a start-up founder that they *are* trying to get rich off their idea, that you should be able to get rich and do something good at the same time.

This is not to say that corporations can never do good, especially amidst the rise of ESG and corporate social responsibility frameworks. Within existing private sector systems that include collaborations with the public sector and a nonprofit “third” sector, change is simply imagined in more limited terms of raising issue awareness, making ethical business decisions, and the voting with one’s wallet of consumer choice. Given who gathers at SXSW, this means creative people raising this awareness in their storytelling, altering patterns of consumption within their lifestyles, and businesses voicing how they take a stand. An example that immediately comes to mind is SXSW 2022 Innovation Award winner in the Social & Culture Impact Category, Degree Inclusive, “the world’s first inclusive deodorant built with people with visual impairment and upper extremity impairment” (SOUR, 2022). Companies eliminating their exposure to the prison industrial complex when pressured by shareholder activists, discussed during the 2022 panel “The Investor Role in Community Oriented Solutions,” is another. But do these gestures outweigh other harms these corporations may cause or exacerbate through their business practices? How many engage in such social impact projects in the first place, and is it possible to distinguish PR from legitimate social impact? There is an industry emerging around assessing these and other dimensions, and that industry was

also present at SXSW with sessions like 2022's "Digital Infrastructure for Collective Impact."

The form philanthropy has taken in global society, dependent on the approval of wealthy donors and their foundations (see INCITE!, 2007/2017), is another force that limits solidarity at SXSW. We see this represented at SXSW 2021 with the participation of big tech billionaire philanthropic organizations, such as the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and Chan Zuckerberg Initiative. Within such a structure, the form and direction of change is dictated through undemocratic processes and dependent upon the health of the business environment. Moreover, it requires foregoing antagonism with this very business environment and the demonstration of impact in business terms. "Take those KPIs [key performance indicators]," one panelist stressed in response to a question on how to take credit for often immeasurable impact during Q&A for the 2022 panel "How Hollywood & Non-Profits Approach Brand Purpose." In other words, focus on impact that is quantifiable and legible to funders. "Donors want to know, 'Did the needle move?'" another added. Whether we examine the profit motive driving corporate activities, or similar logics that shape philanthropy and nonprofit action, or even the programming of a media industry event itself, we must consider that "whoever is writing the check is the one making the decisions," as a speaker on a separate panel critical of these processes put it.

Solidarity is also conditional upon the values held by organizations. We see this in a statement by Mobile Loaves & Fishes, a 2022 SXSW Community Service Awards Honoree, proclaiming that "housing will never solve homelessness, but community will," in spite of extensive evidence on the success of housing first approaches (Baxter et al., 2019; Woodhall-Melnik & Dunn, 2016). Nonetheless, within existing systems for advancing social justice, one interviewee reminded me that philanthropy is a central part

of the process, one of many elements in aligning stakeholders, practitioners, and financial resources.

Where advocacy in the nonprofit sector starts to merge and get confused with the private sector in areas like corporate DEI efforts, there is what one social impact practitioner described to me as “tension” between social impact work that aligns with social justice movements and marginalized communities, and DEI efforts that keep the transformations they push for at the level of deference politics and tokenization to preserve the economic order:

There's a way in which the corporate DEI has incentivized the classism, even in Black spaces. ... Those are the folks who, to an extent, welcome tokenism. ... They believe in, like what we call the Black talented tenth and so they don't usually come into my space or through our spaces. ... And those folks have even tried to appropriate impact culture in ways that I think is inappropriate at times. And so, there's definitely tension.

Solidarity conditional on accomplishment, as this reference to W.E.B. Du Bois' (1903) “talented tenth” alludes, could be found throughout SXSW. “You must be willing to engage in a personal revolution before we embark on a collective revolution,” reads the slogan of featured speaker Eddy Zheng, a formerly incarcerated individual and an advocate for Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander (AANHPI) communities impacted by immigration policy and racialized incarceration in the US (SXSW, n.d.-d).

Featured speakers whose talks concerned social justice and related issues tended, necessarily, to structure their advocacy around their career paths and accomplishments in order to make a case for themselves and their issues. They channeled advocacy into the format of personal brand performances while repeating trite calls to action like “it is about more than just me” or “it takes all of us.” This neoliberal mode of action is an individualistic approach to activism that seeks notoriety, if not celebrity, as a marker to

show oneself deserving of the resources sought for a cause, even when it is unclear where this then connects to a collective political project on the ground. It is a phenomenon perhaps reflective of the limited resources for which the activists, advocates, media makers, and many other precarious, creative professionals compete against one another to acquire. This pressure was pointed out to me as a barrier to progress by one interviewee, who noted how even though it was great to be meeting so many creative activists and advocates who were working on the same representational and community advocacy issue areas as them, and that these were people they could learn from, it still felt a bit strange, since this networking would ultimately lead to a network of potential competitors for funding.

Perhaps most striking, appearing time and again at SXSW, is the notion that philanthropy and giving itself should be directed to those deemed to deserve it, that the recognition and redistribution that come with acting in solidarity are conditional on first being earned. There is, for instance, the anecdote told by National Science Foundation Director Dr. Sethuraman Panchanathan during his featured session “Reinvigorating Science and Technology for the Future of U.S. Innovation,” where he described the story of a visually impaired, “very bright” student who had trouble seeing during lectures. Dr. Panchanathan told the student, a double major in computer science and math, that “the best person that can help is yourself” and gave him the opportunity to join his lab. Supported by the lab, the student developed new technologies to make lectures accessible for visually impaired students and won global competitions in the process. Dr. Panchanathan uses the story, and other examples of student accomplishment, to make the case for inclusion: “If we don't have this inclusive, intentional way of unleashing the exploratory mindsets that all these children have all across the nation at speed and scale, how are we going to guarantee that we are going to have vibrant progress into the

future?" And yet, the conditions of individual drive and merit placed on inclusion hinders its realization in the first place.

A side effect of conditional solidarity becomes implicitly viewing some communities as more deserving than others. There is the example of a 2022 encounter between former US representative Gabby Giffords and a Black audience member during Q&A for the panel "A Real Public Health Epidemic? Gun Violence," where the audience member rebuked her and others on stage for ignoring the problem of gun violence in BIPOC communities for years, and now that they care, for approaching the issue in a colorblind manner. The panel accompanied SXSW Film & TV Festival screenings of *Gabby Giffords Won't Back Down*, a documentary recounting Giffords' journey as a gun control advocate following her own experience as a victim of gun violence.

Accessibility and Cost

One barrier to realizing social justice at and through South by Southwest came up in every single one of my interviews, and that barrier is accessibility, together with the related issue of cost. This is a point where first impressions can do a great deal of harm. From my subjective vantage point when conducting fieldwork, the accessibility at South By seemed fairly adequate. I saw frequent shuttle buses on the streets and ASL interpreters at many of the panels I attended. As my interviewees told me later, the festival will give free wrist bands when a disabled participant requires a companion person, allowing that person to join them wherever they go, but only where they go. Most other big festivals, I heard, require that person to also purchase a badge or pass. A DEI advocate and Deaf person I interviewed commended South By's team and the ease with which they were able to communicate with them and schedule interpreters for the sessions they wanted to attend. Many of the drawbacks of attending in person were

related to things South By cannot control, like the difficulty for a Deaf person to network with people after a panel when the scheduled interpreter has already left for their next assignment, or the need for this person I interviewed to hurry to the next activity where they had booked accommodations, meaning few opportunities for impactful chance encounters.

But there are things South by Southwest can control, and I started to hear about the shortcomings: yes, there are shuttle buses, but the fact that these shuttles are not always accessible is not publicized and there is a separate bus you have to summon via text, or else “you have to happen upon it with another disabled person in the ADA line.” South By prepares captions for its films, but “they’re not very accessible. They’re horrible,” the same Deaf interviewee told me, because they come on portable devices that “sit in your cup holder.” I also heard, from several interviewees, that there were times when staff at venues and even some SXSW staff themselves were not very courteous. Specifically, I heard about an incident where Alamo Draft House, one of the main screening locations for the Film & TV Festival, had no accessible bathroom and people with disabilities were brushed off by SXSW and Alamo staff alike. This interviewee explained that people with disabilities understand that the world is not accessible to them by default, but that “we collectively want people to just care and have that responsibility, and feel that responsibility to acknowledge, and say, ‘Hey, when this bathroom is broken, that is actually very inaccessible.’”

I have focused here on participants with disabilities because their experiences stress the point that pursuing social justice cannot always be a profitable exercise. South by Southwest is notoriously expensive. While many of the people I interviewed received free badges for speaking at the conference or screening their work, which is one way the glut of programming subsidizes itself, every single person I interviewed had their

attendance covered by their employer, or else a nonprofit had sponsored them. “I’m not gonna take out a loan to go to a film festival,” one person told me, describing the hiked up costs when this sort of event is not held in a metropolis like New York or LA: “you’re out \$5,000 easily if you’re from out of town.” They pointed out how a person receiving disability payments cannot even legally possess more than \$2,000 in their bank account. It is a big decision also for the small nonprofits who sponsored many of the advocates and filmmakers I interviewed. As an organization, one of them explained, “you really have to make the case to justify that expense.”

On the other hand, cost can also be a matter of perspective—at least in terms of the degree of inaccessibility or inequity. One of the media executives I interviewed appreciated how SXSW did not seem to have a huge barrier to entry, at least compared to other festivals like Sundance or Venice. They attributed South By’s “unpretentious” atmosphere to this and, even though it was still expensive, noted the people they met on the ground were the people who “were doing the work for the betterment of the industry, versus, ‘I’m doing the work to become the next star of the industry.’” Another interviewee said something similar, that South by Southwest may be one of the most diverse and inclusive events in North America, but for a certain class, and definitely not for the world. On that point, I heard that the Austin location matters in terms of who the event is able to serve as far as local creatives and entrepreneurs with fewer resources.

Nonetheless, the conference remained inaccessible for many, and this exacerbated inequities. This was a sore topic for one of the conference speakers I interviewed, who explained they were really upset that not one, but two speakers, women of color, who were supposed to be on their panels were not able to attend due to the costs of attending from out of town. Free badges for the speaking engagement were not enough. In at least

one of these instances, a white woman speaker filled the open panel seat and took the opportunity to draw attention to the issue at the start of the session.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have shown how the size and scope of South by Southwest make it a useful platform for social justice issues in media production. The event's emphasis on innovation, inspiration, and impact, combined with its massive scale, allows for a wide range of programming that can accommodate transformative discourses and resistant media. While SXSW primarily attracts filmmakers, musicians, technologists, and other creative professionals, it also draws social justice organizations and advocates due to its focus on the future and how industries are representing, adapting to, or even driving, societal changes.

South By's programming reflects the dominant positions of neoliberal consensus politics, which can catalyze some social justice discourses and action, especially in relation to the issue of diversity, equity, and inclusion within industries and organizations. However, this places boundaries and conditions on solidarity, which must be earned and align with business imperatives. Despite this, SXSW still provides valuable opportunities for participants to leverage the platform to challenge the status quo, and to connect with others who seek to do the same. As they interact with other participating organizations and individuals, their contributions to event discourses unsettle dominant approaches to social justice action that do not incorporate redistributive action alongside recognition. This reveals shortcomings and contradictions that ultimately prove productive for all who must navigate industry pressures and balance corporate imperatives with ethical decision-making.

As an event for the media industries, social justice pertains to media representation and inclusion within the politics of production. On its stages, this took the form of calls for more authentic casting, accessible sets, and greater diversity in decision-making roles. SXSW also functions as a site of trade rituals, facilitating connections between media makers, social justice advocates, and industry professionals. The event's informal atmosphere and approachability foster organic interactions, producing connections that lead to new projects, collaborations, and funding opportunities. The event's ability to gather a critical mass of industry stakeholders and members within communities of practice allows for not only the exchange of ideas and building of relationships, but also influence on decision-makers.

Barriers to progress do exist, including the double-edged sword of South by Southwest's overwhelming scale, the ways in which dominant neoliberal discourses reinforce industry norms, and issues of accessibility and cost. Despite these challenges, SXSW remains an important industry node, reflecting and catalyzing changes within the media industries. It is a site worthy of the attention and participation of activists, advocates, and all who desire dignified production processes, just on-screen representations, and improved mechanisms for social justice communication. More effort on the part of South by Southwest to make the event accessible to its featured speakers and creatives would further improve its ability to act as a hub where "diverse topics and people come together."

Chapter 6: Austin Film Festival and the Benefits of Community

INTRODUCTION

In her opening remarks for the virtual Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference on October 22, 2020, television writer and producer Wendy Calhoun spelled out the challenges facing media workers, especially industry writers like herself.²⁵ “I had no idea that we were going to be heading into a pandemic,” she said, “that we were going to have a massive Black liberation movement, a law enforcement reckoning, economic upheaval, wildfires and hurricanes and environmental catastrophe, skyrocketing gun sales, and a social life shutdown.”²⁶ She encouraged audience members to choose an “intention word” to guide them through the conference, explaining it should be “bigger than your career goals or your latest script,” one which “encompasses your heart’s intention.” Modeling this practice, she chose “mindful” as her word. She then reflected on a recent trip to a plantation, acknowledging her ancestors would have been murdered for living as Black woman writers. When merely achieving literacy under slavery meant risking their lives, their intellectual expression threatened the racial narratives upholding white supremacy. And yet, Calhoun noted, “even today, free speech is under assault in this so-called land of freedom.” Mindful of those who still lack access and her own precarious industry position, she asserted she would “write and sell stories that matter.” She described this as an “obligation to use my voice to create and also to explore,” urging the audience to join her and “go beyond our comfort zones in the comfort of our own homes.”

²⁵ Portions of this chapter first appeared in Limov, B. (2023). Platforming inclusion at U.S. media industry events: Confronting Hollywood’s lack of representational diversity. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 40(4), 227–241. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2023.2245440>.

²⁶ 2020 Panelists are quoted and paraphrased from festival transcripts. Information from panelists in 2021 and 2022 is quoted and paraphrased from field notes taken live during the festival.

Calhoun's remarks exemplify how a politics of presence at an industry event can elevate social justice within the politics of production. Crucially, she addressed a specific community of practice to which she and the audience perceived themselves to belong—writers—strategically giving voice to inclusion, foregrounding self-reflection, and encouraging confrontation as intentional practices for this community as they participated in the festival. The Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference (hereafter AFF), unlike SXSW, does not boast a media valuation in the hundreds of millions. Apart from occasional coverage by the trade press around big film premieres or awards honoring famous Hollywood writers, AFF's media footprint exists mainly in local newspapers, its own promotions and press releases, and most importantly, the networks of writers across Screenwriter Twitter, Discord, and other social media and messaging platforms.

AFF is a “well-kept secret,” one established Hollywood writer suggested to me, given that successful, famous writers do not command the kind of celebrity that attracts widespread attention within popular culture. It thus avoids mainstream scrutiny. The festival is more a place to hang out rather than premiere movies, as a media executive explained in a separate interview when describing how AFF relates to larger, more prestigious, and film-centric festivals like Sundance. Despite its shortcomings as a media event in the sense that I have already discussed SXSW, discourse production at AFF is much more targeted. It excels as a site of trade rituals, “inspiring and championing the work of writers” as its nonprofit mission statement proclaims (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-a). Its smaller (though by no means small) scale translates into a greater ability to focus on a particular community of practice, and that in turn translates into opportunities for building social capital and shaping industry discourses affecting the politics of production surrounding their media creation.

Within the broader question of social justice in creative production, this chapter considers the extent to which media industry events advance equity and inclusion offscreen and representational diversity onscreen, particularly at “critical junctures” (Della Porta, 2021) in the sociopolitical environment as enumerated by Calhoun in her remarks. My discussion of social justice advocacy in the previous chapter focused on relationships between media makers, nonprofit advocates, and media executives, who were all drawn together due to South By’s scale. The focus at AFF as an industry node is narrower, driven by the concerns of the community of writers it attracts. Social justice as it can be seen at the event is not about nonprofit representatives seeking to connect media makers with media executives, but rather involves writers thinking about how social justice relates to their craft.

In what follows, I examine how AFF’s organizers and participating writers use the festival as a platform for discussing representational issues and working to improve equity and inclusion in industry production through the connections and commitments they form. While film festivals have been discussed as sites for activism (see Iordanova & Torchin, 2012; Tascón & Wils, 2017), the industry focus of larger media festivals in the United States makes them productive for imagining solutions to Molina-Guzmán’s (2016) “Hollywood Paradox.” Even as inclusion on screen improves numerically, historically underrepresented identities remain peripheral in decision-making spaces like writers’ rooms, where the “quality of representation” is determined (Erigha, 2015). Industry events are sites where challenging exclusion and the superficiality of on-screen representation is possible. Bringing together thousands of aspiring screenwriters with hundreds more who have already established their careers, AFF’s spaces—which the festival curates, but has limited control over—afford participants opportunities to shape discourses within their industries. At the same time, festival processes enable them to

forge connections that can change the look of industry labor and diversify the range of stories told.

While AFF is important for a particular community of practice, it has limited resources as a nonprofit festival that is large, yet nonetheless a step down from the size of Sundance and SXSW. There is a dependence upon the involvement of its participants to make it meaningful as infrastructure for building relationships and producing discourse on craft, as well as a reliance on sponsors and partners to fund its activities year after year. This includes efforts to avoid upsetting its benefactors, much like how South by Southwest accommodates the neoliberal consensus politics of its corporate participants and world leader keynotes. Of Calhoun's many charged words shared in her opening remarks, for example, AFF carefully selected a quote to post to Twitter that could reinforce its storytelling mission while steering clear of contentious messaging: "Prizes come and go. The act of writing and completing a script is the reward." Nonetheless, attendees were receptive to Calhoun's message, praising her with posts like "We are intention setting at #aff27 with @wendycalhoun YES! Magick is everywhere." Some responded with their own intention words, such as "Opening day of the Austin Film Festival. Thank you to Wendy Calhoun (Prodigal Son/Empire/Justified) for leading us in setting a one word intention. #clarity #austinfilmfestival #aff2020 #toptwopercent #screenwriter."

This last attendee's pursuit of clarity, integral to recognizing what panelists repeatedly referred to as "truth," is crucial to Calhoun's call to write "stories that matter." But this raises key questions. Which stories matter, and where do their truths originate? Echoing Warner's (2015) call for "color consciousness," Calhoun has stated "I'm a television writer and producer and I refuse to tell colorblind stories" (Future of StoryTelling, 2017). As an alternative, color consciousness "acknowledges the culture

carried by those with similar sociohistorical contexts and skin colors and further seeks to understand how this racial-cultural experience informs the unique personality of a given individual” (Warner, 2015, p. 25). With her anecdote about slave cabins on a South Carolina plantation and musings on ancestry, Calhoun suggested truths are revealed not only through exposure to history, but also by approaching history as something lived. This commitment to addressing sociohistorical contexts and one’s own positionality is not unlike the advice shared on SXSW’s stages, though here the application is narrower and its professional audience is clearer.

This perspective on truth, and what constitutes “good” writing, is not universally shared, or to be more generous, not universally understood among the community of writers that AFF gathers. Nor is it so clearly communicated as I have presented it here. White supremacy and heteropatriarchy within the dominant culture, which are reflected in the perspectives of many writers within AFF’s heterogenous community of practice, produce tensions and conflicts. But the focus at AFF on representational practices means participants can contest systems of oppression as they relate to processes of recognition through media representations. In other words, by gathering at the critical juncture of a post-2020 racial reckoning, AFF’s attendees work through contradictions around truth and quality between normative understandings of these terms and what is brought by organic approaches to diverse representation (see Christian & White, 2020). Diversity in production itself concerns a politics of redistribution,²⁷ intertwined with this need for symbolic recognition of difference (Fraser, 1997; Young, 1990). As I will discuss, AFF’s commitment to diverse panelists is a major driver of contestation against dominant ideologies reflected at the event.

²⁷ Ongoing discrepancies by race and gender in both the number of TV show creators and the budgets they are allocated is a clear example of this, as indicated in UCLA’s Hollywood Diversity Reports (Ramón et al., 2022, 2023).

While SXSW may give the veneer of participation and community power, AFF and its script competition are highly regarded as an entry point into the professional community of writers, one that is dependent upon tremendous amounts of outsourced and volunteered labor from writers to assess the upwards of 10,000 entries submitted annually. Politics play out within this community as they volunteer to read scripts, serve as finalist judges, and speak on panels at the conference itself. This leads to a more controlling role for community members over discourse at the event, and in turn, more power in assigning value to some representational practices over others. Despite festival organizers' efforts to depoliticize, a speaker like Calhoun might use their relative freedom to speak out about current events and industry politics.

In the case of the script competition itself, discourse on Screenwriter Twitter in recent years has blown up around feedback returned to entrants that criticized their work for being either too concerned, or not concerned enough, with identity and difference. In the case of AFF's annual script pitching competition, 2021 even saw a contestant whose pitch included racist tropes advance all the way to the finals before the contestant was shut down by interjections from the audience, the issue having been overlooked by the volunteer judges in earlier rounds. If SXSW is a big-tent, pop culture super event where social justice can sneak in and carve out space within its platform, AFF is instead a space where a particular community of practice works through various challenges facing their craft. These challenges include how to address social justice as storytellers in the current sociopolitical milieu, which is no easy task given the intractability of both implicitly and overtly white supremacist, heteropatriarchal perspectives within the highly competitive and profit-driven environments of their industries.

In the following sections, I start by describing how AFF came to be known as the "Writers Festival" and identify equity and inclusion as part of its nonprofit mission that

culminated in the launch of the “Uplifting Diverse Storytellers Initiative” in 2021. Repeating the process taken in the previous chapter, I next turn to a thematic analysis of the interviews, observations, and other data I collected as part of an ethnographic record of the event over the 2020-2023 study period (see Chapter 3: Methods in Detail). I focus here, once again, on patterns related to the politics of presence. I move from the festival’s curatorial efforts to discourses produced by participants themselves, assessing how they articulate representational ideals like truth and authenticity in storytelling, as well as how they inspire solidarity with fellow writers from marginalized groups seeking better representation and the means to represent themselves. I then turn to AFF’s impact on the politics of production as an industry entry point and site for labor reproduction with firmly established trade rituals. As writers network, or “friendwork,” interrelationships between identity-specific social circles and inclusive, festival-wide networks emerge that benefit not only writers from underrepresented groups, but all writers in attendance. From there, I discuss Austin Film Festival’s limitations as a platform for advancing social justice among industry writers as a community of practice: its constraints as a nonprofit and dependency on volunteered labor and social resources, the difficulty of improving representation within a highly competitive field in which very few actually succeed, business logics that perpetuate inequities due to historic lack of diversity, and the segregation and disempowerment inadvertently caused by attempts at improving diversity, equity, and inclusion within the media industries. Finally, I focus on how AFF is a site for consensus formation as white supremacy and heteropatriarchy are reflected and contested by the heterogenous gathering of writers the festival attracts.

THE WRITERS FESTIVAL – AFF ORIGINS AND SCOPE

In this section, I discuss AFF’s origins and how it has carved out a niche for itself between film festivals and writing competitions with a conference that has become a site of pilgrimage for industry writers. I describe its nonprofit mission and numerous activities in support of writers’ professional development, while keeping in mind my second research question:

RQ2: How does social justice fit into the missions of media industry events?

The Austin Film Festival’s focus on a particular community of media practice has enabled it to organically expand its scope in tandem with converging media industries as it strives to meet the needs of this community for information on their evolving craft and business environments and for opportunities to engage each other. AFF relies heavily on partnering studios, educational institutions, and professional organizations to provide its participants with not only knowledge, but real resources and industry connections. Its year-round activities reinforce its position as a node within the networked support systems for writers, while its local engagement in Austin bolsters its educational nonprofit mission. Across these and other efforts, AFF’s social justice-related work can be seen. As of 2021, this work is advanced under the programming umbrella of the Uplifting Storytellers Initiative, which influences all festival activities.

AFF History and Current Activities

The Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference was founded in 1994, then known as the Austin Heart of Film Festival. “Often, the writer’s biggest stumbling block is not a lack of talent and resources, but rather, the lack of contacts and knowledge about what to do with a script once it is completed,” Kate X. Messer explained about the impetus for the festival in her *Austin Chronicle* coverage of it in 1996, “One Austin film

organization, the Austin Heart of Film Festival, has taken the lead in providing, if not a venue, at least a launching pad for these opportunities, matching seasoned film industry veterans with an audience of hopeful screenwriters and future professionals” (Messer, 1996). Despite only being in its third edition that year, AFF had received over 2,200 submissions to its script competition and attracted the participation of 50 panelists that included the likes of Wes Craven (*A Nightmare on Elm Street*) and Christopher McQuarrie (*The Usual Suspects*), as well as executives such as Barry Josephson (Columbia Pictures) and Stu Smiley (HBO). Television-related programming was also present even from these earliest days in the mid-90s, with participants like David Mills (*NYPD Blue*, later *The Wire*), Kim Friedman (*Frasier*), and Michael Pillar (*Star Trek: The Next Generation*) in attendance that year (Messer, 1996).

AFF immediately found a niche for itself among a growing field of film festivals. When it returned the following October for its fourth edition, the number of screenplay submissions had increased to more than 3,200, double that of the first contest’s 1,600 entries in 1994 (Smith, 1997b). However, for an event with “film festival” in its name, its screenings were comparatively lackluster in these initial years. *Austin Chronicle*’s Russell Smith (1997b) described it as “a film program that, in the overall scheme of the conference, has been little more than a rudimentary tail on a very large dog.” While that has since changed, the main draw of the festival as an industry entry point for aspiring writers has not. A teleplay competition joined the existing screenplay competition in 2001, leveraging the conference format to offer finalists a master class with a participating panelist (Austin Film Festival, 2001).

Remaining true to its original purpose and spirit, the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference of the present has refined its mission: “to further the art and craft of storytelling by inspiring and championing the work of writers, filmmakers, and all artists

who use written and visual language to tell a story” (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-a). Due to its focus on the writer, it has continued to remain fluid to the evolving and convergent industry contexts of what we might call the “media arts” after the festival itself, with the mission statement over the years replacing “filmmaking” with “storytelling” and “language of film” with “written and visual language” (Austin Film Festival, 2012). The conference remains core to its mission, and just as AFF had responded to the rise of television, programming in recent years has expanded to include video games, digital series, podcasts, and even theater. These newer sections of programming have been accompanied by similar additions to the competition categories, which now include scripted digital series, playwriting, and fiction podcast contests (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-b).

While programming around emergent and convergent media is more a necessity in fully serving its community of practice than a specific focus of the festival itself, as is the case with SXSW, I heard from panelists participating in these sections that the AFF platform has proven valuable for their own subcommunities, leading to resources and know-how in ways similar to those experienced by film and television writers. Moreover, Austin is roughly equidistant from Los Angeles and New York and acts as a meeting point or middle ground for what are usually thought of as coastal industries. For this reason, a programmer from a New York City organization explained to me that the festival can “get away with” programming beyond the scope of Hollywood’s film and television productions.

Together with expansions in Austin Film Festival’s programming, recognition of its brand as a marker of value and its conference as a chance to leverage that value for career opportunities in interactions with established writers and industry professionals in attendance also has grown. While the festival attracted an estimated 1,500 attendees in

1997 and had already begun to receive global script submissions (Smith, 1997b), in 2023 AFF reported that attendance had ballooned to 14,000 and the number of panels to over 200 (Austin Film Festival, 2023a), meaning hundreds of industry insiders present for these attendees to interact with. The script competitions received a record 13,175 submissions in 2020 (Austin Film Festival, 2020). Throughout my interviews and field work, I heard repeatedly how awareness of AFF's importance as *the* writers' festival was something learned through the grapevine of peer networks, mentors, and social media networks. As one interviewee who had recently been staffed in a writers' room described the event's status in the industry to me, "You get in the Austin Film Festival. You place in a contest. You get a manager. It was always like a gateway to kind of like becoming, you know, a WRITER writer." Another attendee I interviewed, who had only recently made the decision to pursue writing seriously when the pandemic hit, put it just as bluntly: "there's no other place where I'm going to accomplish what I can accomplish at Austin."

In its promotions, AFF claims its conference is "the largest educational and professional development opportunity for screenwriters and media makers in the world," where similar to the case SXSW makes for itself, "aspiring writers come away with *inspiration*, as well as practical advice for career advancement" (Austin Film Festival, 2023a; emphasis added). AFF's focus on a particular professional community when compared to SXSW means that this inspiration comes in the form of creative guidance directed toward concrete practice, supported by newfound technical know-how and knowledge of the business (see Table 6.1).

2022 Conference Panel Titles

Developing Characters for the Small Screen
Better Together: Writers and Managers
Leading the Room: Showrunners Responsibilities
Podcast Track: Audio Fiction 101
The Agent's Impact
Interactive Storytelling: The New Frontier
Have I Got a Deal for You: Selling Your Screenplay to Hollywood

Table 6.1: A sample of conference panels covering industry knowledge and the evolving craft of writing. There were 95 in total at AFF 2022. (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-g).

Throughout the thematic analysis section of this chapter that analyzes AFF as a media event and site of trade rituals, I will discuss participants' experiences with roundtables where small groups of attendees meet with industry writers and professionals in a more intimate and unstructured format than the conference's four days of panels, information and interactions around the dozens of panels themselves, the pitch competition where festival participants could opt to pitch their stories in a shorter, more performative format than the main script competition (see Figure 6.1), the film festival screenings—which the writers I met ignored to instead focus their energies on the conference—and the ample parties, mixers, and networking hotspots where attendees sought out peers and potential storytelling mentors or collaborators. For writers as a community of practice, these activities hold value as trade rituals for working through matters of craft and career. Across these activities, we also see how social justice expressed as equity and inclusion among writers organically emerges through the politics of presence achieved at AFF.



Figure 6.1: The pitch finale party at AFF 2022. Photo by the author.

A Conference Among Contests, A Writers Festival Among Film Festivals

Austin Film Festival benefitted in its initial years from the quick success stories of some of its finalists. In the lead up to its third edition in 1996, competition winner Max Adam's 1994 script *Excess Baggage* had already been optioned by Columbia Pictures, while 1995 semi-finalist Ron Peer's *Good-bye Lover* had found a home with Gotham Entertainment (Messer, 1996). Both scripts were later produced and released as feature films in 1997 and 1999 respectively. *Variety*, describing Adams as "red-hot" after making a mid-six-figure deal with Universal in 1997, accredited her rise to a pair of screenwriting competition wins in 1994 that included the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences (AMPAS) Nicholl Screenwriting Fellowship alongside her AFF award (Hindes, 1997).

Thinking in terms of global industry nodes and networked events as I discussed in Chapter 4, AFF is but one of many such nodes within the overlapping social webs a writer navigates to break into the industry. As of the early 2020s, there are now numerous contests besides the Nicholl and AFF, such as the PAGE International Screenwriting Awards, as well as script rankings²⁸ like the Black List and Coverfly that all act as filters for media industry writers. “If screenwriting were a sport,” begins a tweet with 320 likes that circulated around the Screenwriter Twitter subcommunity, “I feel like the Academy Nicholl Fellowship would be the equivalent of our Olympics, the PAGE Awards would be the FIFA World Cup, and Austin Film Festival would be Wimbledon.” Such evaluations spread through peer networks, whether this occurs on Twitter as it did here, among MFA program students and alumni, or on a popular writing podcast like John August and Craig Mazin’s *Scriptnotes*. In service to its community and as a collaborative member of these networks, at times, AFF will promote other script competitions in its communications—“If you plan on submitting a Feature Film screenplay to AFF, you should also consider submitting it to our friends over at Scriptapalooza” (Austin Film Festival, 2023b).

What ultimately sets AFF apart from other prestigious contests, something now being emulated by newer events like the Catalyst Story Institute, is its conference. What also separates AFF from the thousands of film festivals held annually, even those that place an emphasis on the screenwriter like the Nantucket Film Festival, is again, its conference. Existing in between these festival and contest networks, it unites and benefits from both while looming large in the community of writers as a site of pilgrimage.

²⁸ Black List describes its ranking process as follows: “Every December, we survey hundreds of Hollywood film industry executives about their favorite unproduced screenplays from that calendar year. The result - the annual Black List - is a showcase of the industry’s most liked unproduced screenplays” (Black List, n.d.).

Festival Partnerships and Related Fellowships

Austin Film Festival partners with studios, educational institutions, and professional organizations to realize its mission as a platform for career advancement. The Writers Guild of America (WGA), for example, sponsors panels and activities at AFF like 2020's "The Creative Career: Practical Tips for Starting Out." Banks (2015) describes the WGA as "the most passionate, forward-thinking trade union in the American entertainment industry" (p. 242). It has initiatives like the Writer Access Project, ongoing in 2024, which connects early career minority writers with showrunners to address the persistent problem of getting them past their first jobs (Banks, 2015). Industry events meaningfully extend these efforts, especially those that are backed by an organization engaged in year-round activities that connect to them.

While the WGA, I was told, does not sponsor many festivals, Director of Programs at WGA-East Dana Weissman explained that "it's the North American screenwriters conference, so we should be there." For those who place high enough in AFF's competitions, each year the WGA organizes panels on the process of qualifying for and joining the guild, as well as what benefits membership entails (see Figure 6.2). They also sponsor private parties for these writers to meet and mingle with guild members. Among the other important institutions and organizations working closely with AFF are educational institutions with prestigious media production programs like the University of Texas at Austin and the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA), the latter sponsoring the pitch finale party in 2022 to promote its Extension Program in Screenwriting, as well as media organizations like *MovieMaker* magazine, with whom AFF collaborates on an annual "Screenwriters to Watch" list to further add value to its recognized writers. AFF's close partnership with *MovieMaker* itself is an indication of their significance in the production chain with their curation of new voices and talent.

Described as a “screenwriter’s bootcamp” by *MovieMaker*, AFF has continued to appear on the publication’s “50 Film Festivals Worth the Entry Fee” every year since 2014.



Figure 6.2: WGA session at AFF 2022. Photo by the author.

Austin Film Festival heavily promotes its fellowship opportunities each year in the run up to its submission deadlines. These are arranged with industry partners and tend to vary annually, with 2022 seeing, among others, the involvement of AMC Networks and Warner Bros. These two studios sponsored awards for television pilots that offered finalists meetings with their studio executives and are an example of how AFF’s competitions can hold value beyond the buzz associated with awards by providing real resources in the form of direct access, mentorship, cash prizes, or all of the above. Speakers on AFF’s panels frequently reinforce the value of such writing fellowships as a path for entering the industry, one common among the speakers themselves, especially those run by major studios like NBCUniversal’s Launch TV Writers Program, FOX

Entertainment Writers Incubator, or the Nickelodeon Writing Program, which is sponsoring AFF's TV Comedy Fellowship in 2024. In their description of this particular fellowship, AFF explains the winner "will receive feedback from Nick executives on the winning script, meetings with Nick executives in either the live-action or animation field, and the option of a studio visit" (Austin Film Festival, 2024). In some cases, said Warner Bros. Television Workshop Head Rebecca Windsor on the 2021 panel "How to Market Yourself," placing at AFF or in similar contests can become a steppingstone to such fellowships. This, in turn, becomes a writer's ticket to a staff position on a show, which is exactly what happened for one person she met at AFF and encouraged to apply to Warner Bros.' program.

A Nonprofit with a Year-Round Educational Mission

AFF now describes itself as "a platform that provides year-round opportunities for new voices within the media arts to directly engage with the entertainment industry's leading creatives" (Austin Film Festival, 2023a). Reader notes on competition scripts are usually released in early December, which is only about a month after the festival's end and right around the time the next year's competition opens for submissions. With early bird deadlines following soon after around March, the cycle is continuous. Together with its ongoing Coverage Program that helps writers prepare their scripts to survive Hollywood's vetting processes, AFF is an organization that works continuously to support storytellers working within the media arts.

Outside of Austin, AFF sponsors an annual Ghost Ranch Writers Retreat in Abiquiu, New Mexico, as well as one-off panels and networking events co-organized with the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences in Los Angeles and in New York City with WGA-East. These events on both coasts sustain alumni connections and an

industry presence that can benefit festival participants. One person I interviewed ultimately found representation based on their festival win when they later attended an AFF in LA event, thereby building on the impact of their initial award in Austin. “AFF in LA” and “AFF in NY” programming reinforces the networked support systems for writers between professional organizations like the guild or academy, educational institutions like UCLA or Columbia University, and competitions like AFF.

AFF extends its brand and niche focus on professional development for writers in the direction of an educational nonprofit organization with a public mission. For example, AFF works with local high schools and universities to provide students with free badges, discounts, and internship or volunteer opportunities. I personally benefited from this when I received a free pass to attend AFF’s virtual festival in 2020. One of my interviewees, an Austin-based writer/director and fellow University of Texas at Austin graduate who is now working in the industry, similarly gained from the close relationship AFF maintains with the school. For them, a free badge introduced them to the festival for the first time, which later led to submitting to one of the script competitions, and finally to participating as an industry speaker, which is how I came to know them for this project. UT-Austin faculty also serve on AFF’s board of directors, moderate panels during the conference, and since the earliest days, have been involved with the script competitions (Smith, 1997b). Faculty also collaborate with AFF on its *On Story* project, which extends the educational value of festival content by recording and releasing panel conversations on public television, public radio, and various online platforms.

On Story, as an expression of AFF’s year-round nonprofit mission, presents a different way to think about the constitution of a media event—not in terms of swaying public opinion or a ritualistic, cultural mode of mass communication, but in terms of preserving and further circulating knowledge produced by its conference to benefit

writers. I mentioned how AFF's media footprint, as far as coverage by the trade press is concerned, is rather small when compared to SXSW's self-reported media valuation that runs in the hundreds of millions. With the *On Story* project, however, videos curated from previous conferences air on 86% of PBS-affiliated markets nationwide, and more than 3,500 hours of audiovisual content is available to the public at Texas State University's Wittliff Collections (Austin Film Festival, 2023a). While journalists seemed to be absent each year I attended, perhaps due to strict media guidelines enforced by the festival, AFF staff and volunteers could be seen in just about every space running around with cameras to document the event. This produces a lot of content beyond what gets curated for *On Story*, and in addition to its archive at Wittliff, AFF also monetizes a searchable and annotatable database of full-length festival conversations on the Statemints multimedia platform (Austin Film Festival, 2023a). As I will discuss in relation to AFF as a media event, this is significant in how it affects public visibility of the festival's brand beyond the professional community of writers.

AFF's structure as a nonprofit is most apparent in its locally engaged activities, which stand in contrast to the relative absence of similar efforts by large for-profit events like SXSW. In addition to the nearly 450 free badges offered to local students and their teachers, AFF's "Young Filmmakers Program" includes a free-to-enter competition category for filmmakers ages 13-18, no-cost six-week production courses for students at participating middle schools and high schools in Texas, and summer camp programs (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-c). There are also events catering to adult writers based in Austin like the "First Three Pages, Live!" competition, where selected local screenwriters have the first pages of their work performed by actors at Austin's ColdTowne Theater, as well as advance screenings, speaker panels, and roundtables where local writers can connect with industry professionals throughout the year. Many of these, like July 2022's

“A conversation with Mike Jackson,” fall under AFF’s Uplifting Storyteller Initiative, which is a programming umbrella for its diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts. As I will describe in detail later when discussing financial constraints on the festival, these numerous year-round activities are all means of raising funds and sustaining engagement to support the festival mission. For now, I turn to the Uplifting Storytellers Initiative as means of addressing my first research question in relation to this case study,

The Uplifting Storytellers Initiative

As an organization co-founded by two women, and one that has awarded women top competition prizes from its beginning (Hernandez, 1997), there is evidence of early interventions by the Austin Film Festival in matters of industry equity and inclusion. AFF began overtly pushing for more inclusive representation with its Diversity Focus Program in 2016, a commitment to “a Writers Conference slate with no less than 50% of panelists who are women+ and/or from a minority or underrepresented background” (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-d). It expanded its efforts post-2020 with the Uplifting Storyteller’s Initiative. In its overview of the initiative on its website, AFF articulates an awareness of the overlap between its role as an industry entry point and the project of “enacting sustainable change within the entertainment industry at large”:

AFF recognizes its unmatched ability to open doors and provide opportunities for emerging writers, filmmakers, and creatives of all kinds. AFF improves the standards of diversity, equity, and inclusion within its sector of the media arts through:

- Events in partnership with the industry’s key players
- Programming that showcases and celebrates pioneering artists of color
- Annual competitions which amplify new voices
- Youth programs intended to spark creativity in all students

(Austin Film Festival, n.d.-d)

As this bulleted list suggests, the initiative touches every aspect of AFF's activities, from panels at the conference like 2022's "Writing Yourself Into the Room," competition fellowships like the "Rooster Teeth BIPOC Fellowship Award," which was given from 2021 to 2023 prior to the company's closure, and scholarships for children from underserved communities to participate in its youth programs. In addition, AFF has collaborated with Six Square in East Austin, a cultural district that takes its name from the 6-square mile area where Black residents were forced to live during segregation (Six Square, n.d.), to bring programming into the area during the festival and year-round. It features panels, roundtables, and screenings hosted at locations within Six Square like the Washington Carver Museum and Huston-Tillotson University, Austin's Historically Black College/University (HBCU). Writers of color who frequently speak on panels at the festival like Wendy Calhoun (*Justified*) and Chuck Hayward (*Dear White People*) serve on the initiative's advisory committee.

While it is true that these sorts of efforts could be critiqued as a nonprofit equivalent to diversity as a corporate branding strategy, with any overly radical ideas safely regulated by the nonprofit industrial complex depended upon for funding (INCITE!, 2007/2017), the racial justice protests of 2020 mark a critical juncture in the sociopolitical environment that enabled a more politicized approach to nonprofit missions without alienating stakeholders. For AFF, this means platforming a politics of production that is as conscious of racialized and gendered historical and social contexts as it is the trite notion that writing "your story" is key to writing "authentic," universally relatable characters. That said, AFF and its initiative are best understood as infrastructure. What can be accomplished under such circumstances is contingent upon the power of those who participate, how receptive they are to change, and the extent to which industry logic has been internalized. Among those at AFF are writers from historically underrepresented

groups, their allies, and those with industry power who claim they are willing to listen in a moment of so-called racial reckoning. Given that AFF is by no means an identity-based event and caters to a community of practice that is heterogenous but nonetheless predominantly white and male, there are also those who do not understand or agree with the project of equity and inclusion.

ANOTHER PLATFORM FOR SOCIAL JUSTICE? – THEMATIC ANALYSIS

In this section, I continue my empirical investigation of the relationship between media industry events and social justice in creative production. I will examine AFF's politics of presence in light of my ethnographic observations, interviewee experiences, and other data collected from social media and festival communications to better understand the ways AFF *inspires* as a media event that platforms discourses and actors, as well as how it creates *impact* through trade rituals where these same actors interact and work through the problems they face as a community of practice. As with my previous chapter, the central question is the extent to which media industry events can close the gap between inspiring change and realizing change when it comes to social justice within and through the media industries' politics of production. Once again, I will pay attention to the interplay between efforts that lead to recognition, redistribution, or both.

I addressed RQ2, regarding the place of social justice within AFF's mission, in the previous section. I described how AFF works to include writers from underrepresented groups across its conference programming, partnerships, community engagement, and year-round support activities, all of which were further prioritized under the Uplifting Storytellers Initiative. Here I direct my third research question toward the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference. To reiterate, it asks:

RQ3: In what ways do media industry events catalyze social justice within normative industry processes?

- a. How do events' programming practices inspire social justice?
- b. How do event participants shape social justice discourses at events?
- c. How do event experiences impact the work of marginalized media professionals and social justice practitioners?

In the previous chapter, I structured my thematic analysis around four separate sections. I repeat that structure here, examining social justice in relation to the discourse produced by the festival and its participants as I respond to RQ3a and RQ3b in the sections “Inspiration – Curating in Solidarity from Above” and “Inspiration – Solidarity among Storytellers.” I then investigate trade rituals at AFF in the section “Impact – Inclusive Labor Reproduction” to better understand the event experiences of writers from underrepresented groups in relation to RQ3c, before turning to a discussion of the event's limitations to contextualize its possibilities as a platform for social justice in “Impact – Barriers to Progress.” In a final section, “Consensus for Cultural Change,” I explain how AFF's focus on a particular community leads to tensions and resolutions around social justice and representation within that community as the business is discussed and stories are pitched, evaluated, and awarded.

While the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference still reflects dominant ideologies within the media industries' politics of production, it also acts as a catalyst for change through curatorial strategies that represent a diversity on its stages and screens that is closer to an industry where equity and inclusion have already been accomplished. As featured speakers discuss craft and career, sociopolitical history and cultural identity become aspects of individual and group experience that inform “truth” in storytelling in compelling ways, as well as broaden perspectives on industry participation. Moreover, acknowledgment of past representational harms translates into a solidarity with writers from underrepresented groups in the present. The experiences these marginalized writers

had across identity-specific circles and central festival networking spaces suggest great value for their careers, though competition for entry into the industry remains fierce and overt festival interventions run the risk of segregating. Additionally, not all writers involved across AFF's festival, conference, and competitions are sensitive to difference or supportive of equity and inclusion efforts.

Inspiration – Curating in Solidarity from Above

In this section I will describe how festival staff and participants perceive these attempts to curate in solidarity with marginalized writers and discourses, regardless of whether these efforts fall under the Uplifting Storytellers Initiative or not. In my conversations with AFF organizers and observations of their on-stage welcomes to attendees each year, a sentiment I heard repeated again and again was that the Austin Film Festival needs to “accommodate what’s happening in the world.” While of course this meant navigating the COVID-19 pandemic and figuring out how to bring AFF online and then back offline, one staff member I interviewed described the Uplifting Storytellers Initiative as AFF’s direct response to the cultural moment that followed George Floyd’s murder in 2020:

All of a sudden, you're walking into organizations and professional spaces and having conversations that, by and large, people weren't really trying to have, at least in an upfront manner. And so this program sort of birthed out of a lot of those conversations that we had internally at AFF.

According to this person and other staff I met at the festival or interviewed, the initiative sought to build upon and bring together activities previously scattered across the organization, to “dig our heels into this and really push it forward and try to make the program as robust as we can.” It would be a means of “signaling” to writers from underrepresented groups in particular that AFF takes equity and inclusion seriously, that

they are keeping it “front of mind” when arranging conference panels, curating the film programs, or organizing the many other activities I have described above.

These are sentiments that kicked off the festival in October 2021, with Director of Programming and Industry Relations Casey Baron announcing AFF’s commitment to “do more to support underrepresented voices” as he introduced the Uplifting Storytellers Initiative, its advisory board, and related programs for the first time. Rooster Teeth’s Head of Studio Ryan P. Hall stressed the point when handed the mic: “This is the third year we’ve been doing our fellowships with the AFF. As Casey mentioned, diversity and inclusion is at the top of their list.” Rooster Teeth’s fellowships for BIPOC writers and women in animation were a means for the now defunct studio to mentor up and coming voices while benefiting from the diversity of viewpoints they bring. As Rooster Teeth’s Manager of Development Allie Watson explained on a separate conference panel in 2022, each fellowship was actually “more of a relationship” where fellows were kept in mind as staffing opportunities arose.

My research questions were never something I kept secret as I went about conducting this project. Throughout my interviews and onsite interactions, participants candidly shared with me their perceptions of AFF’s attempts to prioritize equity and inclusion. In general, I heard appreciation for the festival’s efforts. Longtime attendees noted the festival’s progress toward honoring a more diverse range of stories with its awards and competitions, as well as a more inclusive approach to who was appearing on its stages. “It was nothing like this in 2019,” one panelist I met quickly shared while chatting over lunch about my project in 2021. They recounted to me how the festival used to feel “hopelessly white,” in particular remembering a panel with “three white guys named John” that they later took to Twitter to criticize. Rather than being blacklisted by the festival, however, they have since been welcomed as a speaker multiple times, an

indication of AFF's genuine approach taken to representational issues. "Once you have seen the all-white male panel, you can't unsee it," another speaker told me about industry events in a broad sense, but this is not something they noticed in their own conference trajectory at AFF, which they simply described as "diverse" before recalling this diversity that they saw across the parties and panels they attended.

Several people shared how the panelists invited by AFF seemed to be more diverse than the attendees themselves, and of course more diverse than the industries they work within, even if still falling short of reflecting society at large. On this point, I was reminded in interviews that equity and inclusion is not something AFF is doing single-handedly, that it is a part of a larger movement within the media industries. However, the encounters and trade rituals AFF hosts are crucial for working through how to go about change, for refining the ideas and building the connections necessary, for understanding barriers as they arise from existing power dynamics, and for getting opportunities to talented writers from underrepresented groups. In short, it is a catalyst, and rather than merely reflecting broader industry changes, it has the ability to program an event with representation among the speakers platformed closer to what an already equitable and inclusive industry would look like.

One staffed writer of color, who would often hear "really?" as a response when telling peers that Austin Film Festival is the place to be, highlighted how platforming big names within BIPOC communities and other underrepresented communities is one way the festival can continue to attract those communities, that "representation begets representation." They pointed to Kemp Powers (*Soul*), who spoke on a panel in 2022, as one such example. Diversity among panelists also makes it difficult to "spread propaganda" or hate around supposed advantages minority groups enjoy, explained another interviewee, that while a white male audience member might hijack Q&A during

a panel with three white Johns to ask why white men are not being hired anymore, an incident I was told actually occurred though not without the man who posed the question being politely corrected by the white panelists, it is hard to imagine this happening in the first place when there is more diversity.

To the point of the festival as infrastructure for writers as a community of practice, AFF staff explained to me how they welcome people with ideas for diverse and inclusive panels, or for otherwise improving the festival, and that they do read the feedback they receive in the surveys they send out to attendees after the event each year. In an interesting example of community taking ownership over the platform/hub of the festival, a panelist that I later interviewed confirmed this, that their survey feedback was heard by the festival. This person and one other speaker I interviewed, both creatives of color, affirmed AFF's openness to their panel pitches, how they were able to directly approach programmers and get their proposed panels into the festival line-up whether the topic pertained directly to equity and inclusion or not.

Many of the people I interviewed already advocate for their communities, and in solidarity with other underrepresented communities, in their day-to-day industry work and through membership in identity-based organizations. Somewhat to my surprise, but nonetheless reasonable in light of this, diversity programming was not something they sought out at AFF. On this point, the festival differs from SXSW, where there is a professional community gathering specifically around their advocacy work as they seek to promote their issues by leveraging SXSW's media event. Repeatedly, I heard from AFF interviewees that when they did opt to attend panels over networking, they chose those featuring a topic of interest to improving their craft or those featuring a person they would like to meet. "We already know!" a creative of color quickly retorted when I mentioned during our interview that most of the people I had spoken with up to that point

did not attend any of the DEI-focused panels. What people really care about, she explained to me, are practical concerns like “how do I get the manager?” rather than “tell me more about being a Black woman.” In her experience, the value of inclusion had been that diverse points of view on panels meant diverse life and career paths to draw inspiration from when she herself was looking for a manager.

Relatedly, a common response among my interviewees when I asked them for their thoughts on the Uplifting Storyteller’s Initiative was that they were unaware of the initiative in the first place. As an AFF organizer explained to me, the initiative is a way of packaging the festival’s diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts across all of its activities in a way that is legible to sponsors and partners. Apart from the Six Square panels, which attracted the interest of several interviewees who were ultimately deterred from attending due to its distance from the main festival venues and a misperception that these panels were intended for Austin locals, the initiative is not something with discrete activities one can participate in. But its impact can be seen in the abovementioned perceptions participants shared with me about how AFF is a space that feels diverse and inclusive, and increasingly so, even outside of programming focused on marginalized identities.

AFF has wrestled with the dilemma between programming around the experience of a certain identity group versus diversifying all programming, aware of pushback at other industry events by creatives of color who were only being invited to speak about identity. Much of the diversity-focused programming at AFF is tied to Six Square collaborations and other outreach to certain communities outside of the festival proper. However, in interviews, staff still argued for these conversations to take place within the main conference as well, explaining to me that they are “trying to host programming where it’s very overt, and people are able to talk about their experiences and the challenges they have, and to give them a platform.” Crucially, these panels cover the

practical concerns writers of all backgrounds have, though starting from particular racialized or gendered experiences. I earlier gave the example of the “Writing Yourself Into the Room” panel. Even though this panel was made up writers of color who had only recently started to land their first television gigs and focused on the challenges they faced and continued to face, and it was a panel scheduled for the conference’s final morning, it nonetheless packed a large ballroom. Staff later informed me that it also became one of the most highly rated sessions in that year’s post-attendance surveys.

Effectively programming equity and inclusion is a delicate process, a balancing act between showcasing how racialized and gendered experiences are insightful points of reference for anyone pursuing a career in the media arts, and at the same time, letting these experiences inform discussion on panels throughout the conference beyond those programmed specifically on the topic of identity. This is AFF’s two-pronged approach that avoids segregating the experiences of writers of color, instead treating race, gender, and other facets of identity as constitutive parts of an individual creative’s complexities that inform their craft and shape their career trajectories. As a staff member put it:

Obviously most of the attendees are in similar situations where they’re trying to make a career out of it, right? So just creating that space where someone on stage can discuss how they went through it and overcame some of those obstacles, or are still trying to overcome some of those obstacles. And then on top of that, too, just making sure that we’re also across the board with all of our programming having some diversity on those sessions.

Support for this approach to programming could also be heard across my interviews and interactions. One interviewee laughed and simply said, “sometimes we can just be of color and on a panel.” They recalled how their session dealt with the business of writing, specifically what kinds of stories were being bought and sold at the time, and that it benefited from diversity among the panelists, but, as they explained, “It wasn’t about diversity. It was about the industry, and we [each] had a very specific lens in the

industry...we all had very different experiences selling. I was not able to sell in a market where they were able to sell..." Reflecting on the many panels they had seen, another interviewee appreciated how often writers from underrepresented backgrounds talked about their lived experiences, finding their voices, and how this became their "calling cards." I previously mentioned AFF's commitment to having 50% of their panelists be women or people of color. In 2022, that number hit 65% (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-d).

Inspiration – Solidarity among Storytellers

In the previous section, I highlighted the many ways Austin Film Festival is pushing to diversify its speakers and signal to writers from marginalized or otherwise underrepresented groups that their experiences and perspectives are welcome at the event, and not merely in a segregated or tokenized manner. Now, I will discuss how this push for equity and inclusion at AFF and within the industry at large could be heard within the discourses circulating amongst writers, especially those speaking on its stages. How writers addressed representational diversity became an observable process during the conference panels as they "internalized and acted upon" (Havens et al., 2009) industry discourses.

I begin my discussion in this section with insights gleaned from AFF's virtual festival in 2020, where the lack of impromptu, spontaneous interaction with attendees presented me with the opportunity to focus more closely on the ideas coming out of the panels themselves. I attended panels throughout the five days of the conference, selecting those with descriptions related to representational diversity when more than one option was available in each 90-minute time slot. As I took notes, a theme emerged in how writers described the pursuit of authenticity in their stories, often using the term "truth" to mark their goal. In the panels addressing inclusive representational practices, this concern

with truth included an emphasis on sociohistorical context, considerations of positionality, and calls to empower writers with diverse perspectives. The pattern strengthened after a close reading of transcripts from four panels that I requested from the festival: the “Opening Remarks” with Wendy Calhoun, which I discussed in my introduction to this chapter, “A Conversation with Damon Lindelof,” “A Conversation with Kevin Willmott,” and “Writing about Sexuality in Film and TV.”

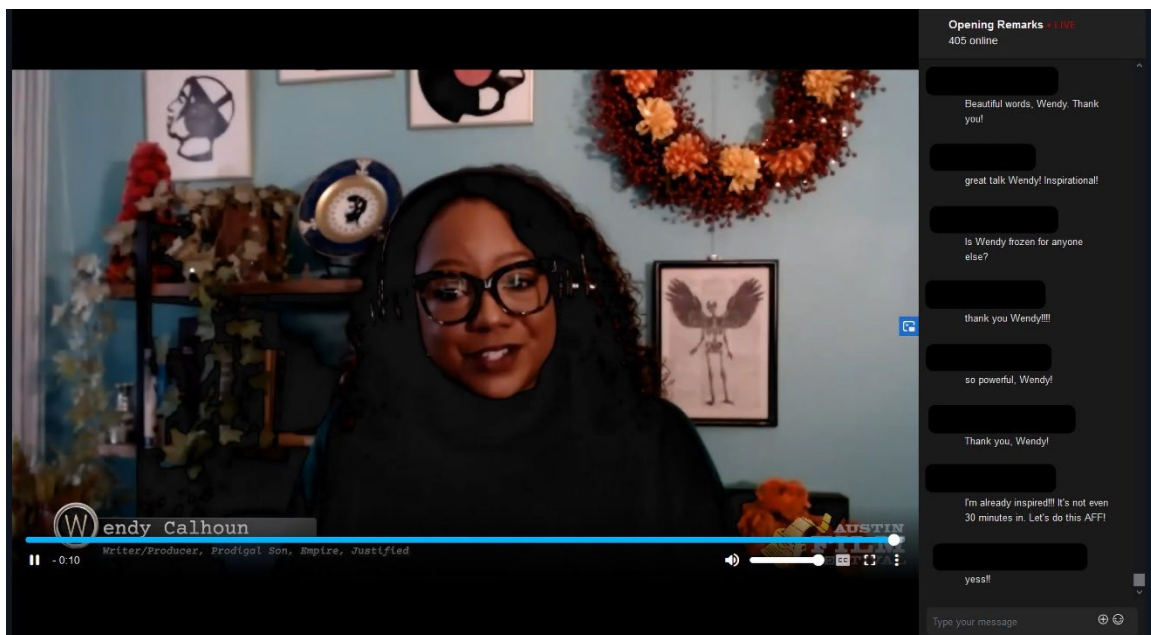


Figure 6.3: Wendy Calhoun speaking during AFF 2021’s “Opening Remarks.” Attendees describe feeling inspired in the sidebar chat. Screenshot by the author.

As panelists discussed their craft, often in terms of that pursuit of truth, they contested what Warner (2017) calls “plastic representation”: the lack of cultural and historical depth when colorblind casting swaps characters of color in and out of normative depictions that may be “positive” but ultimately “feel plastic” (p. 32). Panelists and attendees foregrounded the importance of positionality to storytelling, though not

without contestation. While posts on Twitter and Discord tended to be short, limited to praising panels and films, self-promotion, and celebrating festival wins, they also extended the conversations in affirming ways. In what follows, I discuss these moments alongside my analysis of the panels.

Following this close reading of 2020's virtual festival, I draw on my field work and interviews to elaborate on how these discourses appeared and were extended by panelists when AFF returned to the physical world in 2021 and 2022. In the process, I further define the relationship between epistemic privilege (Táíwò, 2022; Toole, 2019, 2022), representation, and authenticity. The question became not just one of empowerment, as I discuss in relation not 2020's virtual event, but also how identity relates to a writer's voice, how they market that voice, and what they ultimately bring to a project or writers' room. Similar to the previous chapter on SXSW, deference politics in the form of who should and should not tell a given story in the current political moment also emerged as an important theme, which I discuss in terms of "reparative representation" in the final subsection.

Writing Individual Experiences of Shared Histories

Similar to Calhoun's remarks about freedom and slavery in her "Opening Remarks," Damon Lindelof (*Lost*) emphasized the clarifying role of history during his 2020 "A Conversation" panel. As showrunner for HBO's *Watchmen*, he recounted how adapting the spirit of the comic book source material embedded in Cold War anxieties meant engaging with the past through the sociopolitical moment in 2019. "We're telling this story about the fundamental idea that there's systemic white supremacy in law enforcement," Lindelof said. Drawing connections to a history where masked vigilantism went hand-in-hand with racial violence, he further asked, "What makes somebody want

to dress up and fight crime?” The show is known for its opening scene that recovers the 1921 Tulsa Race Massacre from historical elision, provocatively setting the stage for a continual confrontation with the U.S.’s racial past. Unlike superheroes who have their origin stories in familiar events like the Holocaust, Lindelof explained his writers’ room had to confront the massacre’s erasure, “to make it clear to the audience somehow that Tulsa ‘21 is a thing that really happened.” They did this by grounding the intergenerational trauma of their Black superhero protagonists in this opening scene, making it real through a fictional account that approximated lived experience with careful research and accurate recreation. “Black Wall Street” and “Tulsa Massacre” trended online the night it aired, Lindelof said, their audience intuiting its veracity inside an episode with “squids falling from the sky.”

Rather than paradoxically reinforcing “a mythically normative ‘superhero’ grounded in dominant logics of whiteness” (Griffin & Rossing, 2020, p. 210), *Watchmen* opens up representation for Black superheroes by substituting post-racial fantasy with recognition of racism (hooks, 1992). Moreover, Lindelof used the platform of the festival to set an example for other writers to explore sociohistorical contexts as they address the representational needs of the present. “Still need to do a post-George Floyd rewatch of *Watchmen* to think about it in that context. #AFF27,” posted one attendee on Twitter. AFF acknowledged the power of the panel, extending its availability after the conference had ended; however, they again played it safe in their promotions: “What makes Damon Lindelof tick? How’d he create HBO’s *Watchmen* series? And what ever happened to that bear on *Lost*? Catch all you missed by purchasing his panel here.”

The relationship between obscured histories and writing underrepresented subjectivities returned as a major topic in the “A Conversation” panel with Kevin Willmott (*BlacKkKlansman*). Responding to an audience question on how he develops

historical characters, Willmott explained “our job is to tell this history, but tell it through a human experience.” He gave his film *The 24th* as an example, which addresses the often-overlooked Houston Riot of 1917. For Willmott, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century is a period of racial terror “that defines race in America more than any other period, probably more than slavery.” In contrast to the Tulsa Massacre reenacted by *Watchmen*, the story of how the all-black 24th Infantry Regiment were brutalized by police and mutinied when threatened by white mob violence caught Willmott’s attention as “one of the few times where Black people clearly fought back.” He drew on the Buffalo Soldiers of his hometown, “the father of the kids [he] grew up with,” when writing his characters to situate the story of injustice in empowering individual experiences with which he was familiar.

This approach to character and plot development taken by Willmott and Lindelof uncovers authentic human stories by situating experiences of identity within their sociohistorical milieus. It inherently generates conflict when stories are set within a white supremacist society, something Willmott highlights by extending Du Bois’ (1897) concept of “two-ness.” In *BlacKkKlansman*, which Willmott cowrote with Spike Lee, protagonist Ron Stallworth is Black, but he is also a detective. He experiences “the twoness of being Black and being blue,” Willmott explained, especially as he hides this occupation from his love interest who gets pulled over and sexually assaulted by a racist officer in the film. In *The 24th*, the morale of the characters as U.S. American soldiers meaningfully contributing to the war effort is undercut by the abuse they face as Black men when deployed to the Jim Crow South. Although Lindelof does not use the specific term, tension for his protagonists in *Watchmen* is also grounded in the Black and blue duality. “You’re a vigilante because the law is not working for you,” Lindelof explained about their decision to retcon Hooded Justice, the first vigilante to appear in the comic

books' universe and the only one to evade unmasking, re-envisioning him in the show as a token Black officer in an openly racist and corrupt 1930s New York Police Department. Other cops lynch and nearly kill him after he arrests a white supremacist for setting fire to a Jewish deli. "Hooded Justice was a Black man who was hiding his identity because he knew that if people knew that he was a Black man, they'd stop treating him as a hero and start treating him as a villain," Lindelof said.

These examples highlight how exploring history and individual identity in complex ways that openly address racialized power dynamics is not a liability, or something to be written out to cast roles blindly. Rather, it is a narrative tool for enriching storytelling by adding layers of truth to characters of color. Centering race, hooks (1992) argues commodification of the Other for consumption without "mutual recognition of racism" never leaves the realm of "denial and fantasy" (p. 28). Whether it is YouTube flashing \$100 million for positive PR, or showrunners on AFF panels calling for diversity and inclusion, it is important to remain critical of superficial representations that elide histories of oppression, or otherwise foreclose on actual progress. The approaches to storytelling platformed at AFF by Calhoun, Lindelof, and Willmott instead resist such post-racial ideology. They counter the normativity of colorblind casting and culturally ambiguous writing which, paradoxically, only reproduce stereotypes as "characters of color step into racial tropes" (Warner, 2015, p. 78).

Modeling Positionality and Empowering Underrepresented Writers

Beyond platforming a color conscious approach to on-screen representation, AFF's panelists and attendees in 2020 contested normative industry dynamics. For example, during 2020's "Writing about Sexuality in Film and TV" panel, television producer Jenny Bicks claimed the stories that can be told have changed over the past ten,

or even five years: “There aren’t any stories that are taboo to tell really anymore—meaning, there’s a truth out there...no one is going to tell you not to write that truth.” She described how, when writing *Sex and the City* in the early 2000s, having a bisexual character was seen as a big deal. Although shifting popular attitudes mean new representational possibilities, the positionality of the writers given opportunities to explore “the truths to people that we are allowed to write,” as Bicks put it, remains a concern. Equally important is the relationship between executive producers like Bicks and emerging writers from marginalized groups who experience pressure to conform for approval (Henderson, 2011).

Inclusion and empowerment came to the fore when Melanie Marnich (*The Affair*) directly questioned her co-panelists on positionality: “There’s a greater awareness of where we shouldn’t go given who we are, what our identity is, what somebody else should be writing. Have you guys encountered that with your work...where you’re like, you know what, I’m not the person to do this in an authentic true way?” Her two co-panelists, who both have experience as executive producers like Marnich, responded ambivalently. Carter Covington (*Charmed*) described restricting writers as “a dangerous road to go down,” arguing truthful portrayals are possible when careful research is done in “partnership” with the Other. This is not unlike the consultation approach to improving representation discussed in the previous chapter on South by Southwest. Covington gave the example of a storyline reviewed, directed, and acted by trans people who could “tell us where our blind spots were.” Bicks similarly stressed the “dangerousness” of the idea “that people can only write who they are.” She absolved herself by describing the problem primarily in terms of skill: “If you’re a good writer, you better be able to write more than just who you are.” For Bicks, the worrisome alternative is a story that “never gets told at all.” When the audience broached the topic a final time during Q&A, asking

about inclusive hiring practices for writers with BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) and LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer) identities, Covington similarly emphasized a skill angle: “there’s a big pressure—everybody wants to make sure that their writers’ room looks diverse and looks like the country, and I think that’s a good instinct, but we’re still building up our depth of bench and writers that can also execute.”

The exchange is reminiscent of constraints on inclusion Martin (2018) observed at a 2015 ATX Television Festival panel on casting and diversity when the speakers, all women, drew upon “best actor” discourses to defend the practice of casting heterosexual men in gay roles. Like Warner’s (2015) critique of colorblind casting, Martin argues “by making gay roles undifferentiated from non-gay roles, it precludes gay men from participating in the self-fashioning of their representation” (p. 287). At AFF, a “best writer” discourse emerged that reduced diversity in writers’ rooms to a superficial numbers game, threatening to exacerbate the Hollywood paradox. It ignored the writers’ room itself as a collaborative space for unpacking the why and how of such stories when staffed with people who can write from relevant positionalities. However, this discourse arose from off-the-cuff and contradictory remarks and its articulation was unstable, couched in a fear that established writers would be restricted while diverse stories go untold, or are told poorly. Earlier, Covington did contradict himself somewhat by expressing excitement about “the work being done now almost through a social justice lens where people are feeling like it’s really important to tell these stories from new perspectives,” and Bicks did suggest hiring writers with these perspectives to address blind spots. Closing the panel with the final word on the subject, Marnich challenged her co-panelists by clearly stressing that staffing an inclusive writers’ room should never mean rushing to have agents send you writers who “check a box.” Instead, she reframed

the problem as inaction on the part of the panelists, proclaiming, “it is incumbent upon showrunners, all of us, to read, read, read, discover, discover, find those voices, find these people, and bring them to the table.” Bicks and Covington agreed with this final point as they signed off, hinting at successful contestation.

Further support for Marnich’s position arose once the conversation extended to Screenwriter Twitter. The panel instigated a long thread with over a hundred replies that I located during natural language processing of the streamed Twitter dataset for that year (see Appendix D). Script competition finalist Danielle Nicki, leveraging her festival recognition (De Valck, 2007), asked about the necessity of sex scenes (see Figure 6.4). In the replies that followed, motivated sex scenes that advance the plot, develop characters, and depict consent clearly and freely emerged as key themes. Similarly relevant to “consensus-building” (Caldwell, 2008) around inclusion in production spaces, a handful of users replying in the thread and sub-threads echoed Nicki on the importance of scenes that not only feature historically underrepresented people, but also are created by people from these same identities. Their remarks are encapsulated well by one user, who posted “Women-directed sex scenes that advance the plot or reveal the nature of a character are everything I Love.” Nicki replied with an affirmative “Yass!”

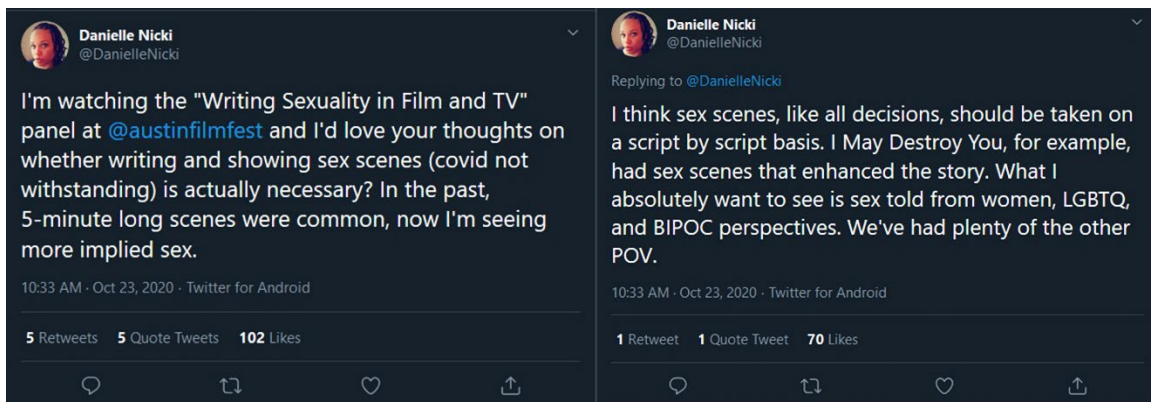


Figure 6.4: Danielle Nicki starts a conversation among writers on “Screenwriter Twitter.” Shared with permission.

Significant to the politics of production (Saha, 2018), Lindelof modeled how he uses his industry position to bring in talent and expand creative spaces as called for by Marnich and Twitter users. During his panel, he explained the question for him when taking on a new project is less “what am I gonna do next?” and more “who am I gonna do it with?” Resonating with Henderson’s (2011) criticism of diversity in writers’ rooms, he argued this means seeking out writers with different backgrounds, but, more importantly, different voices and perspectives. He amassed a room that was half Black and half women for *Watchmen* (Bastién, 2019), encouraging them to go beyond identifying his blind spots to challenging his ideas and generating new ones. For example, Lindelof remembered Cord Jefferson as the voice in the room who first suggested “it didn’t make any sense for white people to be vigilantes in the 1930s,” leading to their origin story for Hooded Justice. The job of storytellers, Lindelof proclaimed, is to “get closer to the truth.” When working through ambiguities in character motivations towards compelling depictions of truth, a diverse writers’ room must be empowered to disagree with their showrunner. “It didn’t feel too good,” he joked, but, given the result, he would “never be able to do it the old way again.” His writers “speaking up” may have made him uncomfortable (Adamo, 2010), but what he did with that discomfort to produce a critically acclaimed show became an example for other showrunners at the festival.

Attendees who tweeted about Lindelof’s panel found different aspects inspiring, although many connected with his articulation of truth. For example, “This talk with Damon Lindelof is immense: *Watchmen*, religion, ‘genetic trauma,’ how the TV/film industry is adverse to ‘messy’ life stories. Truly fascinating. #AFF27 @austinfilmfest,” and “Watching an #AustinFilmFestival panel featuring Damon Lindelof. I love the passion he brings for big ideas, for doing your homework, for lifting up the voices of others. #AFF27.” Twitter users were not alone in their praise, joined by attendees on

Discord and Eventive who wrote comments like “This is the realest conversation I have heard in a long time. Thank you Damon for being level headed and honest,” and “I feel like every year there are a handful of panels where the panelist is this good and articulate. This is definitely one of the ones for 2020.” Lindelof is a white male showrunner, one with enough renown as an executive producer for *Lost* that it landed him a spot on “The 2010 *TIME* 100” (Poniewozik, 2010). His allyship in bringing on and empowering writers from underrepresented groups, like that of other white showrunners who do the same, may be enabled by a belief among studio decision-makers that they will still “serve the white audience,” rather than indicate systemic improvement toward higher-level opportunities for writers from underrepresented groups (Warner, 2015, p. 147). Nonetheless, his emphasis on historically informed and contextualized portrayals, as well as diversifying and empowering his writers’ room, outwardly challenges normative forces. It was seen as “real,” “immense,” and simply “good.”

Reparative Representation and Storytelling Solidarity

The panelists at 2020’s virtual event anchored their discussions in works they had written, and when they addressed the contexts in which this writing took place, they spoke from positions of privilege as showrunners or lead writers on film projects. AFF in 2021 and 2022 featured similar conversations with award-winning television showrunners and screenwriters who also brought audiences along on deep dives into the stories they have created. There was more talk of allyship, like when Peter Hedges, writer and director of AFF’s opening film in 2021, *The Same Storm*, emphasized the process of “cocreating” with BIPOC cast “draft after draft after draft” on a script that dealt with 2020’s protests and racial tensions as major plot points. Or in 2022, when the Polly Platt Award for Producing recipient Dede Garner called for “more, more, more, and then some

more, and some more” when asked about her hope for the future of women in the film industry. A co-president of Brad Pitt’s Plan B Entertainment, Gardner’s Academy Award-winning work as a producer includes Lee Isaac Chung’s *Minari* and Barry Jenkins’ *Moonlight*.

Moving from consultation and cocreation to empowerment, where creatives from underrepresented groups can helm films, television shows, and other projects, unites recognition with redistribution and enables the production of reparative representations. The limitations of deference politics notwithstanding, it offers a starting point until a time when equity and inclusion in decision-making spaces is fully realized and solidarity in storytelling across differences becomes the norm rather than the exception. In this section, I describe how many attendees at AFF understood these circumstances and called for this empowerment.

Panelists throughout the conference continued to muse about truth and authenticity with the return to Austin, but together with these conversations, the spaces for writers to network and discuss craft beyond virtual threads and channels had also reemerged. Living rooms were replaced with crowded conference halls and ballrooms. It is in these contexts that my attention as a researcher shifted from how successful writers described a writing practice and leadership decisions that could advance representational diversity to the question most of the people sitting around me in these sessions were wondering, namely, how to break into the business. On this particular topic, for which conference speakers offered innumerable personal stories and endless advice, the relationship between individual, lived experience and the sociohistorical experiences shared by groups in society remained central. In this context, it was expressed in terms of a relationship between epistemic privilege and a writer’s distinctive voice, in other words,

how their truth relates to their own racialized and gendered personal story that they bring to the table.

Both years I attended AFF in person there were numerous examples of this intertangling of epistemic privilege and discourse on what constitutes good writing, especially the importance of learning how to pitch your identity as part of a process where telling your story is key to not only being an authentic, effective storyteller, but also to receiving an opportunity to tell your story in the first place. “They’re buying you, not just the script,” Saeed Crumpler (*Flatbush Misdemeanors*) explained about entry into a writers’ room during 2022’s “Alternative Ways to Break In,” that the key is to “write something different, personal, from your life experience, and you’ll never go wrong.” The panel featured Crumpler, a rapper turned screenwriter, alongside others with untraditional career paths like Nadia Abass-Madden (*9-1-1*), a former 911 dispatcher. “Write your truth, all that kind of stuff,” said Ben Epstein (*Buck Alamo*), echoing this wisdom in a very different space that year as a speaker during “Indie Film Track: Texas Filmmakers.” He, too, noted the importance of social identity, elaborating how he has used stereotypes to his advantage. “I always really bought into the idea of the Texan. The cowboy,” he said, sitting reclined in a chair on stage with a cowboy hat on his head. Or take for example the response from Sean Collins-Smith (*Chicago P.D.*) when the panelists for “Writing Yourself Into the Room” were prompted to share their personal loglines with the audience: “Hey, I’m a journalist of 10 years who grew up in the heart of the Confederacy, biracial, surrounded by statues for a war that they lost.”

The problem, as discussed in the previous section, is that accounting for identity can easily devolve into agents sending showrunners new writers who check a certain box. Coincidentally, this is an experience an agent specifically spoke to during a roundtable session I attended in 2022, where the agent was asked for a writer from a specific

background without any other details shared. They encouraged the half a dozen or so writers seated around the table to “be kind,” because people remember, “but don’t back down either” when it comes to pushing for empowered forms of inclusion. Lorna Clarke Osunsanmi (*All American*) also highlighted this issue in 2021 during “Navigating the Writers Room.” “Particularly, as a Black woman, there are a lot of assumptions made. There are a lot of assumptions made about all of us,” she said. The key to avoid getting pigeonholed or locked into ineffectual participation as a token diversity hire is to bring all of your life experiences and life story, she explained, “Just know that’s a part of your voice and what you’re bringing when you have a meeting and they ask, ‘Who are you?’”

Knowledge, of course, is not limited to one’s racialized or gendered experience. It can stem from any lived experience. Describing the process for hiring writers to adapt IP (intellectual property), Rooster Teeth’s Co-Head of Studio Dan Shorr emphasized “organic passion” alongside technical ability as essential to knowing what to take from source material and what to leave behind. Similarly, when pressed by the moderator of the 2022 Six Square session “Representation On and Off Screen” to speak about times where he had been tokenized or stereotyped, Beau DeMayo (*X-Men ’97*) instead spoke to his experiences in a much more holistic way. “For *The Witcher*, I was very much the nerd. ... I don’t think I’ve ever been hired because there was a Black character,” he said. But similar to the on-stage conversations about industry inclusion I discussed in the previous chapter, DeMayo described being Black in the writers’ room as also “consulting, but not being paid for consulting.” On this point, however, he spoke to the inherent value in diversity—the importance of young people, old people, BIPOC writers, white writers, that diversity makes the job easier, and ultimately, “you are there to bring a set of skills that serve the *entire* story” (emphasis added).

Epistemic privilege based in one's racialized or gendered experiences can mean that serving the needs of the entire story involves speaking to those experiences. As discussed in the previous chapter, deference to those presumed to have lived experience is at least a starting point for aligning representational practices with social justice. With a culture of box checking, however, often comes the oversimplification of difference, or its erasure entirely. Linda Yvette Chávez (*Flamin' Hot, Genteefied*) spoke to this issue in terms of how it impacts the offers she receives, explaining, "I constantly turn things down when it's not something I feel I should be writing." Espousing solidarity across difference throughout her "A Conversation" panel that year in 2021, Chávez she explained she responds to such requests with "Here is a list of Black female writers you should reach out to. Here is a list of Indigenous writers you should reach out to." Or, when given the opportunity to represent a group to which one belongs, a situation *Shang-Chi* writer Dave Callaham recounted when speaking at AFF in 2021, still having to make it clear that "Hey, you know not all Asians are the same, right?" In a global Hollywood context, this meant resolving the narrative problem of "How do we speak to the widest version of this diaspora without putting anybody off?"

Placing creatives of color in positions to guide a television show or film presents opportunities for reparative representation,²⁹ where epistemic privilege in accessing and understanding past harms is necessary to avoid their replication, or the ongoing erasure of difference. Continuing the example of Dave Callaham, he noted how in the comic book source material, "Shang-Chi would basically walk around Central Park in a [martial arts] gi waiting to karate chop people and then spout nonstop bullshit Eastern spiritual mysticism." He shared how when Marvel Studios asked him to adapt this source material,

²⁹ For more on a reparative praxis across production, funding, and distribution, see Christian, A. J., & White, K. C. (2020). Organic representation as cultural reparation. *JCMS: Journal of Cinema and Media Studies*, 60(1), 143–147.

to their credit they were aware it was problematic and gave Callaham the freedom to take it where he wanted. While the caricature of Shang-Chi as described by Callaham might make the project of reparative representation sound easy, Chávez acknowledged during her panel that “it can be harmful to not do it well.” When asked about representing trauma and finding a balance between showing and not showing, she mentioned the specific issue of whether to include familiar stereotypes like Cholos in the show *Gentefied*, pointing out that their absence would mean “you end up erasing an entire working class.” Her solution is straightforward, if not simple: “create from a place of love, not from a place of fear.”

Whether starting from a place of love, or even just a place of respect, what audiences will perceive as authentic or truthful representation is connected to knowledge. Within contemporary cultural and political contexts, a deferential approach, dependent on the epistemic standpoint a writer or creative from a marginalized group is perceived to possess, can seem sensible. However, the concept of epistemic privilege points to how this deference can be problematic when presumed knowledge is absent. In other words, being in a position to know and knowing are not the same thing. Checking a box does not guarantee freedom from representational missteps, from harmful stereotypes and tropes. In place of epistemic privilege, or in addition to it, writers stressed the importance of research. “I research to a fault... I research, I research I research... all of that informs strong world-building,” said AFF 2022 New Voice Award winner Nikyatu Jusu. A second generation African American, she screened her Sundance-winning film *Nanny*, which is a psychological horror about an immigrant African woman working as a nanny for money to bring her son to the United States. The importance of research was also stressed by Sean Collins-Smith during “Writing Yourself Into The Room.” His award-winning script *Wonder Drug*, a historical drama about the drug thalidomide, FDA

regulation in the 1960s, and “the greatest pharmaceutical disaster in human history” (Coverfly, n.d.), was not based in his life experiences. However, the research that went into it did draw on what he learned during his decade as a journalist.

As I have just discussed in relation to the need for reparative representation, the act of representing within the dominant culture has historically started neither from a place of love nor a place of respect. When it comes to representation, a deference politics is now widespread. One white writer working in Hollywood, who described themselves as an ally, explained to me the necessity for this as follows:

I think that the industry is really in a moment of reckoning where we do have to overcompensate by allowing creators to share their own stories from whatever community they come from, until such time as we can go back to some sort of equilibrium where everyone's allowed to tell whatever stories, because we're all so enlightened, and we're all so conscientious and checking in with each other to make sure that our storytelling is representative of the communities we're representing.

The sentiment of wanting to write stories of characters from backgrounds other than our own is one I heard during my interviews and field work interactions from writers, regardless of background, typically together with such an acknowledgement of the early 2020s cultural moment. This process of becoming enlightened, remaining conscientious, and—barring outright collaboration—sustaining connections necessary for “checking in” are tactics for moving from a deferential approach in the present, a time when reparative representation is needed, toward a future where solidarity as storytellers is the norm.

Impact – Inclusive Labor Reproduction

In this section, I will examine the extent to which participation in the Austin Film Festival and its connected professional networks translates into industry opportunities for

historically underrepresented writers. As I discuss the experiences of attendees within official, unofficial, and festival-adjacent spaces for networking, I will draw on perspectives gleaned from interviews with organizers and participants to illuminate the value they found for their careers and creative projects at this industry node.

AFF benefits from an approachability not unlike the one discussed in relation to SXSW in the previous chapter, but here it is even more fully realized as established industry writers make themselves available to conference participants throughout AFF's networking spaces. An event culture firmly established by the festival and reinforced each year by participants is largely responsible for this. Through "friendworking" horizontally with old and new peers, as well as vertically with potential mentors and future bosses, AFF's participants enter into or build out their networks for professional development and industry opportunities. This holds true even for the established writers in attendance and their perpetual need to find their next projects. These processes also benefited writers from historically underrepresented groups. Diversity at the event creates opportunities to gravitate toward those with shared identities, but also, and more importantly, diverse peer groups where they were accepted as writers among writers. Difference became an asset as writers shared perspectives that could enrich storytelling approaches, as well as their respective challenges in relation to finding industry work. Similar to how reaching critical mass for a particular professional community is important for the benefits of South by Southwest's trade rituals to be realized, at AFF, reaching a critical mass of inclusion for underrepresented groups amplifies the capacities of its trade rituals for supporting all writers in their craft and careers.

The Experience on the Ground

The Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference is an event where the film festival circuit collides with Hollywood vetting processes and trade rituals. New storytelling possibilities are collaboratively explored, as discussed in the previous section, but also a lucky few can find their way into a notoriously competitive industry through the platform it provides. The “vibe” of the festival—a term that, similar to attendees of SXSW, those at AFF heavily used—is largely to thank for this. Festivals like Sundance or Telluride “have got a little sheen on them,” a media executive pointed out to me when describing the comparatively commercial function of those festivals as marketplaces for buying and selling films. Another interviewee who frequents major US festivals for their industry work described such events, and Sundance in particular, as “very overwhelming” with the media attention and celebrity they draw. AFF, in contrast, has a less exclusive feel:

It doesn't feel like there's a strata, it doesn't feel like, 'Oh God, there's Vince Giligan. I can't talk to him.' You know? There is a little bit of the parting of the Red Seas when Vince Gilligan walks in the room... but then no one feels like they can't go talk to him. Nobody feels like they can't go talk to, you know, the big show runners and the big filmmakers. It feels like that's what they're there for.

AFF's pitch to filmmakers is very similar to the one it makes to writers, or to put it another way, is encapsulated within the one for writers. Filmmakers who understand the focus on and primacy of writing benefit the most from attending. One writer and director shared with me how this changed their approach to working the festival. While they have a rule of seeing ten films at every festival they attend, even at major business events like Cannes Film Festival, they changed their plans entirely when they arrived at AFF. “I didn't know how much of a writers conference it was until I got there,” they said about the experience, attending ten panels in place of ten films. The vibe, pointed out to

me by multiple people I met and interviewed, is something that needs to be experienced to be understood, especially for those outside of the networked webs of the screenwriter community.

Queues for screenings at AFF tend to be filled more with locals and cinephiles than conference participants. Once panels have concluded for the day, the writers instead head to festival parties or the Driskill Bar, gathering in the same “secret” spaces, whether they are a showrunner or have just placed in the script competition for the first time. It is not a place where crowds can be seen pestering celebrities as they are shuttled from one appearance to the next. Important people have time and make time for interaction, making for some blatant contrasts with other events. In one case, I heard from an interviewee how a director that dodged post-Q&A crowds at another festival they attended set aside time to talk at length with those who gathered after their panel at AFF.

Setting the Event Culture

This feeling of “that's what they're there for” is the result of buy-in to an event culture that is heavily pushed by organizers, promoted by speakers, and reinforced throughout the social networks of writers in attendance. There is an approachability that is less transactional than even the one I described at SXSW, arguably due to greater focus on a particular community of practice, one where its members are always searching for their next project through peer networks, if not more direct forms of collaboration with these peers. Given the scope and scale of Austin Film Festival, it is less about carving out alternative or counterhegemonic spaces in the manner I described some SXSW participants doing, and more about participating in a collective event culture. In this section I describe AFF's event culture, which is similar to how writers interact

professionally elsewhere, but also different in key ways that create a more level playing field for writers at different stages of their careers.

“Opening Remarks” and “Closing Remarks” bookend the start and end of each year’s conference, and together with other annual first day panels like “How to Work the Conference,” present some of the most overt opportunities for AFF to establish this culture. During 2022’s opening, for example, Executive Director Barbara Morgan set the tone by describing writers as the most communal people, that “most are here for a reason, that is to give back.” At the opposite end of the festival in 2022, Shane Black (*Lethal Weapon, Iron Man 3*) similarly stressed this point as what AFF does well during his annual delivery of the closing remarks. “We’re all here because we are passionate about this business,” he said, “It is a leveler, this festival. ... We’re all in this together.” There are no VIP rooms, we are told in these panels. Even as Austin gets bigger, the conference “stays friendly and cozy,” said video game writer Susan O’Connor (*Bioshock*) during 2021’s how-to session, it is “mostly friends you haven’t met yet.” Her co-panelist Kevin Hamedani (*Darius the Great Is Not Okay*), an AFF attendee for more than a decade, drove home the value of the conference weekend for planting the seeds of these friendships. “I was naïve, I didn’t realize how many powerful people were in this festival,” he said about his initial experiences.

Together with this equality and approachability comes expectations and etiquette for conference interactions. In her comments at the 2022 opening, Morgan advised everyone to “be people first,” to never shove a script in someone’s face. It is a reminder that echoed speakers a year earlier on 2021’s how-to panel. “It’s maybe nice to be a person around people,” said O’Connor. “You don’t want to pitch to anyone who... doesn’t ask you... to do that...” added writer and executive Daniel Petrie, Jr. (*Beverly Hills Cop, Enderby Entertainment*), her co-panelist, with a dramatic delivery that caused

the crowd to erupt in laughter. Acknowledging that writers skew towards introverted, Rooster Teeth's Head of Studio Ryan P. Hall encouraged bold interaction at 2022's opening: "I promise you that you will leave here very excited that you came to this festival and are in this business....if you assert yourself maybe more than you would have before," a sentiment echoed by Morgan that year.

These opening sessions reinforce not just the "how" of AFF but also the "where." We are told repeatedly to go to the Driskill Bar, even though the long-standing partnership with the Driskill Hotel had ended by 2022. "They will not! They will not!" shouted Morgan to a boisterous crowd when writer VJ Boyd (*Justified*) told the audience people will still be at the Driskill that year. The bar is a place with an accumulated history and identity facilitating the event's culture, partnership or not, a site where attendees ritualistically gather year after year. "Driskill hotel is basically a hub; at other film festivals it can be difficult to break through and meet other filmmakers and speakers," explained Hamedani. "If you go in just meet people, organically, things might happen."

These rules of etiquette and expectations for organic connection are embraced by audience members each year. After encouraging bold interaction at the opening in 2021 and 2022, for example, Morgan directed the audience to introduce themselves to the person next to them. The packed ballroom, with shoulder-to-shoulder standing room only, erupted into a din of networking. It is a sound that remains constant throughout the four days of the conference, whether at the Driskill Bar, the festival's opening and closing parties, or the pitch finale, where in 2022 it drowned out the finalists' pitches and led an irate man to repeatedly shout at the crowd to be quiet, eventually standing on his chair to do so, but to no avail. The Driskill Bar itself is equally loud and chaotic, but crowded drink queues make for quick acquaintances.



Figure 6.5: The scene inside the Driskill bar at AFF 2022. Photo by the author.

There, in the Driskill, I asked people what they thought about the festival. Their comments all fell into a general pattern where they expressed zero expectations, instead proclaiming that they simply wanted to meet people and have a good time, repeating the discourses and internalizing the behaviors AFF had worked hard to establish. While it is a process led by those who have participated in previous years, it is something I also caught myself doing, especially when meeting local students and offering them advice on how to spend their time at the conference. I realized I gradually had been absorbed into the event culture through interactions with fellow attendees that typically, at some point, seemed to veer into an appreciation of this culture. Staff, panelists, attendees on the ground, newsletters written by “success” stories who launched their careers at AFF, the social media hum of those who come to Austin year after year, all work to establish how to “do” AFF and the value to be found in doing it this way.

These networked social processes produce the value of Austin Film Festival as a site for inclusive trade rituals. A semi-finalist I later interviewed emphasized to me how surprised they were that all of this talk at the start of the festival was not just hot air, but that people actually take it up and make it the reality on the ground. Indeed, from a methodological perspective, this made finding participants to interact with and later interview fairly straightforward. Some of the writers with whom I spent the most time in 2022, for instance, were a group from LA that I “bravely” (as encouraged at the festival’s opening) approached at a Chik-Fil-A in Downtown Austin when I saw festival badges hanging around their necks. This kind of interaction is not uncommon within the few blocks that the festival occupies, though unlike SXSW, any indication that there is a festival and conference going on at all disappears beyond its comparatively small downtown footprint—a “well-kept secret.”

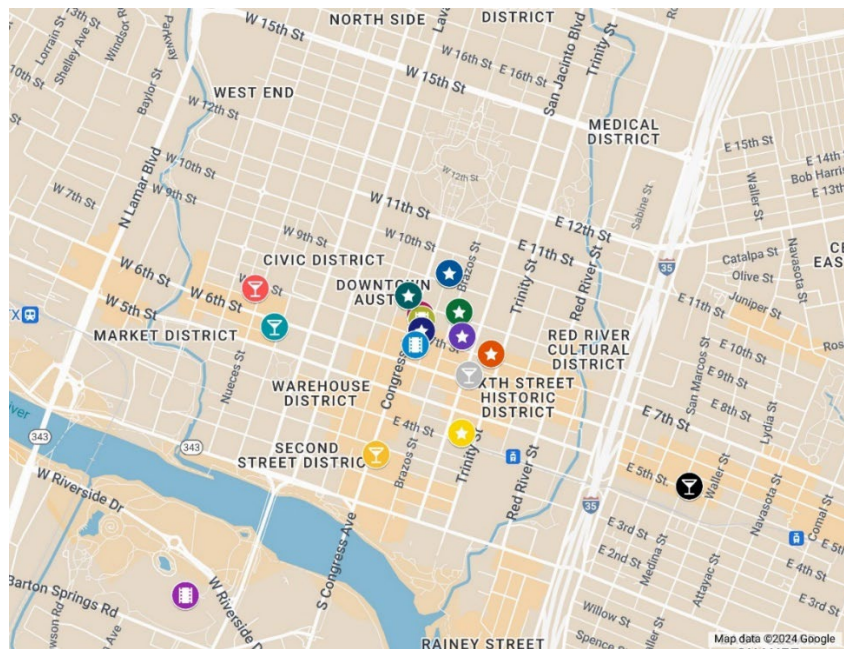


Figure 6.6: Austin Film Festival 2022 conference and screening venues concentrated around Congress Avenue and East 7th Street. Screenshot by the author from Austin Film Festival (n.d.-h).

“Friendworking” Vertically and Horizontally

Just meet people. Make friends. Let things happen organically. These unofficial rules structure social interactions at the Austin Film Festival, which become the primary draw of attending the event. A pattern that emerged in my interviews and interactions with writers at AFF, especially compared to the ways SXSW interviewees discussed their experiences, is how the specific conversations they had and the people they met so severely overshadowed any kind of content or consumed experience when they recalled their time at the festival. It points to the importance of “friendworking” to AFF’s trade rituals. This term, introduced to me by an Austin-based writer filmmaker, encapsulates the discussions of friendship and organic interaction already mentioned. But as they explained, friendworking is more importantly a shift in emphasis from pitching work and transactional networking to “seeing who you naturally get along with” for the specific purpose of effective collaboration in production. The benefit, they said, is that “when you feel like you’re forming a friendship, that’s when those relationships can really blossom. You can end up working together one day. And that’s the goal—you want to work on films with your friends and help out your friends.”

At AFF, relationships forged through quality time together and repeated interactions are the journey and the end goal. One staffed writer working in LA described to me in an interview how people they met at Austin Film Festival are, they said, “the first people to arrive at my birthday party every year.” Friendworking at AFF contrasts with networking out in LA, several people explained, which instead requires managers coordinating schedules in advance and often produces “contacts” rather than friends. I heard, for example, how a producer and director who now work together bonded at AFF’s annual barbecue over their shared love of Ozu Yasujirō’s films. In fact, every single person I interviewed told me they were able to find a peer group of writers through

Austin Film Festival, or at the very least, were invited into one. The transition from conference encounters to membership in a writers group or workshop is a common occurrence, one that is often recommended by speakers as a means of further bonding with peers, sharing information about opportunities, and learning how to give and take notes. “You’re building horizontally before you’re entering a really treacherous industry,” Nikyatu Jusu explained in 2022, or as Shane Black more pessimistically put it in 2021, “The goal is to be sinking in the leaky boat together.”

Friendworking is an approach to developing one’s creative work and career that is embedded within the “find your tribe” discourses I discussed in relation to SXSW. The word “tribe” and the value of horizontal networking, that is, finding a group of peers for collaboration and support, was similarly stressed throughout AFF each year I attended. “Get to know your peers who are moving up in the ranks,” Lorna Clarke Osunsanmi recommended to her audience in 2021 on the importance of peer networks for staying employed. “I always tell them ‘Hey, I’m gonna be done. Start lining me up. I want to be working.’” However, friendworking is a concept that was also discussed in a vertical manner—not only should you be friends with those on the same level or career stage as you, but also with present or potential bosses and subordinates. “That’s what Hollywood is, really. A bunch of successful mediocre writers,” Jameel Saleem (*Bob’s Burgers*) explained during 2021’s “Creating a Creative Career” panel in Six Square, stressing that the jobs go to the “affable person that people like to be around.”

Competition winners who return as established writers to speak on panels at AFF emphasize the same thing—leverage your placement for exposure. This begins at the festival itself, with badges that indicate the wearer’s script title and placement (see Figure 6.7). In short, people treat finalists differently, especially when they end up with one of AFF’s trophies, the bronze typewriter, in hand. Conversations can go farther, even if

everyone otherwise starts on equal footing within the festival’s culture. “The showrunners and the working writers are going to see that badge. They’re going to see you’re a finalist,” said an established writer in an interview, “you might be able to bend their ear for an extra five minutes because of that, or they might pay a little more attention to you because of that.” During 2022’s “Writing Yourself into the Room” panel, Sean Collins-Smith talked about this process at length, describing how he got the first break of his career when Michael Green (*Blade Runner 2049*) saw his badge in 2017 and said “Oh, you’re a finalist for the script called *End of Life*. What is *End of Life* about?” This conversation got him a manager, who in turn connected him with Michael Schur (*Parks and Recreation*) for a meeting related to staffing a *Field of Dreams* television spin-off that never came to be. When Collins-Smith placed as a finalist again in 2021 and approached Schur outside of a panel he spoke on, Schur greeted him with a “Sean, I recognize the hair, how’s it going?” and the ideas he pitched to Schur in that moment landed him his first job in a writers’ room.

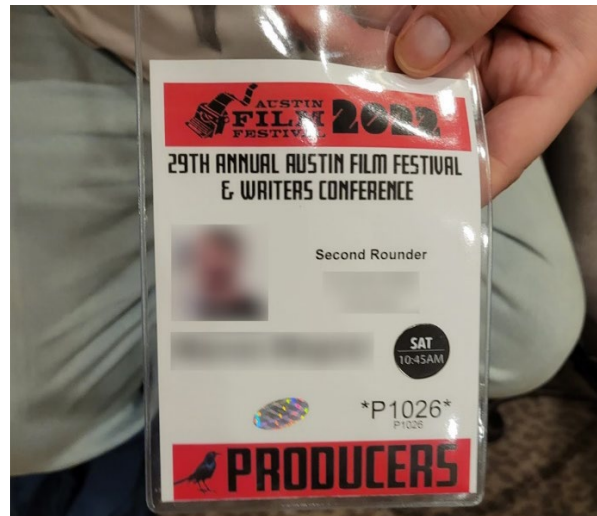


Figure 6.7: An all-access “producers” badge indicating “second rounder” placement above the name of the script. This participant attended the roundtable session at 10:45 am on Saturday. Photo by the author.

Friendworking vertically in this manner is clearly beneficial to writers attempting to launch their careers, supported by a mentality of paying it forward at AFF. “Mentorship is a requirement of the job,” said *All American* showrunner Nkechi Okoro Carroll in 2022, explaining how any staff writer she has on a show has to produce their own episode, that she wants to bring people up and groom the next generation. “Slip into my DMs. I will respond more often than not,” said Kelly Edwards (Warner Media Entertainment) on that year’s Six Square panel, “Representation On and Off Screen.” In my interviews with established writers and executives, however, it became equally clear as they described their experiences at AFF that they also benefited greatly, if not more than those trying to break in, from the friendworking and recognition that the festival provides. I heard about showrunners and screenwriters meeting one another for the first time in places like airport shuttle buses. Having a strong network that can connect you with your next writing job remains ever important. In one interview, a recently staffed writer of color recalled their experience pitching a new television show they were developing, how sharing the idea “just in passing” at the bar led to it “buzzing” among other working writers and showrunners who were at AFF speaking on panels, with this writer pitching the show again and again at hotel room parties and dinners and when repeatedly approached by people saying, “Hey, I want to hear about this show.” They came away with seven new connections who they planned to keep in touch with and work with upon returning to LA.

The Experience for Underrepresented Writers

With Austin Film Festival’s trade rituals sketched out, the question remains of whether writers from underrepresented groups experienced the same levels of community and opportunity in their festival interactions. While the accounts of friendworking that I

presented in the previous section came entirely from women writers and writers of color, it is still insightful to learn how identity specifically impacted their experiences. AFF, like SXSW, is neither a social justice festival, nor is it an identity-based festival. Some of my interviewees drew comparisons to the American Black Film Festival, Urbanworld Film Festival, and Essence Festival of Culture in how AFF programs around equity and inclusion, but it is not focused on serving a particular community. Its role in cultural and institutional change is thus somewhat different, as are the support networks and resources it makes available to festival participants. I was told there are better spaces, like the events just mentioned, for writers looking solely for a community of people who share their background.

Throughout my interviews, writers of color and women writers shared their perceptions of diversity at AFF. I heard that though the festival skews white and heteronormative, there is plenty of diversity to gravitate toward. “I’ve been in multiple situations in my life where I was the only person of color, and I didn’t feel that way at AFF,” said a Black writer who was attending AFF for the first time, having placed as a second rounder in the script competition. However, there seemed to be a bit of disconnect between the more established participants, who already had their tribes they could plug back into, or who attracted writers from underrepresented groups due to their speaker status, and those who are new to the festival and to the industry in general. “There were Black writers coming up to me all the time,” I heard from one Black panelist. Perceptions can also be unreliable, an executive of color explained to me, that when representation goes from 3 in 100 to 5 in 100 within these industry spaces it can seem a lot more diverse than it actually is. At the very least, interviewees described the whiteness and heteronormativity to me as manageable, while on the opposite end of the spectrum, I was told that AFF has “a plethora of BIPOC and LGBTQ writers.” If I am in doubt, this

particular interviewee told me, “feel free to scour my social media for my Austin posts. But you’ll see in those pictures, I mean, there is huge BIPOC representation.”

What was more important for my interviewees than finding writers from the same backgrounds as themselves was that they could feel accepted as writers among writers. Of course, several acknowledged that there is still a tendency to gravitate toward those with shared identities. The second rounder mentioned above, for example, recalled such an incident at a festival party, leading to friendworking that was meaningful for them:

We’re hearing people speak, and then behind me I get a tap on my shoulder, and it’s another, you know, Black male writer, and they’re like, ‘Hey, Black man! How you doing?’ And we were able to really connect. ... Me and this person ended up chatting, getting into a long, you know, conversation about not even just writing, just about life, and like existential stuff, and kind of connecting tribe-wise. ... and it kind of led to us hanging out solo, but then going to the other festival events later on that night.

This writer’s comment about the interchange between personal connections and festival crowds is one that is common to the process of friendworking and how it facilitates a larger networking process. When prompted to reflect on where they find value in their AFF experience, for example, a few interviewees highlighted 2022’s Creatives of Color Meet Up, which was not an official part of AFF, though it was co-organized by former AFF Director of Script Competitions Steven DeBose and Director of Programming and Industry Relations Casey Baron. While these Austin meet-ups are typically invite-only when held at other times throughout the year, this one overlapped with AFF and was open to badge holders as well. One valuable aspect of the event was how it facilitated collaboration around representation for particular underrepresented communities, or as one attendee explained, “We need to meet other people that have similar points of view and backgrounds and an understanding of those type of stories.” At the same time, the Creatives of Color Meet Up was an unofficial gathering not unlike the

many unofficial parties that are held around SXSW each year, and similar to those dynamics at SXSW, the interconnections between smaller networks or tribes like the ones being forged at the meet-up and the larger professional community of writers gathered at AFF became immediately beneficial. According to that same meet-up attendee:

We ended up leaving that place and all carpooling back to the Driskill, just to hang out more, and it was so interesting because we went from this event that was all people of color to the Driskill, and just the bigger festival, and we started spreading out, but then we started introducing each other to other people we had met or already knew. And we were just spreading the love! And it was like, we just had this immediate, ‘Okay, we’re here to help each other,’ you know? That was the spirit.

In this way, the Creatives of Color Meet Up amplified the already networked process of friendworking that occurs as attendees not only meet new people, but also people from Screenwriter Twitter or virtual writing programs for the first time in person, or reunite with old classmates and workshop colleagues, or are introduced to new industry connections from whom they have two or three degrees of separation.

These trade ritual dynamics between tribes and with the larger professional community create an inherent camaraderie and sense of belonging across difference within festival spaces, despite attendees gravitating toward certain kinds of people. Identity is one important dimension in the process of finding a tribe or peer network, but I heard throughout my interviews that more often the people with whom they found “common ground” and built community were the same in their difference, and in their open-minded appreciation of difference, rather than necessarily all sharing the same backgrounds or identities. “Let’s keep pushing, let’s keep elevating each other,” is how one described the energy toward diversity. I heard in these interviews how friendworking within diversified groups or tribes of attendees was inherently valuable to these writers as they go about figuring out how to tell stories, their positionality in relation to them, and

their unique challenges with entering or continuing to work in the industry. These dynamics, when diversity is present, illuminate the importance of a critical mass of inclusion for underrepresented groups, an inclusion that is not simultaneously segregated even as it overlaps with safe spaces. It all feeds back into the larger spirit of generosity among writers, solidarity in storytelling, and how being surrounded by diversity supports this project.

Impact – Barriers to Progress

Similar to what I discussed in relation to SXSW, the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference’s capacities as a platform for social justice in creative production are constrained by economic, cultural, and political factors within the broader media industries. These include the difficulty of improving representation within a highly competitive field in which very few actually succeed, as well as the intractability of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy in a capitalist system where, to mitigate risk, funding goes to those with a record of success. This means white and predominantly male creatives due to historic lack of diversity. There are also factors tied to festival operations that influence its approach, such as its financial constraints as a nonprofit and dependency on the volunteered labor and social resources of its partners and participants, to say nothing of the issue of segregation and disempowerment produced by heavy handed interventions into improving diversity, equity, and inclusion. In this section, I will provide a brief overview of these barriers and describe how they constrain progress toward more equitable and inclusive media industries.

Financial Constraints, Limited Labor, and Participant Action

There was a misperception among many of the festivalgoers I met that AFF is a lucrative enterprise. The prices attached to festival badges and submission fees related to its many competitions and programs were often cited as evidence of this. What gets lost in such conversations around badges, which will have a walk-up price of \$775 for the most unrestricted level of access in 2024 (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-e), is that many participants each year do not pay the cost of attendance whatsoever, and many more benefit from discounted pricing. I have already mentioned AFF's scholarships, free passes, and discounts for students. The festival also lowers rates for those who place in its competitions, with finalists given badges free of charge. The hundreds of panelists, of course, also attend for free. In fact, I heard from one writer that their journey from finalist to speaker over the years has meant that they have never paid to attend.

As a nonprofit, AFF's finances are public knowledge. There is no indication in its tax filings that any particular individual benefits from its programs and sales. Festival revenue has hovered around \$2.5 million for the past several years, exceeding expenses by about \$193,257 in 2021, but falling short by \$159,798 in 2022 (Propublica, n.d.). Throughout the period of my study, I have observed AFF's marketing team hustle year-round to sell enough badges, merchandise, and other programming tickets to keep the organization in the green. They frequently promote festival memberships and tax-deductible donations as well. Meanwhile, AFF's budget has grown tighter in recent years due to the pandemic and the decision to compensate script competition readers for work that was previously entirely volunteer-based.

AFF's approach to running an industry event is thus one that moves limited resources toward subsidizing participation for the greatest number of writers possible, which then maximizes its network effects as a hub for its professional community of

writers and their trade rituals. It becomes a space to be acted upon, and as one organizer explained to me, “the beauty of AFF is the stuff that isn't controlled directly by the people that work here.” This approach comes with tradeoffs. Some panelists pointed out that other festivals like those run by the Catalyst Story Institute invest more in compensating guest speakers. For an event of Austin’s scale, with its hundreds of speakers, this would not be feasible without reducing how it subsidizes other attendees. Indeed, one writer I interviewed who placed in both events’ script competitions noted how Catalyst itself does not offer its participants the kinds of discounts that Austin Film Festival provides. At AFF, it is the historical participation of a large community of established and emerging writers, together with the relative affordability of AFF for those who place, that results in easily reaching a critical mass of participation for meaningful interactions among panelists, writers in competition, and others in attendance. While speaking at AFF might not earn you a check, it could lead you to your next job. There is real social capital to be gained.

In my interviews with festival organizers, I learned how AFF is driven by those who treat it as a kind of passion project, with “people working way above their general bandwidth.” They explained how staff work long hours for modest pay and suffer from high turnover, a persistent problem common at film festivals (see Fenwick, 2023; Loist, 2011). Some tasks take priority over others, while others can slip through the cracks, such as prompt communication with award winners post-festival or mechanisms for ensuring smooth transitions when people key to particular tasks leave the organization. Passionate and skilled team members can be very difficult to replace with the salary the festival is able to offer, a point expressed by not only festival staff themselves, but some of the long-time AFF participants I interviewed who reminisced about devoted staff members who had since moved on from the festival.

While AFF's Uplifting Storytellers Initiative is a group effort, limited festival resources mean that a few staff in particular end up shouldering the brunt of the work, even as their employment remains precarious. Staff members stressed to me the importance of AFF's community of writers in making equity and inclusion under the initiative work. They explained how AFF is largely dependent on its existing networks for connections to new industry partners who can sponsor fellowships, and how they also welcome collaborations with groups and organizations working specifically on the issue of equity and inclusion. These partnerships are less about money, I was told, and more about finding partners working in areas the festival does not, or who can help to get participants and alumni into the media industries. In short, programming decisions are an ever-evolving puzzle of when people, partnerships, and other resources are available. From this perspective, AFF catalyzes change as a "matchmaking" node that connects writers with opportunities and each other. Its ability to do so is largely dependent on the active participation of its writers and partners in this process.

Inspiration, Aspiration, and the 'Hope Machine'

Passion is not only what drives festival staff to work long hours, but it is also what drives the thousands of writers to submit to AFF's competitions and fly out to Austin each year. Passion, perseverance, and luck are virtues attendees are made to believe will lead them to success in their careers, and much like the event's culture and etiquette, these virtues are reinforced throughout the week of the festival. "Do it, do it often, and you'll get noticed eventually." "If you want it bad enough, you will get it, no matter how bad your writing is." These are common refrains. Take also the first words out of Shane Black's mouth when delivering his closing remarks in 2021: "There are a lot of hopeful people in here." Or, a year later, when he closed the conference by playfully

prodding the crowd's optimism: "You're crazy, you're nuts if you think this is going to work out!" And yet, what I heard from my interviewees is that their time at AFF left them with even greater feelings of hope. For one interviewee, the many paths to success they heard established writers share on stage and at parties impressed upon them the feeling that "it's achievable, that it can be real."

The media industries run on hope, what Brooke Erin Duffy (2017) calls "aspirational labor" in relation to the many aspiring fashion and beauty influencers on social media who boost corporate brands for free in hopes of one day turning their media production into a career. Hope drives long hours of unpaid, passionate production through which media makers persevere in pursuit of their dreams. For writers, as Russell Smith (1997b) pointed out in the *Austin Chronicle* nearly three decades ago, Austin Film Festival's success stories "inspire, embolden, and (the sad truth be told) delude thousands of men and women who each day enter darkened rooms and try to pour images of self-created worlds through the luminescent glass windows before them." In the context of my field work, this topic came up several times—whether festivals and contests, and AFF itself, are "exploitative" or "predatory" in how they "encourage people they really should not be encouraging" for the sake of bringing in more money, thereby creating a "Hope Machine." Indeed, it can be difficult to draw a line between support and exploitation. The same festival party conversation where this term originated had writers who did not place, and therefore paid the full price of admission, standing alongside peers in a circle that included a competition winner and a staffed writer. "Who am I to tell you that your writing sucks?" joked a literary agent to the circle. But the term, Hope Machine, resonated with these participants and others to whom I later introduced the term during interviews.

The Hope Machine is a kind of social machine, operating through contest and festival networks. It is comprised of peers and mentors, script coaches and consultants, managers and agents. It is communicated through the marketing of success stories, as AFF frequently does to attract more participants, and threads on Screenwriter Twitter where aspiring writers encourage one another and celebrate each other's accomplishments. In short, it is sustained by complicated interactions between industry economics and the culture of professionalization surrounding writers. Mentorship is "not 100% magnanimous," as one speaker said to me. As I have noted, there is real value for the many established writers to attend AFF each year. From the perspective of the Hope Machine, this value is greater when they have a side hustle providing guidance on professionalization in the form of how-to books, podcasts, and consulting services. In many cases, entire careers are built around giving structure and support to aspiring writers, or else preying upon their optimistic pursuit of their dreams. "It takes a lot of time to do what we're doing, so can that time be better spent doing something else?" said the writer who coined the term, ruminating over the nature of the Hope Machine. "The responsibility of figuring that out is on the individual, but it doesn't help when you get feedback from society that 'Oh, you know, you, it's possible you can do it, too. Make the sacrifice.'"

As an industry node, one embedded within the Hope Machine, AFF is caught amidst difficult contradictions between the spirit of camaraderie its participants share and the tremendously competitive nature of its contests. One way to understand this paradoxical character is to view competition as against the industry, and what it desires at a given time, rather than against fellow writers. This point of view is grounded in the notion that everyone has unique voices and stories to tell, as well as the socially interdependent process for finding future work. From this perspective, it should come as

no surprise that the business itself was a ubiquitous target of writers' criticisms at panels and parties.

There was widespread awareness of the Hope Machine among the people I met. This came alongside a self-awareness among writers, who perceived shortcomings in their work and where they felt they were in their creative journeys. This led them to adjust their expectations for the conference accordingly. While my SXSW interviewees were often ambivalent about the value of attending that event, with AFF there was ubiquitous positivity. The value they found differed greatly depending on career level, from simply learning valuable info, to finding a cowriter for a feature, to finding an agent or even a job. Rather than seeking ROI in the manner of SXSW attendees, here the ideology of process over result, whether in terms of building relationships or finishing a script, reoriented perceptions of value in the experience.

The Hope Machine metaphor is productive for thinking about why equity and inclusion within a hyper competitive industry is difficult to accomplish. First, and to the point of providing writers "structure," there are entrenched processes for breaking in. These tend to reproduce the same kinds of writers. Second, and closely related to the first, is the issue of cost. The UCLA Extension Program in Screenwriting, which numerous panelists across my years of observation highlighted as the key to either their success or the success of peers, means paying over \$10,000 in tuition at time of writing (UCLA Extension, n.d.). In one interview, an established writer reminded me that attending AFF itself amounts to a middle-class person's annual vacation if they are from out of town. "Set a budget" for pitch competitions, film festivals, consultants, and other professional development activities is a piece of advice shared by Nadia Abass-Madden in 2022. "Get married!" is another, offered jokingly by Angela Bourassa (*If You Were the Last*) that year, yet it is nonetheless a common solution to the problem of finding time and support

to write. Others cited parents, prior professional careers, and the shoestring budgets of life as single young adults.

Success requires passion, perseverance, and hope, but also varying degrees of privilege and sacrifice, and it is this last factor that leads to an event like AFF where the panelists on stage are more diverse than those sitting in the audience. “To be a creative is to live in fantasy,” an aspiring writer of color shared with me. That can be difficult when material circumstances constantly pull oneself back to reality. For those who make sacrifices, fantasy also leaves them open to the risk of pouring considerable time and money into pursuing an industry career that may never be too profitable. Notably, the problem of financial precarity does not disappear once one has broken in. During 2021’s “Navigating the Writers Room,” Nick Antosca (*Channel Zero*) described how most staff writers he knows go on unemployment after a season ends, that making a career out of writing remains challenging until hired at mid-level. “The days of 24-episode seasons are over,” he said, alluding to production cycle changes that have come with television’s shift from broadcast to streaming. Successfully breaking into the industry—and staying in—is a matter of not only talent, but having the resources necessary to sustain one’s creative output through the precarity leading up to the first job and existing between subsequent jobs.

Intractability of White Supremacy and Heteropatriarchy in a Capitalist System

In addition to the limited resources available for festivals to act as support systems for underrepresented writers and the sacrifices required of writers themselves to pursue careers as storytellers, the intractability of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy within profit-driven and risk-averse industries further exacerbates the difficulty of advancing equity and inclusion (Erigha, 2015). During 2022’s “Representation On and

Off Screen” session in Six Square, Beau DeMayo and Kelly Edwards both spoke to how this issue surfaces when it comes to financing production for films and television shows. Given that it is “still predominately a straight, cisgendered, white-dominated industry we are working in,” explained DeMayo, overall deals³⁰ tend to go to white showrunners. These deals then help them to build their companies and hire people from their networks, which due to the aforementioned tendency of writers to gravitate toward those with shared identities, perpetuates the problem. Edwards expanded on this idea, explaining how it trickles down when a large overall budget goes to a well-known white writer and director like J.J. Abrams. For Edwards, the question of representation in writers’ rooms and diversity in production is “directly correlated to the overall deals.” “We’ve got a *long* way to go, I feel,” DeMayo put it bluntly. As cited by Edwards during their panel, evidence of this funding discrepancy exists in UCLA’s annual Hollywood Diversity Report.³¹

With the COVID-19 pandemic, which created a sudden interest in hiring creatives of color,³² another issue emerged. As Linda Yvette Chávez explained at AFF in 2021, directors of color were suddenly “all booked up.” She discussed the tension this brings to the fore, between wanting to improve diversity and needing skilled labor. In her account, bringing on “lower level” people is great for the long-term development of the industries,

³⁰ “An overall deal is an agreement between a creator and a studio where the studio financially compensates the creator and/or their company to then own the ideas they create while under this deal. Anything created while this deal is signed stays within the studio that owns it. It cannot be shopped elsewhere, even if the studio passes on that project. These deals usually cover television shows, and not so much feature films” (Hellerman, 2019).

³¹ From September 1, 2021 to August 31, 2022, the report found that in the area of broadcast television, “white female creators (79.3 percent) and creators of color (69.6 percent) were more likely to have smaller episodic budgets under \$3 million per episode than white male creators (51.2 percent)” (Ramón et al., 2023, p. 20).

³² For example, the Hollywood Diversity Report has documented an increase in females of color among the overall share of credited writers in broadcast scripted television from 13.8% in 2019-2020 to 21.6% in 2021-2022 (Ramón et al., 2022, 2023).

but “middle level” people are often needed for certain tasks like when a draft needs to be turned around quickly. Furthermore, she noted difficulty in finding people of color to fill out production crews when taking stories from script to screen. A member of Untitled Latinx Project (ULP), who authored an open letter to Hollywood calling for systemic change around Latinx representation in film and television (Braxton, 2020), Chávez is aligned with DeMayo and Edwards in the belief that when you put people in positions of power and behind the camera, they are going to bring other people like them into the industry. “Finding events like this,” Chávez said, and organizations working to uplift underrepresented writers, provide a means of locating and cultivating talent into those middle level and higher positions. It is as simple as asking “Who do you have that we should look at?”

I conducted my interviews with AFF participants in 2023, nearly two years after Chávez’s comments. The racial reckoning, at that point, was already three years in the making, and arguably, its unmaking as well. I heard cynicism in some of these conversations, where interviewees pointed out that spending cuts and layoffs after the 2023 WGA and SAG-AFTRA double strikes, which were ongoing at the time of interviews, would disproportionately impact writers from underrepresented groups who had recently begun to find work.³³ Others stressed the cyclical nature of the concern over diversity, equity, and inclusion within the media industries, or put another way, this is not the first representational revolution (see Zook, 1999). Some interviewees did voice optimism, however, in particular around diversity fellowships and programs that continued to launch into 2023 when I spoke with them, even as others were being cut.

³³ While it is too early to assess the impacts of the strikes and related spending cuts on writers from underrepresented groups, the 2023 Hollywood Diversity Report noted the elimination of talent pipelines and diversity-related leadership positions as issues requiring ongoing attention (Ramón et al., 2023, p. 66).

Segregation and Disempowerment

Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized the importance of diversity fellowships and awards like those offered by the Austin Film Festival. Indeed, they are a means of surfacing talent needed to meet the demands for improved representation in production spaces. However, these identity-based opportunities add to the negative assumptions faced by writers from underrepresented groups when working in white, heteropatriarchal production spaces. This irony complicates the process of finding recognition and legitimacy among peers, with these fellowships and awards often leading to a writer being read as a writer *because* they are from a certain group, rather than, as intended, a writer who *is from* a certain group and for whom that identity is a meaningful part of the voice they bring as a storyteller. In interviews, I heard some competition winners describe how their wins had been perceived as “lesser than” awards, which required them to be prepared for microaggressions in the form of demeaning remarks. In other cases, these writers were thrust into the role of activist and approached by fellow attendees about what they could do to support their identity group. Whether due to checking identity-related boxes on submission forms or otherwise being selected by festival organizers and judges, diversity-related awards led several interviewees to feel as though they were being segregated out of main event competitions. For these reasons, fellows often distance themselves from the fact that their fellowships are diversity fellowships in order to avoid stigma while still benefiting from association with a festival or organization’s brand.

There is also the issue perceived by some that diversity award winners at many contests and competitions skew heavily towards a white demographic, a byproduct of a broad approach to diversity that places race, gender, and sexuality on equal terms. Anyone who is not a white, cisgendered, heterosexual man then becomes diverse.

Evoking the 2020 racial justice movement, white women writers and white, self-identifying queer writers I interviewed described these programs as not for them, that it is in fact “cringy” when diversity does not reflect racial diversity. This state of affairs is perhaps due, in part, to the barrier posed by the added submission fees a writer must pay if they want to be considered for multiple awards beyond the particular competition category to which they enter their script. As one AFF competition winner explained to me, “if you’re targeting a particular population that has been historically underserved, I think it’s a little unethical to charge them for their entry fee.” These fees are a common practice with writing contests, one that AFF follows.

Apart from segregating and diminishing underrepresented writers through identity-based awards and fellowships, white supremacist and heteropatriarchal cultural practices and ideological positions are subtly reinforced by discussions around appropriate behavior within industry spaces like writers’ rooms. Writers in AFF’s panel audiences are advised to “learn the love language of your showrunner,” to “read the room, listen to what the showrunner wants, and serve that vision,” and to “pay attention to the politics and etiquette.” While this sounds reasonable when POC writers and showrunners are talking about it on stage in the context of creating more opportunities for people from underrepresented groups, the racialized and gendered character of these power dynamics as they actually exist in white and heteropatriarchal industries can be problematic. Writers are often unwilling to speak from their positions of epistemic privilege due to the precarity of their status within production spaces (Adamo, 2010; Henderson, 2011; Martin, 2021).

Panelists during 2022’s “The Women in the Room” spoke specifically to the ways this dynamic impacts the experiences of women writers. In order to not be treated differently as women, the speakers described de-sexualizing how they dress to avoid

cowriters developing romantic feelings for them, as well as dropping the pitch of their voices to be heard when brainstorming ideas around the table. At the same time, they discussed the difficulty of being treated as peers with male cowriters, who might go out for drinks without them and return to the room the next day with new ideas that end up in the script. “I just don’t touch women anymore,” one of the panelists recalled a cowriter proclaiming. Relationships among women in these spaces was no better, with the panelists noting overt hostility among women in these spaces as they compete against one another for the limited spots in the room. “This is just a systemic problem...there’s only so much of the pie we have,” one of them said.

Many in the audience found the panelists’ willingness to conform to these circumstances distressing, if not unacceptable, and several stormed out in the middle of the session. The tone of the panel, which had begun in the same open and lighthearted manner seen throughout the conference, shifted as the paths to success that these women had taken were challenged. In my conversations with AFF’s organizers, I heard that creating safe spaces is a festival priority. “The Women in the Room” panel is one example of this effort, providing an opportunity for women writers to vent about their experiences in “an authentic and unfiltered” manner (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-f). However, it became an instance where broader cultural struggles around gender-based discrimination entered into the discourse about matter-of-fact industry processes, here with women in the audience pushing back against complicity.

Consensus for Cultural Change

The constraints and limitations described in the previous section highlight the importance of participant action and consensus-forming processes as part of the trade rituals that take place at AFF and other events like it. I will describe those processes

further in this section. I witnessed several incidents at AFF where patterns of behavior in the dominant culture that perpetuate the marginalization of underrepresented groups appeared and were resoundingly contested. Compared to SXSW, where organizations and individual advocates sought to amplify calls to action by leveraging the event's scale as a media event, what is most salient about AFF are the moments when the larger community at the festival responds to an action taken by a festival volunteer, competition judge, or one of the many writers gathered that runs counter to the ideal of an equitable and inclusive professional community. This most prominently appeared in the discourse surrounding the release of reader feedback on scripts submitted to AFF's competitions in the weeks following the festival each year, but also very powerfully in how attendees responded to a racist pitch during 2021's Pitch Finale Party.

Discussion of AFF online is generally positive, with people sharing their placements and congratulating each other for their awards (see Appendix C), but some of the widest circulating posts on Twitter during the period of my study, and 2021 in particular, were tweeted by entrants who received feedback that took issue with representations of race and gender in their scripts. In one instance, a reviewer criticized a Jewish writer—who they believed to be “from a non-Jewish background” due to the blinded review process—as “using other people's culture as flavoring” in their portrayals of Jews and Judaism within the script. In the notes returned by a reader in a separate incident, a Black writer was advised to consult with a person of color to improve the dialogue between the Black characters in their script. Then there is the most liked tweet within my dataset for 2021, which featured an overt expression of partisan debates around language. A reader reprimanded a writer's use of the word “unhoused,” stating in the returned feedback that it “takes the PC whitewashing of language over the top.”

Tweets like these each sparked dozens to hundreds of replies and retweets where other writers joined in expressing their disillusionment with AFF's selection processes, levying accusations that these examples of low quality of feedback and a perceived lack of diversity among reviewers harms the chances of writers from underrepresented groups advancing in AFF's competitions. At the same time, many people praised AFF for the feedback they received on their submitted scripts. For example, a writer I interviewed shared that they felt the coverage they received from AFF on their pilot played a direct role in getting them staffed in a writers' room. But insufficient oversight of review processes has become a problem as turnover among staff remains high and submissions have ballooned, necessitating the rapid recruitment of an ever-larger base of volunteer readers. Demands for improved representation and more dignified language on the one hand, and backlash against this "politically correct" or "woke" language on the other, play out as writers volunteer to anonymously read the thousands of scripts submitted to AFF each year.

In response to its competition controversies, AFF immediately implemented what one staff member described to me as an extensive reevaluation process. Festival staff also confirmed the perceived lack of diversity among script readers, film screeners, and other volunteer groups to be the reality. Suggesting this lack of diversity to be a byproduct of how nonprofits depend upon relationships built with volunteers who return year after year, and who in the case of AFF's volunteers have historically skewed heavily toward a more affluent and whiter demographic, these staff members explained that AFF has proactively broadened its calls for volunteers. In particular, they have engaged in community outreach in zip codes where there are high populations of people from demographics underrepresented among their volunteers, holding conversations in community spaces there about the opportunities AFF has to offer as an arts organization.

The difficulty, I was told, lies in finding not just readers and screeners who are willing to work in exchange for festival credentials, but who have the training, experience, and references to indicate that they can be trusted to evaluate submitted work well. More recently, and as a response to concerns around the quality of its selection process expressed by participants, script readers now receive monetary compensation for their work, though it is unclear if this comes in addition to festival credentials or not. Monetary compensation for readers and diversifying the reader pool are the two main demands of writers expressed in interviews, fieldwork interactions, and on social media.

Austin Film Festival evolves in tandem with its community and in response to the suggestions, and more importantly, pressure from this community as seen in the above examples from Twitter. As these examples indicate, however, the problem often lies within the community of writers itself. This came most visibly to the forefront of festival discourse during an incident at 2021's Pitch Finale, which was held in a long, narrow bar that featured an indoor balcony and two floors packed with hundreds of people. The placement of the judges and amplification at one far end of the bar made it difficult to hear the pitches clearly, and most writers instead opted to chat amongst themselves once they had grabbed their drinks. This was the case, at least, until a white male finalist pitched his action movie about a scientist with a micropenis who invents a new enhancement drug and is pursued by "the North Koreans, who have the world's smallest penises."

When the man enunciated this punchline of his pitch, which broke through the din of chatter in the bar, the crowd immediately erupted in anger, cutting him off mid-sentence with boos and shouts of "You racist piece of shit!" The writers around me exchanged looks of disbelief, equally shocked that this pitch could have made it all the way to the competition's final round. "Ask yourself how you would feel if the executive

you were pitching to is Asian,” a judge said to the man, reprimanding him. One of the three judges, who had presided over the earlier round that advanced this pitch to the finals in the first place, explained that she did not “hear it” until the crowd’s response, and that she had done the writer a disservice by allowing him to advance this far. This also evoked an angry response from the crowd.

As with the problematic script reader feedback, the pitch finale incident triggered discussion on Screenwriter Twitter and other social media platforms that maligned the judges as industry gatekeepers—they were all established industry professionals who had produced television shows or written feature films, here volunteering their time to evaluate the pitches—as well as AFF’s inability to keep the incident from happening. As a result, these social media posts and remarks during conversations I would have at the following year’s conference in 2022 tended to express disappointment at the state of the media industries. It is an incident that stuck with people. However, the speed and conviction with which the crowd and finale judges intervened to shut down this instance of racism in itself was inspiring. That the writer had made it all the way to a pitch finale at a major festival, one with so many attendees that vocally resisted it, further indicates the value of the peer networks available through its trade rituals and how they enable opportunities to have work read by peers with diverse epistemic positions. This could have prevented the incident from occurring in the first place.

The 2021 Pitch Finale incident is a vivid example of how AFF’s platform becomes a space for working through clashes around identity and representation within its community of writers. The festival’s proactive effort to diversify its conference panelists and competition judges under the Uplifting Storytellers initiative is one means of mitigating future harms through programming practices. I earlier noted its 65% of

panelists from underrepresented backgrounds in 2022. AFF has also had some success with its judges (see Table 6.2).

	2022 Script Semifinalist Judges	2022 Script Finalist Judges	2022 Film Jurors
POC	52%	27%	28%
Women+	39%	50%	50%

Table 6.2: Judge demographics reported by AFF for its 2022 script and film competitions (Austin Film Festival, n.d.-d).

As the term “underrepresented” suggests, however, established writers from underrepresented groups receive innumerable requests to volunteer their time as festivals and other organizations seek to diversify. Amid calls to “let them work” now that writers from underrepresented groups are finally finding more opportunities in the post-2020 context, the brevity of AFF means that, as a commitment, it does not interfere with career advancement in the same way serving as a mentor for a long-term fellowship like those run by the WGA or Sundance might. As explained at length, their participation at AFF also holds substantial professional value and opportunities for horizontal networking with other panelists and judges. One panelist of color suggested to me that their ability to demonstrate their professional competence as storytellers when speaking at AFF is also a means of dispelling “diversity hire” rhetoric that diminishes their accomplishments. This also exposes writers to diverse lived experiences, which taken together with the availability of diverse peer networks, means there are ample opportunities for developing an awareness of identity and difference that would prevent a writer from overlooking or ignoring the harm the representations they produce can have on other people.

As a final note, it is worth mentioning that my interviewees did not recall any harmful incidents related to being from an underrepresented group or notice instances of

backlash against equity and inclusion during their experiences at the festival. Similar to issues that arise when reader and screener feedback returned to entrants remains anonymous, festival staff noted that comments on post-festival surveys and calls to the office asking if there will be awards for older white men are about as bad as it gets. As I mentioned in my methods chapter, when I prompted writers to describe any instances of harmful rhetoric or backlash, several emphasized that they would most likely not be exposed to it directly as people of color. They then turned the question back on me as a white male researcher who had spent an extensive amount of time discussing these issues with people at the festival.

In my interactions with white writers, and white male writers in particular, there was a general desire to help make the professional community of writers more equitable and inclusive, a desire that seemed to correlate with the emphasis on mutually supporting one another within the event's culture. However, there also was an uneasiness among many of these white male writers, perhaps due to uncertainty around what they could do without holding a position of power. They also seemed unsure about what it would mean for them as they try to break into these highly competitive industries themselves. This might explain the misplaced eagerness noted earlier when a white male writer conflated a person winning an identity-based award with being an advocate or activist for their identity group. In a few instances, equity and inclusion was put forth as one more reason for their own failures, but when such remarks were made, they came as part of a dialogue with others at the festival who could dispel them, rather than simply being rebuked by assertions of dogma. This is the value of consensus formation through events.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have examined the politics of presence at the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference as a media industry event that serves a particular community of media practice. Through a thematic analysis of ethnographic observations, interviews, and other data collected over the 2020-2023 study period, I have demonstrated how AFF inspires social justice through its efforts to platform writers from underrepresented groups and the discourses on writing contributed by these writers and other participants at the event. Moreover, I have described how AFF impacts the politics of production within the media industries by connecting underrepresented writers with one another, the larger community of practice, and opportunities to advance their careers.

While the Austin Film Festival elevates equity and inclusion as important concerns, which I discussed in relation to its Uplifting Storytellers Initiative, it is not an event that focuses solely on any particular social identity or group. The dominant culture is strongly represented among the participants it attracts. I have argued this makes its social justice-related activities consequential, with writers as a community of practice at the event collectively working through dissensus and consensus concerning just representational practices. As seen in the examples I have presented, allyship across differences can take the form of deference, where writers from underrepresented groups are empowered to tell their stories. This supports a politics of production that can result in reparative representations, and while not necessarily amounting to solidarity, joins recognition with redistribution.

Austin Film Festival is not without its challenges as a platform for social justice. Heteropatriarchy and white supremacy are deeply ingrained within the media industries, for which ensuring profits and avoiding unnecessary risks take precedence over social justice commitments. The event itself faces its own constraints in terms of organizational

capacity, meanwhile efforts to advance equity and inclusion can easily lead to segregation and disempowerment. Despite these shortcomings, the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference, like South by Southwest, is an important industry node that warrants the attention of activists and advocates as a catalyst for improving representation behind and in front of the camera.

Chapter 7: Discussion and Conclusions

When I step away from making academic meaning out of what I observed at these events over the past several years and instead reflect on the experiences and sensations that left the greatest impressions on me, I am reminded of people I met and a handful of spectacles that stood out from among the rest.

Each year at the Austin Film Festival there were groups of writers who welcomed me into their creative tribes, who helped me to think through the questions I was asking and guided me toward new ideas and examples of social justice as it related to representation at the conference. I reunited with several of these writers in subsequent years, and I watched as many more advanced in their careers. I saw them participate triumphantly in self-promotion on Screenwriter Twitter as they ranked higher at writing competitions like AFF, found agents to represent them, and started to get hired into writers' rooms, or get their creative projects produced. I am also reminded of the many established writers who warmly welcomed my questions when I approached them, but even more, I remember those who approached me. In 2022, my festival experience began at registration when these writers struck up conversation with me as we waited in line for our badges, having overheard that I am a researcher. The final thing I saw that year as I walked off toward my car was a group of staffed writers of color gathering outside of the Driskill Bar. I had met many of them separately after the panels they spoke on, but here they were together, joking and laughing with other conference participants they welcomed into their circle.

South by Southwest was more chaotic with long lines snaking around city blocks as people waited to mint their own NFTs, attempted to find their way into big premieres of films like *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, or were funneled into overflow halls when popular sessions like the keynote with music superstar Lizzo attracted thousands to

the Austin Convention Center. While not related to social justice, the premiere of *Evil Dead Rise* inside of the Paramount Theater at its max capacity of 1,270 was a personal highlight for me. Jump scares erupted into booming, collective screams and tense silences were punctuated by shrill shouts of “Oh my God!” But beneath these spectacles there were other dynamics at work. I repeatedly bumped into the same nonprofit workers and activists as our conference and festival trajectories aligned. In the process, I was welcomed into various communities of practice focused on advocacy and activism, such as the climate action community, social impact entertainment community, and the disability community, who had a conference session of their own on the horror genre and its representation of disability. Local volunteers also welcomed me and my project with interest, inviting me into a Slack group where they shared information on where the best parties were going on at any given moment. They wanted to ensure I could see as much of South By’s expansive and varied dimensions as possible, and so I tagged along to parties, music performances, and other activities each year.

But for every instance where a Boots Riley presents an unfiltered Marxist analysis on a South by Southwest stage, or writers from underrepresented groups find community and opportunity at AFF’s conference, there is a Shell House greenwashing the fossil fuel industry’s role in delaying the energy transition (see Si et al., 2023), or culturally insensitive script reader feedback that brings into question the Austin Film Festival as a welcoming space for diversity and difference. I reiterate that these are not social justice festivals, but mainstream media industry events. They are imperfect platforms for social justice and full of contradictions, but they are important as sites for producing dissonance and unsettling dominant cultural norms that influence industry production.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

This dissertation has examined social justice in relation to how media representations are produced through industry processes, where media is shaped by hegemonic routines and norms. While alternative funding, production, and distribution mechanisms are increasingly available in the platform era (Christian et al., 2020), the resulting media are of smaller scale and volume. In addition to alternatives, there is space for contestation within industry mechanisms and the commodification process itself—the “politics of production” (Saha, 2018).

Media industry events, like film festivals (Iordanova, 2015), are nodes that facilitate and shape this production within networked media industries. South by Southwest’s influence on production is related to its massive scale, which gathers venture capital, start-ups, “creatives,” and advocates who deliberate and make decisions on what technologies to innovate, how to inspire through art, who to support, and where to invest. The Austin Film Festival focuses on writers, influencing how stories should be told, who should be telling them, and how to bring new voices into the rooms of creative decision-making.

At critical junctures, media industry events can become platforms for social justice. Event programming and participant agency operate at the level of discourse to produce dissensus and consensus around representational struggles, and simultaneously, catalyze changes related to the labor and resources that go into producing media. These efforts to shift events’ “politics of presence,” and their impacts on production and representation, were the primary focus of my investigation (see Illustration 7.1).

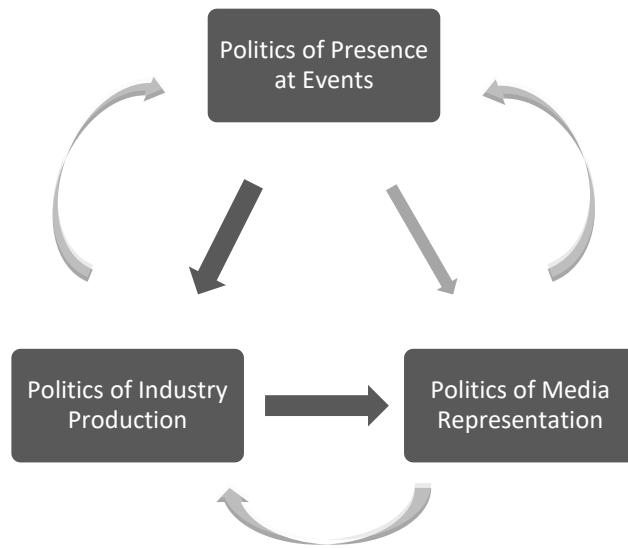


Illustration 7.1: Theorization of how the politics of presence can impact the politics of production and politics of representation.

I analyzed the politics of presence in concrete ways by examining the inward and outward facing dimensions of media industry events as they host trade rituals for communities of media practice and broadcast their newsworthy happenings to the world as media events. A progressive neoliberal consensus (Fraser, 2023) is dominant at the events studied in this dissertation, and there are ample instances of “activism that is tied to modes of operation that uphold the status quo of reformist instrumental intervention (small individual acts), state and NGO-led solutions, and knowledge-through-entertainment” (Winton & Turnin, 2017, p. 92). But the expanded social interactions and participation that come with industry events allow for greater, though still imperfect, degrees of inclusion when compared to the screening-heavy format of traditional film festivals. When festivals and industry events offer expanded platforms for issues and greater social infrastructure for interaction, they become less about “policing” through curation and more about catalyzing discourse.

Media events are not always planned spectacles, but often disruptive or unpredictable (Katz & Liebes, 2007). There are both scripted and unscripted elements at

industry events due to how organizers and participants alike act upon them to shape what ultimately happens. I have argued events are social infrastructure, a kind of scaffolding for communication and interaction among participants that can operate independently of experiences curated by organizers. Events unsettle norms and work toward aligning them with social justice when a politics of presence conducive to doing so is achieved.

I assessed social justice within events' politics of presence in terms of activities related to the recognition of difference and (re)distribution of resources. According to Fraser (2023), recognition and distribution in fact “constitute the essential normative components out of which hegemonies are constructed” (p. 100). Fissures in both the politics of recognition and the politics of distribution appear at critical junctures like the post-2020 period studied in this dissertation. I have mapped the politics of presence onto these media industry events, observing and documenting the ways that the presence of social justice-related discourses and activities were experienced and felt in both cases. These events afforded some scaffolding for grappling with social justice, particularly around matters of representation and production, which are not mutually exclusive. This project as a whole explores the possibilities for moving toward social justice in the context of media activities.

The general emphasis at these conferences on authenticity in storytelling, or innovation in problem solving, offer ways forward for a difficult project. Hall (1997) reminds us that “meaning can never be finally fixed” and involves an endless struggle with the dominant culture (p. 9). This struggle requires greater equity in how the media industries define key concepts, which is tied to greater inclusion in positions of power. At the peripheries, or perhaps at the interstices where business, taste making, and politics collide, industry events act as sites for producing discourses and opportunities that challenge the status quo. Although not without their limitations within dominant

production norms and “the rationalizing/racializing logic of capital” (Saha, 2016), industry events hold the potential to catalyze transformation in their industries, synergizing with other possibilities for representation fought for by activists and afforded by alternative online platforms in an era of niche—though fragmented—audiences (Adamo, 2010; Christian & Peterson-Salahuddin, 2023; Erigha, 2015).

REVISITING SOLIDARITY IN MEDIA PRODUCTION

In Chapter 2, I adopted a definition of solidarity based on its application to news production by Anita Varma (2020). In Chapter 1, I presented an illustration with solidarity at one end of a continuum for assessing social justice activities at media industry events, an aspirational ideal to pursue when navigating the pressures of media production (see Illustration 1.2). In the chapters that followed, I introduced numerous phenomena that I had observed, such as “conditional solidarity” that depends upon individual merit as a precursor for recognition and redistribution. These results illustrated the intractable social forces of white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, which even when difference is recognized and valued, resist any structural redistribution that counters their entrenched domination. I noted how efforts to recognize could inadvertently lead to segregation and disempowerment when they did not translate into collective participation in solving problems.

Openness to change within organizations and institutions often comes in the form of deference to those already present in decision-making spaces, who are presumed to have lived experiences with marginalization or oppression (Táíwò, 2022). While identity does not guarantee experience or knowledge of issues, deference is nonetheless a productive, and as I have discussed, necessary starting point when it comes to media representation in light of historical misrepresentations. Moreover, events are more

dynamic than the media industries at large and have greater capacity for shaking up their rooms of power if they choose to do so.

In some cases, action went beyond mere deference. Solidarity as seen at these events means two things in relation to reparative representational practices within the media industries: 1) incorporating a historical perspective into media production that *recognizes* systemic inequality and power imbalances between *groups*, which often runs counter to the emphasis on *individuals* and their careers under neoliberalism; and 2) epistemologically starting from the vantage point of those impacted by a given issue or circumstance, while at the same time, empowering them to *lead* representational processes. Solidarity implemented as a reflexive and knowledge-seeking practice means incorporating these perspectives into the representation of problems and solutions on how to *restructure* social systems in ways that allow for *collective* participation and investment. It recognizes individual accountability and the social whole while redistributing power accordingly.

Equally clear from the preceding chapters is how social justice action within institutions and organizations is a process involving negotiation and compromise. The above definition offers a guide for how to *do* social justice in media production while balancing the many pressures present within industry spaces. In Chapter 1, I presented an illustration of social justice activities at industry events that broke these activities down into a series of steps that ranged from the cooptation of social justice symbols to action in solidarity with the marginalized and the oppressed (see Illustration 1.2). This stressed solidarity as an aspirational ideal and contrasted it with cynical misappropriations of social justice symbols. Here, I offer another illustration that emphasizes social justice as a process (see Illustration 7.2). Solidarity remains an aspiration, but also a reminder of the relationship between the constitutive elements of social justice to keep in mind when

navigating professional pressures and corporate imperatives, seeking funding as a nonprofit, or programming and participating in events.

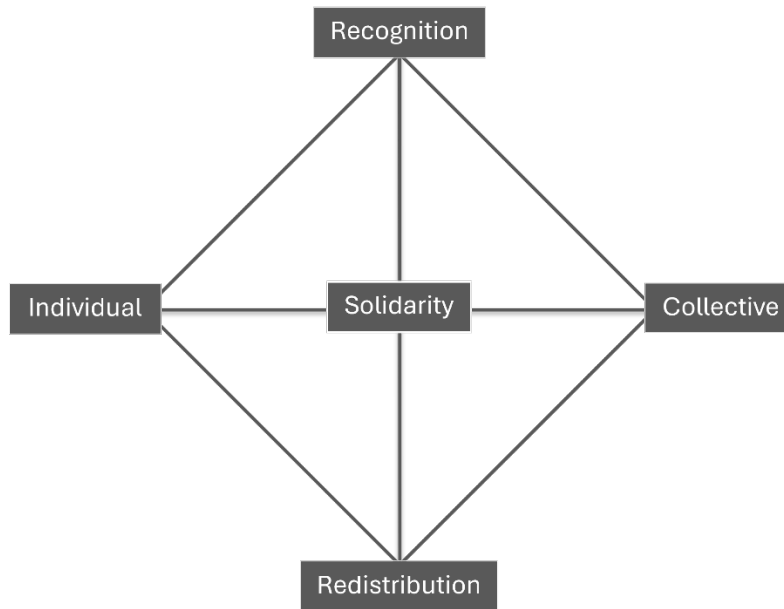


Illustration 7.2: The relationship between elements within social justice action. Its structure is inspired by Wendy Griswold's (2013) cultural diamond.

To give an example, PR and branding that recognizes the value of difference and existing social inequities may not necessarily be a bad thing, especially if it places the organization as part of collective mechanisms for remedying injustices. Such action, though incremental, could be understood as solidarity. However, if this same organization actively inhibits redistributive action while seeking to reap the benefits of positive association with social justice symbols, then wokewashing or greenwashing would be more suitable terms to describe and resist its activities.

Redistribution at the Austin Film Festival is accomplished through its trade ritual dimension when there is an effort to talk about the importance of equity and inclusion (recognition) and to act on that talk to bring underrepresented writers into the industry

(redistribution). Recognition and redistribution are “bigger” at SXSW where social justice discourses involve not just media makers but politicians, nonprofits, tech companies, and media studios. AFF pursues recognition and redistribution *within* a particular area of the media industries, while activities at SXSW are more oriented toward recognition and redistribution in society at large *through* the media industries. However, I have discussed at considerable length discourse at SXSW pertaining to representation in entertainment, while interventions at AFF also have larger impact beyond writers’ rooms in Hollywood as underrepresented voices get to bring their stories to popular audiences. In comparing these two case studies, I stressed commonalities to media industry events that could shed light on how programming and participant involvement might be constructively improved to realize their potential as platforms for catalyzing change, specifically social justice in the post-2020 critical juncture. The similarities and differences between these two case studies, both of which are grounded in the same political economic and sociohistorical context of Austin, Texas, are productive for that. When the politics of presence emphasize social justice, or even create opportunity for solidarity, events can play a role in closing the inspiration-impact gap.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR CLOSING THE INSPIRATION-IMPACT GAP

A central question, as indicated in the title of this dissertation, is how media industry events close the gap between inspiration and impact related to social justice in the media industries. At SXSW, discursive spaces are created, discourses erupt alongside those that are programmed, and sometimes what is invisible becomes visible. In the case of AFF, writers wrestle with social justice and what it means, especially in terms of equity and inclusion. I have argued that critical junctures create interest in alternatives within the dominant culture itself, but it can be difficult to demonstrate any impact that

follows events' inspiring encounters with new ideas and consequential professional interactions. I sought evidence of this impact primarily through interviews, during which interviewees also shared their thoughts on how industry events could further impact the politics of production and politics of representation as platforms for social justice. Their ideas on how to close the gap between inspiration and impact inform the recommendations I present in this section. Given the perspective I have taken toward events as infrastructure, I will first describe areas where events might improve their programming and organizing approaches before discussing how participants and other stakeholders themselves can influence how events operate to support social justice.

First, it is notable that even under the condition of anonymity, many interviewees expressed appreciation for each event's efforts and stressed the importance of continuing and building upon current approaches. As commitments to social justice-related programs in the media industries recede (Ramón et al., 2023), industry events' staying the course becomes crucial. At the time of these interviews in 2023, multiple participants described to me ongoing outreach by the events on the topic of how to improve programming and event-related opportunities to this end.

Industry events should elevate social justice-related programming to improve its visibility. While participants shared event organizers' perspective that this programming should take the form of including diverse perspectives across topics as well as identity-specific programming, most interviewees were unaware of how to easily find specialized programming. Press releases and promotional materials make it seem like there is a lot of it going on at these events, but actually, it can be easy to miss. Relatedly, a recurring suggestion was to amplify social justice in the form of keynotes. Event organizers described the importance of matching topics with spaces that were suitable to expected audience size, which often means rooms off the beaten path, but event participants

suggested that keynotes with the right public figures and celebrities would draw crowds worthy of larger conference spaces. Lizzo’s keynote, which required me to walk for about ten minutes to reach the back of the line, a line that wrapped around multiple floors of the convention center, again comes to mind. One media executive described to me how satisfied their company has been with their experience as a SXSW brand partner, suggesting that the event could similarly partner with nonprofit organizations and individuals to amplify their social impact work. In short, social justice-related programming could be prioritized better in terms of both event space and scheduling.

Apart from the media event dimension, industry events could better support the participants who receive event recognition with greater year-round involvement. Especially for those who won awards or received professional development opportunities like fellowships, I heard expressions of disappointment that SXSW and AFF were not more involved with their alumni as they sought to get their projects made or find distribution. The most prominent request was simply for more support on how to leverage their brand association to these ends, but also more fellowship and mentorship opportunities attached to the events was similarly recommended. While the Austin Film Festival offers writers retreats locally and in New Mexico, interviewees for both events highlighted Sundance Institute’s artist programs as a standard.³⁴ As events increasingly recognize the work of underrepresented media makers, such ongoing support ensures this recognition has the intended impact on the media industries.

Event organizers could further support networking spaces that intentionally curate for various social groups. “Build it and they will come” is a refrain I heard more than

³⁴ Sundance’s programs include grants, an artist accelerator for funding and networking, matchmaking between filmmakers and financiers, and short-term, often residency-based development programs (“labs” and “intensives”). Sundance also has an “Equity, Impact, and Belonging Program,” as well as a program specifically for Native and Indigenous storytellers (Sundance Institute, n.d.).

once: investment is required before participation becomes organic. In relation to the Austin Film Festival, I heard how an activity like the Creatives of Color Meetup would be even more impactful if it were officially sponsored and promoted. While such activities might be more difficult for AFF to directly sponsor given its nonprofit status, it does have identity-based conference programming like the “Women in the Room” session and Six Square panels I discussed in Chapter 6. In Chapter 5, I noted the success at South by Southwest of Muslim House in 2023, together with the disappearance of the Asian and Pacific Filmmakers Experience that year. Its absence was felt by Asian filmmakers, who wished there was such a space for connecting with others who screened similar stories at that the Film & TV Festival. Houses appear and disappear, serving some communities better than others depending on the availability and initiative of sponsoring organizations. One interviewee mentioned Cannes Lion, an event for the advertising and marketing industries that follows the Cannes Film Festival, as an example. There, a space curated for professionals of color gave them a “70-30” or “60-40” majority, putting them in a position to lead event conversations in which their concerns had been marginalized. Such spaces make it easier for interested executives and powerful figures to connect with potential partners from underrepresented groups.

In addition to a “build it and they will come” mentality, industry events should continue proactive efforts in diversity, equity, and inclusion across their operations. This means continuing to diversify panelists, competition judges, and in the case of Austin Film Festival, script readers. Adequate training and compensation for readers is an important priority, as is avoiding extra, “predatory” fees for participation in equity-related opportunities at events. Beyond short-term and volunteer labor, diversity among event leadership is also crucial for events for the same reasons as diversity among

industry decision-makers in that it increases the likelihood of seeing what is underrepresented, misrepresented, or inaccessible.

An area of activity that received much attention in my chapter on the Austin Film Festival was community engagement, which is where efforts by South by Southwest are comparatively nonexistent. While local businesses invest in official and unofficial events each March to capitalize on South By crowds and energy in Downtown Austin, to be impactful for the city's marginalized communities, South By needs to go out into these communities. With the amount of talent and celebrity physically gathering at South By, which is an uncommon occurrence in comparison to locations like New York and Los Angeles, there is a missed opportunity to coordinate trainings or master classes in collaboration with local institutions. Multiple interviewees emphasized to me how getting celebrities and powerful figures in front of youth has the ability to change lives, whether this occurs in collaboration with Austin-area schools or by making it easier for youth to fill seats at South By's conference. "The impact is super high when you meet someone who's actually doing the work or who's famous," as one interviewee explained. At the same time, this community engagement becomes one more valuable activity South By participants can include among their accomplishments when they report back to their organizations. One interviewee explained to me that accomplishing this might be as simple as playing "matchmaker" between SXSW participants and local nonprofit organizations.

The primary complaint levied against Austin Film Festival regarding community engagement concerned its collaborations with the Six Square cultural district. Several interviewees shared that they wanted to attend sessions at locations like the George Washington Carver Museum, but opted out due to its distance and the tight conference schedule. Festivals should be walkable, and otherwise accessible for people with

disabilities. While AFF's grant funding dictated activities must take place in Six Square, bringing the community into the festival *during* the festival, rather than the festival out into the community at that time, would enable locals to benefit from some of the rich interactions with writers from around the world that AFF is known for. Bringing more of this diversity-related content into the festivals' main spaces simultaneously amplifies it within the conference programming as a whole. This recommendation similarly applies to South by Southwest and other industry events, where exposure to the concentrations of talent the events create, if only for an afternoon, would be impactful for underserved communities.

There is also the issue of accessibility and cost, which I discussed in Chapter 5. Investments in staff positions and training for volunteers are both necessary to address the ways events remains inaccessible. There is "a duty of care" to SXSW's participants, one interviewee from the disability community explained to me, especially given how South By's participants produce its content. In practice this might mean reduced rates for nonprofits, or tiered options that can make events more accessible for underrepresented groups, approaches that require "capitalism gets flipped on its head a little bit." Here, as another interviewee put it, the "qualitative" benefit resulting from these interventions needs to be understood as valuable alongside quantitative metrics of performance. In any case, money and cost is the central concern. "That's just always number one. More money," is what I was told by one AFF organizer I interviewed, who described how funding for social justice-related activities is only growing more limited as we move further from 2020.

Throughout this dissertation I have stressed the importance of participant action in making events productive as platforms. The important role of participants is something that was similarly stressed by event organizers themselves. Some interviewees described

to me how they have spoken at length with programmers on how to improve social justice dimensions for more equitable events. Meanwhile, event organizers highlighted the importance of introductions through participants to possible speakers and organizational partners, especially those who can help with creating “pipelines” that build on festival recognition. In the case of a nonprofit event like Austin Film Festival, finding new speakers and attendees through connections with past participants is crucial, a means of gradually deepening the writer networks that make it work as an event. Big name Hollywood writers A, B, and C might be ideal, but perhaps only writers X, Y, Z are in the network and willing to speak for free, or for a price that the event can afford. Participant interventions are particularly true for building out social justice-related programming. I heard about instances where white writers requested to speak on diversified panels while introducing possible copanelists from underrepresented groups. While at SXSW there is the PanelPicker platform as a mechanism for contributing to programming, it also works with partners to fill in gaps. As one South By organizer hypothetically put it, “wow, we got, you know, 10 million ideas on AI this year, but none of them are how BIPOC communities use AI, so we really ought to curate something like that.”

Finally, participants can take ownership over events as social infrastructure. The Creatives of Color Meet Up is a great example of this at Austin Film Festival. Another is how AFF’s 2022 competition winners created a Discord server of their own following the event to mutually support each other as they leveraged their accomplishment. For SXSW, I have noted several privately sponsored events organized around the climate crisis, reproductive rights, and social impact more generally. One interviewee described to me how the interest in these activities and the number of organizations now attending SXSW could be coordinated to create even more spaces during South By that would attract the interest of event organizers and lead to official partnership, explaining that “the business

case is really important for institutions that are commercially driven.” On this point, media executives I interviewed stressed the importance of participating and showing up for such activities, but also explaining to their companies the value of this work. This could lead to the kinds of partnerships and sponsorships just discussed. Perhaps corporate sponsors might like to attach themselves to SXSW as a diverse and inclusive space by funding certain tiered options.

THE QUESTION OF PLACE

Place is connected to these events’ origins, their ongoing appeal, their activities related to social justice, and some of their greatest opportunities for impact. I have argued that this remains the case even as the notoriety of their brands become increasingly global. For SXSW, this notoriety has transformed into global expansions, with a full-fledged SXSW Sydney satellite event held in October 2023 and a SXSW London event planned for June 2025. It promises “Austin attitude” with a “European accent” and will program the usual South By mix of tech, screen media, music, and future-focused ideas (Roberts, 2024). South By’s growth away from Austin contrasts with the above recommendations to expand locally within the city. It also disconnects the event from its reciprocal relationship with place, removing its imagined weirdness from the city and culture that reinforce its authenticity.

These global ambitions are perhaps driven by media conglomerate P-MRC, which as noted, purchased a 50% stake in SXSW during the COVID-19 pandemic (Harris-Bridson & Kohn, 2021). However, SXSW Sydney and SXSW London are not the first times the event has attempted to break out of Austin. There have been numerous spinoff events, such as the North by Northwest (NXNW) music festival in Portland (see Figure 7.1). A collaboration with *Willamette Week*, an alt weekly like *The Austin Chronicle* that

had given birth to SXSW, NXNW sought to capitalize on a similar counterculture and thriving music scene in Portland. A SXSW organizer explained to me that it was discontinued after several years when it did not take off in the same way the main Austin event had.



Figure 7.1: Promotional poster for North by Northwest (NXNW) in 1995. Photo by Michael Crider and shared with permission.

In Chapter 4, I discussed how SXSW emerged and succeeded due to its particular cultural history, political configurations, and position as a media capital within global industry networks. All of these made it attractive as a unique event offering unconventional, and yet valuable, experiences for its participants. But a lot has changed

since the 1990s, and previous South By expansions outside of Austin did not try to reproduce the megaevent in the entirety of its scope. SXSW V2V, for example, was an offshoot of the Interactive Festival held in Las Vegas from 2012 to 2015.

The implications of South by Southwest as a case study could become more significant should it succeed at becoming a multilocal, global event network of its own. This relates to the larger argument I have made about media industry event networks and film festival circuits and how media capitals themselves are similarly networked. South By's "I" words" are likely welcome in just about any global city that wants to brand itself as a creative city in order to benefit from association with technological innovation that can attract cultural capital and economic capital alike. The political and cultural imaginary seen in Austin, at least in how it aligns with the Californian ideology and progressive neoliberalism, is a lot larger than the city itself. I have discussed two particular events in Austin at length, and how time and place have produced them, but it is important to stress that if they were to disappear tomorrow, these communities of practice would gather elsewhere, even if the local dynamics and wider impacts would be different. Creative labor makes the media capital.

What is unclear is how the antagonisms between progressive and progressive neoliberal ideologies, as well as liberal and conservative political tensions, would play out at events away from the Texas state capital. Will there be the same impetus to challenge and critique, the same forces of dissensus and consensus? Progressive neoliberalism is by no means an Austin phenomenon, but the forms of resistance against it are often place-based—the Shell House demonstration in 2022; United Musicians and Allied Workers' unofficial music showcase in 2023 that protested low compensation for South By's participating musicians and featured speeches from Congressman Greg Casar and City Councilman Zohaib Qadri (Sherman, 2023); and most recently, speakers and

musicians boycotting SXSW over US Army and defense industry sponsorships in 2024 (Wolfe & Jackson, 2024). It is notable that South By came out in defense of its own boycotters when Governor Greg Abbott attacked them on Twitter (now known as X; see Figure 7.2). There is a mutual exploitation between those who, for example, seek to leverage South By's global stage to protest U.S.-backed genocide in Gaza, and South By's own attempts to define its brand as a place for progressive politics, disruptive technologies, and trendsetting cultural production. The importance of place to this political and cultural atmosphere at South by Southwest was described me by one media executive: "You have all these people filtering in, funneling into this city that's in a state that is almost, you know, that's so suppressed, right? And so, I think it brings that activism out of folks that you may not see in other spaces." Whether these participants are local or "filter in" from afar, Austin as place acts as a catalyst.

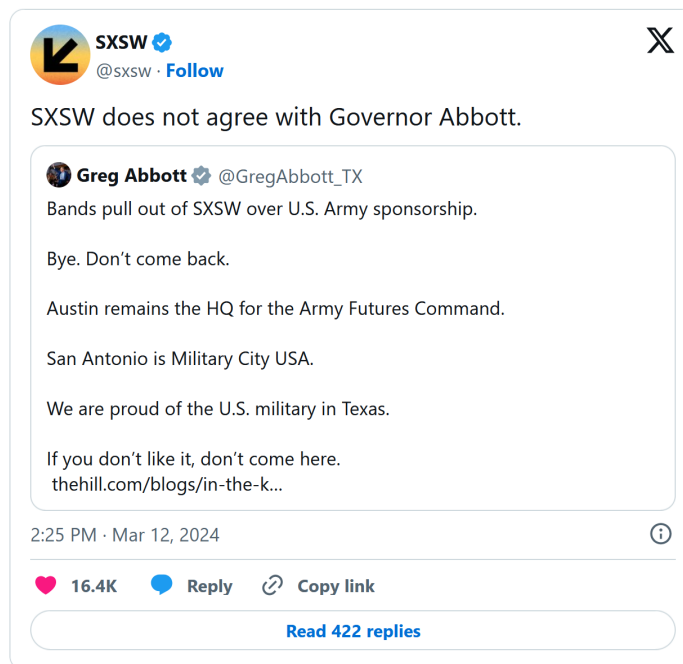


Figure 7.2: SXSW defends bands boycotting its music festival in 2024. Screenshot by the author.

LIMITATIONS

While I have taken a global perspective in this dissertation, my empirical focus has been trained on two events within a single city. I have argued media industry events in Austin have broader implications due to their nodal functions within global networks. A critical media industry studies approach frames this heavily ethnographic research, which includes a comparative case study research design. The narrow geographical focus of this dissertation is a strength, but also a limitation.

Participant observation involved making choices driven by my research questions about what activities to observe and how to allocate the limited time that I had at these large, and brief, events. I sought out, first, examples of politics, and later, specifically instances of social justice-related discourses and activities. The possibility of confirmation bias is a concern. I attempted to mitigate this by accessing the perspectives of other event participants through interviews, but with interviews comes self-selection bias that can be problematic for any interview-based study. I collected Twitter datasets to contextualize these subjective accounts, but of course Twitter as a source for discourse has its own biases in terms of who participates on its platform. In combination, these various sources of data made for a more robust examination of my research questions.

Regarding the question of impact, I delayed interviews until several months after the events had ended in order to give interviewees some distance that could help with assessing the impact event participation had on their media work. I also drew on the events' promotion of participant success stories and other shared metrics of impact like investments obtained or attendee satisfaction. However, these are mostly perceptions of impact. The threads contributing to change are multiple and causality cannot be presumed.

FUTURE RESEARCH

Throughout this dissertation I have acknowledged the different roles played by mainstream media industry events when compared to issue-specific and identity-oriented media festivals. Events like the Essence Festival of Culture in New Orleans deserve further attention, especially when considering the implications of the post-2020 critical juncture. Other mainstream US events like Tribeca in New York City also warrant further attention, to say nothing of the constant stream of industry gatherings within Los Angeles itself. How these US-based, convergent media events relate to “purer” film festivals in other parts of the world is an important question as well.

The period of this study officially ended in March 2023. I briefly mentioned the Hollywood strikes that happened later that year in my introduction, but how the Austin Film Festival responded to the strikes in support of writers, and how the strike ultimately impacted the festival’s event in October 2023, deserve further attention. In this conclusion, I have also noted boycotts of SXSW 2024. Despite vocal support for Ukraine in 2022 and 2023, as well as a Human Rights Campaign Happy Hour scheduled for SXSW 2024, there was no mention of Palestinians in official communications. It would seem the progressive neoliberal orientation of SXSW produces programming elisions when an issue conflicts with the geopolitical agendas of its biggest stakeholders. There was only silence leading up to the event in March 2024, even as what Human Rights Watch at that time called “the scale and gravity of civilian suffering in Gaza driven by Israeli war crimes” continued (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This does not mean participants themselves were silent, as the aforementioned boycotts indicate. In fact, with South by Southwest’s announcement in June 2024 that it would cut financial ties with the U.S. Army and weapons manufacturers (Bergeson, 2024), it seems these boycotts were

ultimately successful. The question of how participants respond to contentious programming and programming elisions are areas deserving further attention.

LOOKING FORWARD

When Stuart Hall elaborated on closure in representation, how symbolic power naturalizes meaning, he argued:

to keep representation open is a way of constantly wanting new kinds of knowledges to be produced in the world, new kinds of subjectivities to be explored, and new dimensions of meaning, which have not been foreclosed by the systems of power which are in operation. (as quoted in Patierno & Talreja, 1997)

I have described how the events studied in this dissertation work to keep representation open. Writers at the Austin Film Festival and Writers Conference called for more diverse and empowered voices in the writers' room, and more stories told from distinct cultural and historical positionalities that can project "layered representations" (Brooks & Hébert, 2006, p. 312) of identity into the popular imaginary. At South by Southwest, social justice discourses pertaining to media and technology across a range of creative industries appeared in pockets as industry leaders, financiers, creatives, media makers, and advocates gathered from around the globe to share innovative ideas and avenues for impact. Calls for recognition and redistribution could be seen at both events. Social justice requires real shifts in the resources available to historically marginalized groups, alongside structural support and opportunity within the media industries. Moreover, it involves those with industry power understanding the value of difference as something more than a reflection of demographics.

Appendices

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROCEDURES AND QUESTIONNAIRES

***Note: the following are templates used for recruitment and interviews, which were later tailored to particular individuals. Interviews were semi-structured, allowing for the interviewees' experiences to lead the conversations. Some questions and sections of the questionnaire became saturated more quickly than others, which also directed my focus toward some areas more than others over time. I ensured every interviewee had the opportunity to comment on each section of the questionnaire relevant to them, though every question was not always covered, and conversations at times would take the discussion in other directions that were nonetheless insightful for answering my research questions.

Interview Recruitment

Recruitment during participant observation

Hi there. My name is Brad Limov and I'm a researcher from UT-Austin studying events and their social impact. Would you be willing to join me for an interview in the coming months to discuss your experience here at the event?

Interview request email

Hi {Name},

Hope your week is going well. This is Brad, the UT-Austin researcher studying events and their impact whom you met at {insert event name}. You expressed interest in speaking with me further about your thoughts on the event. {Insert sentence with specifics of how you met and what you chatted about to help with recall}.

Would you be available for a virtual interview in the coming weeks? This interview would be entirely voluntary and anonymized unless you give your explicit consent to be identified. It should take around 30-45 minutes. We'll shoot for 30.

All the best, and hope to connect soon -

Brad Limov

Opt-in consent tweet (for quoting public tweets with sensitive information; 280-character limit)

Hi {name}!

I'm a researcher [@UTAustin](#) writing about {event}. I plan to quote this tweet anonymously as part of the study.

Please DM me for more information about the project and to opt-in. Thank you!

Consent to be identified as poster of public tweet (follows opt-in consent tweet)

Hi {name}, I appreciate you getting back to me. I would like to identify you as the author of this tweet because {insert reason}. Do you consent to being identified as the author of the tweet for our research study? Your consent is entirely voluntary. If you have any questions or concerns, you can contact me (the researcher) here or at brad.limov@utexas.edu. You can also reach the University of Texas at Austin Institutional Review Board at irb@austin.utexas.edu or by phone at 512-232-1543. Thank you!

Interview Guide for Semi-structured Interviews with Potential Questions

Before Recording

1. Welcome them and thank them for joining you
2. Quickly summarize what we're doing and how we connected
3. Share the consent form in chat and remind them that you emailed it to them previously
4. Ask them if they have any questions. Remind them they'll remain anonymous unless they consent to being identified
5. Ask if you can start recording then begin once they affirm

Questionnaire for Festival Organizers / Staff (Emphasizes Programming)

BACKGROUND

1. How did you get involved with {festival}? What are your responsibilities now?

PROGRAMMING

2. How would you characterize the programming at {festival}?

3. Regarding social mission, {festival} includes a number of activities on the topic of {social justice movement(s)}. Why include this in the programming?
4. Could you describe where this programming fits? What about its location in terms of event space and time slots? How about the event's broader mission?
5. What do you think this programming accomplishes, and how? Feel free to share any specific examples that come to mind.
6. How do you encourage engagement with this programming among attendees?
7. How does talk about {social justice movement(s)} at the festival translate into action for your attendees or other interested parties beyond the event?
8. Might platforming these causes do more harm than good by misrepresenting them or misdirecting action in support of them, or even causing backlash? How could any potential harm be minimized?

NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY

9. Does it matter that {festival} is held in Austin? Why?
10. As you know, a lot of what makes {festival} special is what happens when people gather around common purposes and interests here in Austin. Could you share any thoughts about the importance of bringing people together, of networking to the event? Again, are there any specific examples that come to mind, whether at official events or the many related gatherings in the city at festival time?
11. Relatedly, {festival} talks about its attendees as a "community." How would you describe this community?

THE MEDIA EVENT

12. Beyond bringing people together, we all know {festival} is important in how it sets agendas for the industry and defines taste with its programming and awards. Can you think of any examples of where this media role also helps the social causes discussed at {festival}?
13. Could you describe the importance of social media to {festival}'s mission, specifically as it concerns {social justice movement(s)}?

POTENTIAL PROGRAMMING INTERVENTIONS

14. We've talked a lot about {festival}'s significance. How could it better use its status to support the work of industry professionals and media makers who are engaged in {social justice movement(s)}? What assistance would help {festival} ensure that your event is, in fact, "impactful"?
15. How might various stakeholders work to get these issues more centrally featured? Is it a money issue? Sponsorship issue? Media seemed to force SX's hand back in 2016 with the gamergate scandal. Is there anything they could do that might be more beneficial to both your festival and the broader conversation in getting these ideas featured more prominently? Resources, etc.?
16. What about the audience? How much do attendance numbers/data on previous panels factor into the equation? Or community voting and advisory board input?

FINAL THOUGHTS

17. Anything else you'd like to add that we might have missed, or that you'd like to reiterate and emphasize?

Questionnaire for Industry Professionals and Other Attendees (Emphasizes Experience / Networking / Community)

BACKGROUND

1. What brought you to {festival}? Was it your first time?

THE FESTIVAL EXPERIENCE

2. How would you characterize the experience of attending {festival}?
3. Regarding social mission, {festival} includes a number of activities on the topic of {social justice movement(s)}. What do you think these activities accomplish, and how? Feel free to share any specific examples that come to mind.
4. Of course, you and your work are one example. Did you find your experience at {festival} valuable for your work? Was your message / film / etc. well-received?
5. How did this differ from what you saw other attendees/panelists experience in how their work attracted attention and/or investment?
6. When {social justice movement} was discussed at {festival}, did you feel it was represented properly? Were there any misconceptions?
7. Did talk and conversation ever translate into action for you, an opportunity for you professionally or for your specific project?
8. Might platforming these causes do more harm than good by misrepresenting them or misdirecting action in support of them, or even causing backlash? How could any potential harm be minimized?

NETWORKING AND COMMUNITY

9. Does it matter that {festival} is held in Austin? Why?
10. A lot of what makes {festival} worth the cost of attending is what happens when people gather around common purposes and interests here in Austin—in other words, networking. Did you meet others working on {social movement}, or who otherwise were interested in supporting your work? Again, please share any specific examples that come to mind, whether at official or unofficial festival gatherings.
11. Relatedly, {festival name} talks about its attendees as a “community.” Did you feel like you were part of a community while at {festival}? If not, could you describe any connection you felt with fellow festivalgoers?

THE MEDIA EVENT

12. {festival} only lasts for a short period. Could you describe how your networking at the event relates to your use of social media?

13. Beyond bringing people together, we all know {festival name} is important in how it sets agendas for the industry and defines taste with its awards and other selections. Do you have any thoughts about how this media role could help the social causes discussed at {festival}?

POTENTIAL PROGRAMMING INTERVENTIONS

14. We've talked a lot about {festival}'s significance. How could it better use its importance to support the work of industry professionals and media makers who are engaged in {insert social movement(s)}? In other words, what would you like to see {festival} do better? What would you change?
15. In terms of {festival} as an event more largely, what might activists/advocates like yourself do to get these issues and conversations featured more prominently in the event's programming and spaces? Get backing by other orgs, or funding, or media coverage? (Can give GamerGate scandal as an example)
16. Where should festivals start when programming these causes?
17. Have you been to any activist festivals like the Human Rights Watch Film Festival? Were they different in any key ways in their advocacy in comparison to {festival}?

FINAL THOUGHTS

18. Anything else you'd like to add that we might have missed, or that you'd like to reiterate and emphasize?

APPENDIX B: QUALITATIVE CODING FRAME

Media Event / Inspiration	Trade Rituals / Impact	Locational / Temporal
media event: "badge" festival	trade rituals: (professional / identity-based) community	event background: Austinite experience
media event: (small or niche -- but still overwhelming?) scale	trade rituals: a space for finally meeting	event background: embodied energy / vibe
media event: accessibility and cost	trade rituals: advocacy groups	event background: event outside austin / yearround
media event: alternative public spheres	trade rituals: approachability / informality / openness / welcoming / intimate	event background: facts
media event: backlash / resistance / fatigue / cultural struggle	trade rituals: art imperative (art for arts sake)	event background: founder vision
media event: brand association	trade rituals: authentic connection / feeling out others	event background: general experience
media event: bridge divides	trade rituals: career and networking	event background: global facts
media event: business environment	trade rituals: chasing the next big thing	event background: imaginary / brand / fest culture
media event: career and lifestyle and individual decisions	trade rituals: collaboration / funding / investment / business relationship / networking vertically	event background: local benefit
media event: charismatic leadership	trade rituals: competition	event background: local facts / connections
media event: clarifying and solidifying terms / agendas / ideas	trade rituals: connecting through connections	event background: online platform
media event: community engagement	trade rituals: contesting / navigating norms	event background: top example
media event: contesting stereotypes/prejudice	trade rituals: corporate solutions	austin imaginary: attraction / performance of the imaginary
media event: corporate / industry players	trade rituals: cross industry mixing / inspiration / openness / investment	austin imaginary: city / geography doesn't matter
media event: corporate launch / activation	trade rituals: cross industry mixing failure	austin imaginary: city and festival overlap
media event: critique of media representation	trade rituals: deference politics	austin imaginary: counterculture / community / independent / (weird) "vibe" / organic authenticity
media event: critique of politics of production	trade rituals: education / info sharing	austin imaginary: counterculture's politics
media event: curation and recognition and festival efforts	trade rituals: event as community or village	austin imaginary: cultural / creative hub
media event: diversity and belonging	trade rituals: failure as trade rituals	austin imaginary: film / writing capital
media event: diversity for diversity's sake / checking a box	trade rituals: festival as corporation	austin imaginary: history
media event: diversity initiatives / fellowships	trade rituals: festival partnerships / sponsors	austin imaginary: homelessness and dysfunction

media event: doing a good job	trade rituals: finding tribe or friendworking or organic networking	austin imaginary: music capital
media event: epistemic privilege / authenticity	trade rituals: funding / investment / business relationship	austin imaginary: not LA/NYC
media event: exclusivity	trade rituals: government participation / obstruction	austin imaginary: technopolis
media event: failure as media event	trade rituals: helping alumni	austin imaginary: tourism (weather, welcoming, walkable)
media event: festival abilities and constraints - labor (exploitation) / finances / resources / approaches	trade rituals: hope machine	austin imaginary: top example
media event: festival as platform / hub / infrastructure	trade rituals: influencing the decisionmakers / finding ways to be valuable	critical juncture: place
media event: filmmakers	trade rituals: inspiration-impact gap	critical juncture: time
media event: financial players	trade rituals: investing in career	critical juncture: top example
media event: first time	trade rituals: labor reproduction / entry into industry	aff examples: script competition scandal and confusion or dissatisfaction
media event: good writing discourses	trade rituals: media convergence	aff examples: uplifting storytellers initiative
media event: greenwash/wokewash/PR	trade rituals: mentoring / advice / giving back	sxsw examples: Boots Riley + Amazon
media event: hetero-patriarchy	trade rituals: network of industry filters	sxsw examples: disability justice community + media
media event: history	trade rituals: networking for those who made it	sxsw examples: gamergate
media event: inspiration-impact gap	trade rituals: not solidarity	sxsw examples: McDonalds & Latinx inclusion
media event: inspiring / energizing	trade rituals: official networking and unofficial (friendworking)	sxsw examples: NFTs + social justice
media event: introverted / isolated / idiosyncratic writers	trade rituals: online vs offline networking & connection	sxsw examples: film awards & social justice in film programming
media event: liberal/dem politics and cross-sector forward thinking technocratic creative alliance	trade rituals: perseverance / patience	sxsw examples: Youth Climate Lab / Shell House
media event: media inspiring justice	trade rituals: philanthropy	global industry nodes: event networks/circuits
media event: multidimensional participation	trade rituals: private / public / third sector collaboration	global industry nodes: global participation
media event: networked ideas / spaces / communities / professionals	trade rituals: private sponsored / off site gatherings	global industry nodes: la/nyc participation
media event: new attendee	trade rituals: profit motive / the business case for social justice	global industry nodes: media capital
media event: nonconformity / freedom / disruption / novelty / hype	trade rituals: project promotion / name recognition / buzz	global industry nodes: relation to other Austin events

media event: not solidarity	trade rituals: qualified	global industry nodes: top example
media event: organic diversity / not just mission statement or deference	trade rituals: reconnecting with existing tribe	reflections: discussing project with participants / getting suggestions
media event: overdependence on same bipoc creators	trade rituals: reinforcing norms	reflections: field work approach
media event: panelist / roundtable	trade rituals: rejection	reflections: finding interviewees
media event: participant not solidarity	trade rituals: ROI	reflections: iterating on RQs and argument
media event: participant solidarity / action	trade rituals: same level / horizontal networking / helping each other up	reflections: research as networking and participation
media event: pitch competition	trade rituals: scale	reflections: study origins and descriptions
media event: preaching to the choir	trade rituals: screenwriter twitter	reflections: support from study participants for project
media event: programming / organizing solutions	trade rituals: serendipity	reflections: top examples
media event: raise awareness	trade rituals: solidarity	
media event: repeat attendees	trade rituals: success as trade rituals	
media event: roundtables	trade rituals: symbolic identity politics	
media event: safe space	trade rituals: top examples	
media event: segregation?	trade rituals: top-down	
media event: self-awareness	trade rituals: transactional	
media event: serendipity / exclusivity	trade rituals: work together and be cool	
media event: setting discourse / behavior for event	trade rituals: working outside / adjacent to the system / carving out space	
media event: solidarity	trade rituals: writers groups / feedback	
media event: solidarity not solidarity contradiction		
media event: spectacle / pop culture / trends		
media event: success as media event		
media event: symbolic identity politics		
media event: top example		
media event: truth		
media event: venting / commiserating / support network		
media event: virtual festival / platform benefits		
media event: virtual festival / platform drawbacks		
media event: weird / whacky / fun / independent / funky / buzzy / electric / quirky		

media event: white and
heteronormative

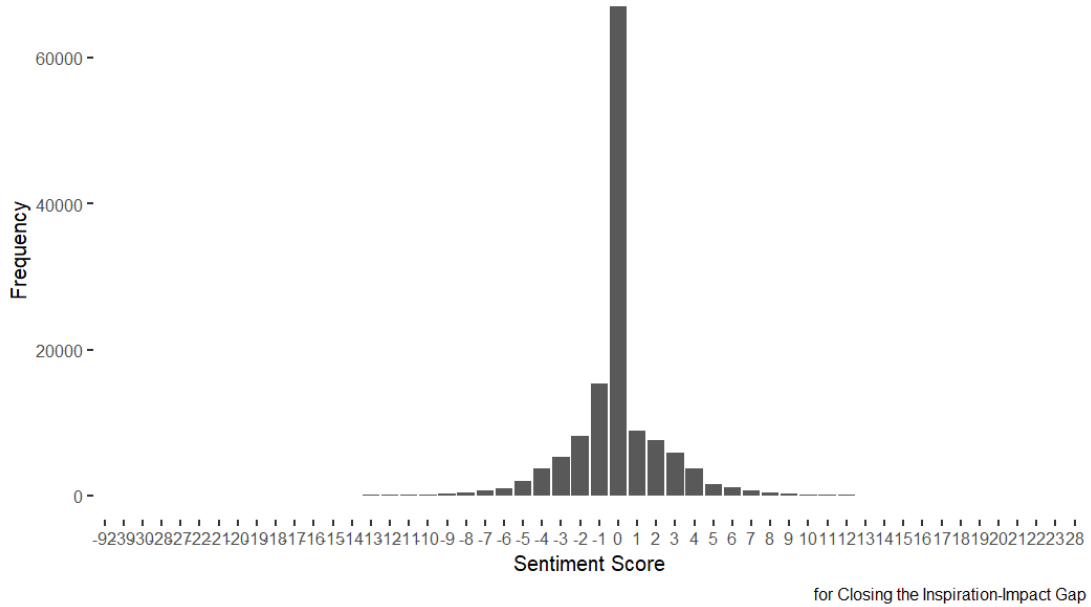
media event: white supremacy

media event: word of mouth /
circulation

APPENDIX C: COMPUTATIONAL METHODS RESULTS

SXSW 2020

SXSW 2020 Sentiment Score Distribution

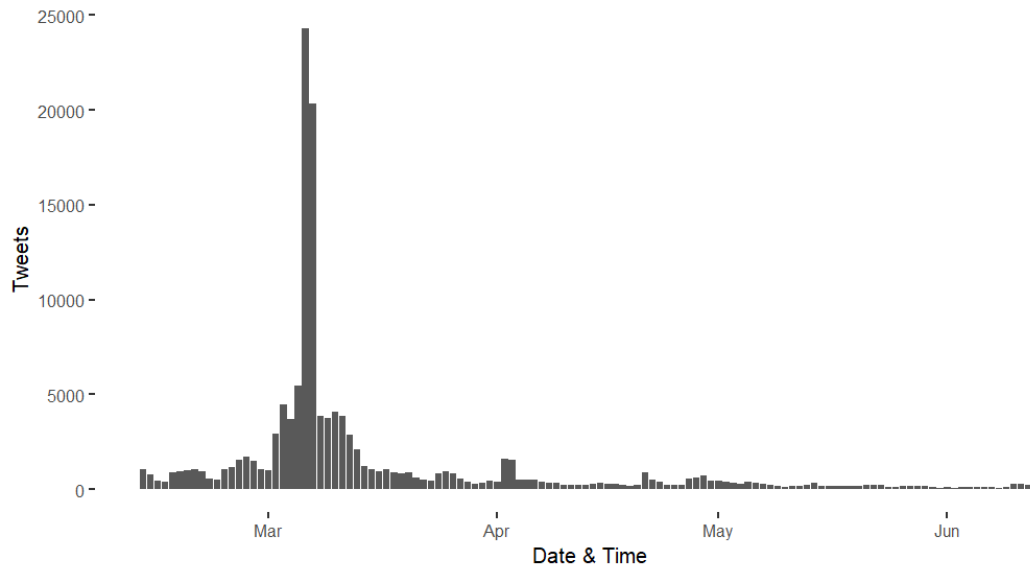


for Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

Figure C.1: Post-hoc sentiment analysis indicating slight skew towards negativity.

Time series of SXSW 2020 tweets

Number of posts on Twitter per day



Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

Figure C.2: Time series indicating massive spike in social media attention when SXSW 2020 was cancelled.

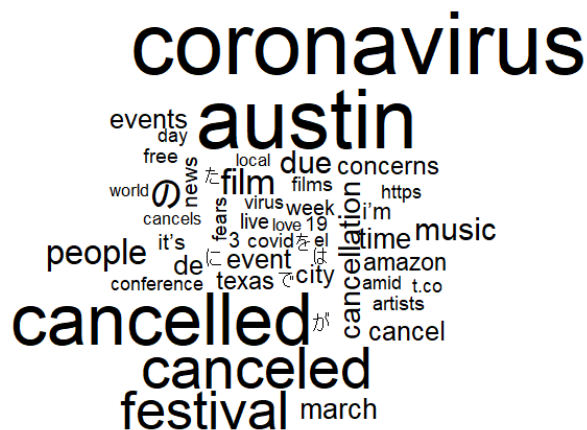


Figure C.3: Word cloud of top 50 words in the dataset. The cancellation and mention of the failed Amazon partnership are notable.

Tweet Text	Likes	Retweets	Replies	Quote
Okay, exciting news y'all! We're partnering with @SXSW on a 10-day streaming event to bring you a collection of movies from this year's line-up. It'll be free to everyone in the U.S. (yeah, we said everyone) because these films deserve an audience. Stay tuned for more details!	32628 (2 nd)	6718	641	1223
what if @AmazonStudios or @netflix or @Apple just bought all the films from @sxsw and did a sxsw x streamer film festival, coronavirus edition. build online community around it. films get bought and seen. and the streamer is a hero to indie filmmakers and fans 🍿	26460 (3 rd)	3912	351	545
SXSW cancelled I remember walking up 6th street shooting No Flex Zone legendary shitliterally gave me my start	17004 (6 th)	1758	92	152
The cancellation of SXSW legitimately stunned me. The suspension of the NBA's season is utterly terrifying. Do you know how bad this shit has to be for billionaire owners to tap out?	9646 (10 th)	1305	204	58
I love SXSW, it's been so good to me over the years. With its cancellation, spare a thought for the many indie film-makers, bands, artists and fans who were excited to go & to the people and businesses of Austin who were relying on that trade. Show your support however you can.	5092 (18 th)	380	22	8

Table C.1: Top tweets from the SXSW 2020 dataset illustrating shock around its cancellation, the resulting impact, and South By's ad hoc response with an Amazon partnership. Rank by number of likes is indicated in parentheses.

South by Southwest 2021

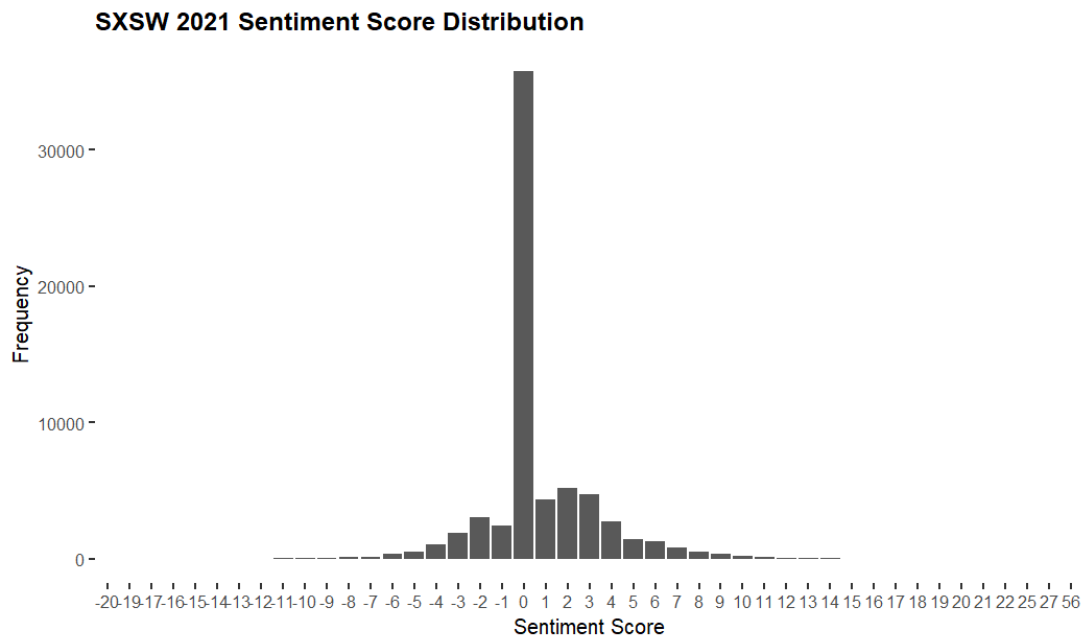


Figure C.4: Post-hoc sentiment analysis indicating positive skew.

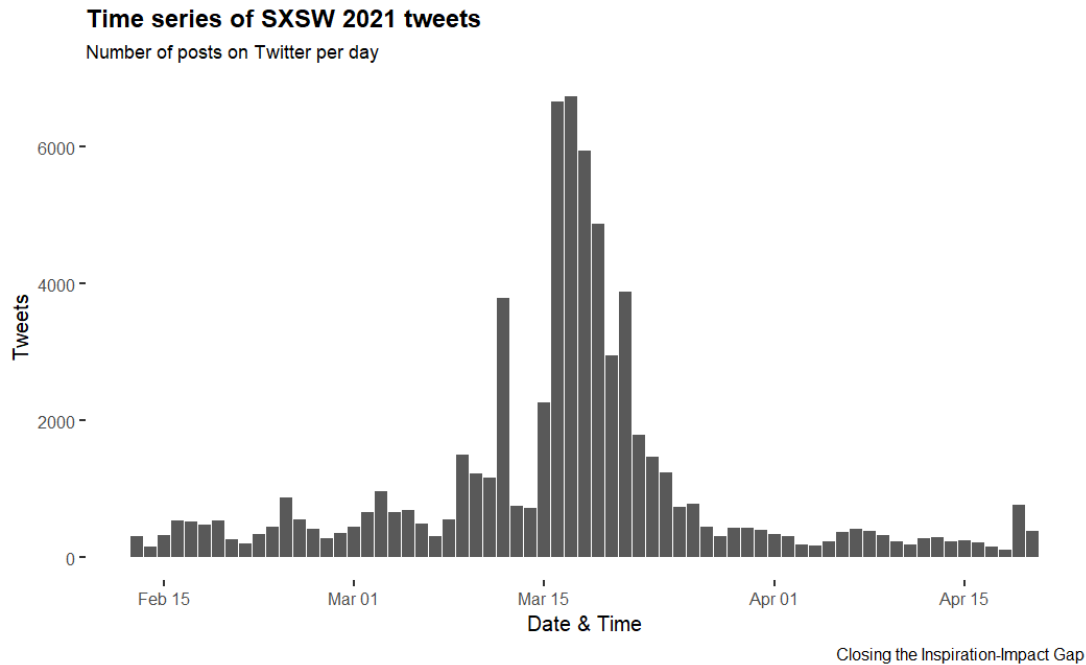
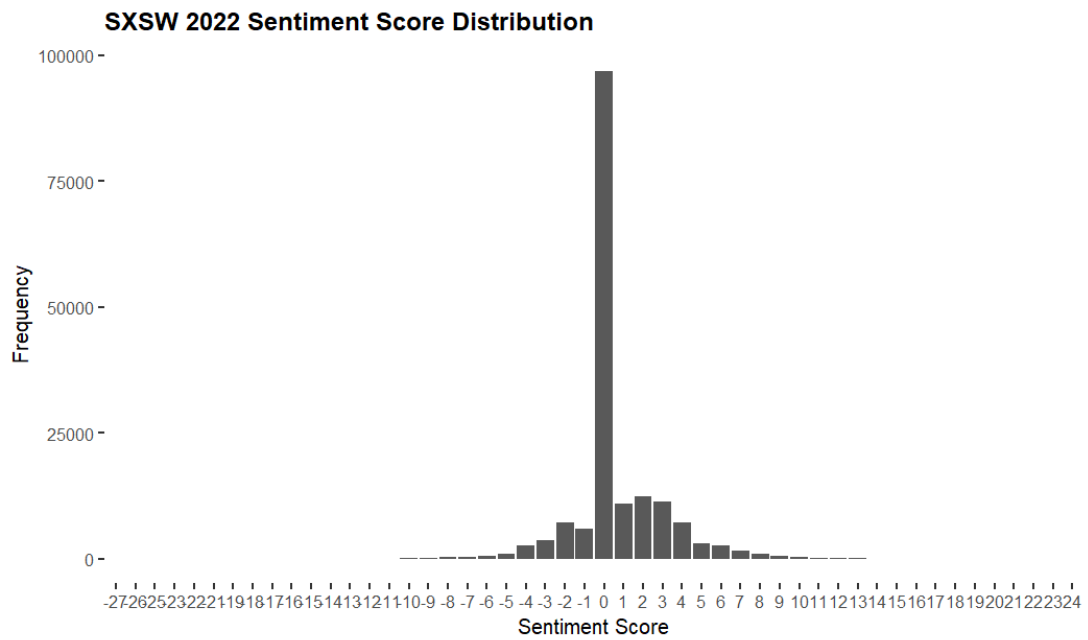


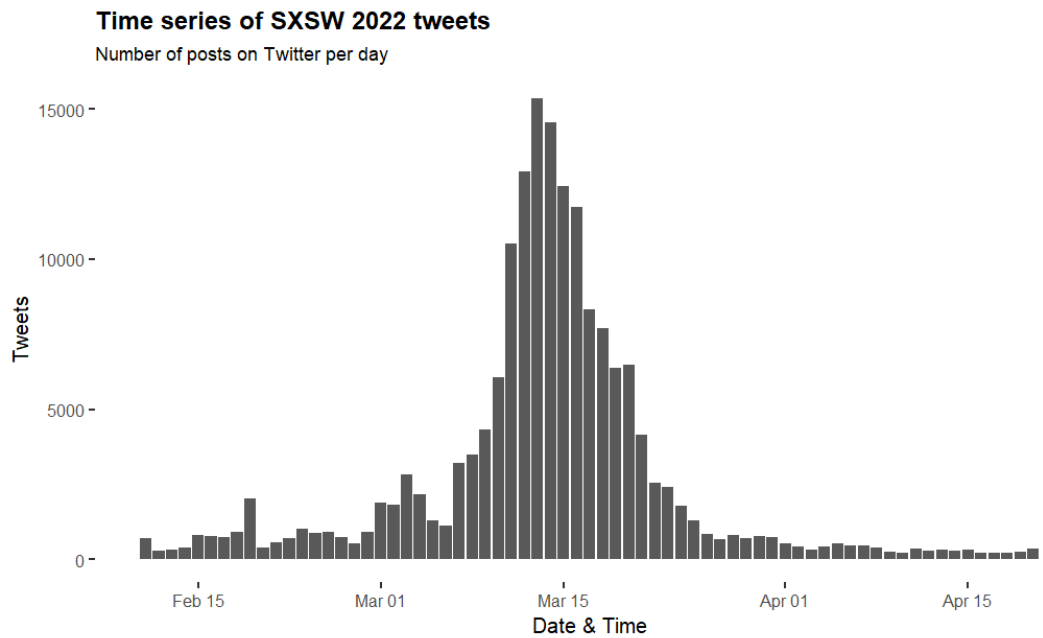
Figure C.5: Time series of social media attention to SXSW 2021 Online, which was noticeably smaller than subsequent years.

South by Southwest 2022



for Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

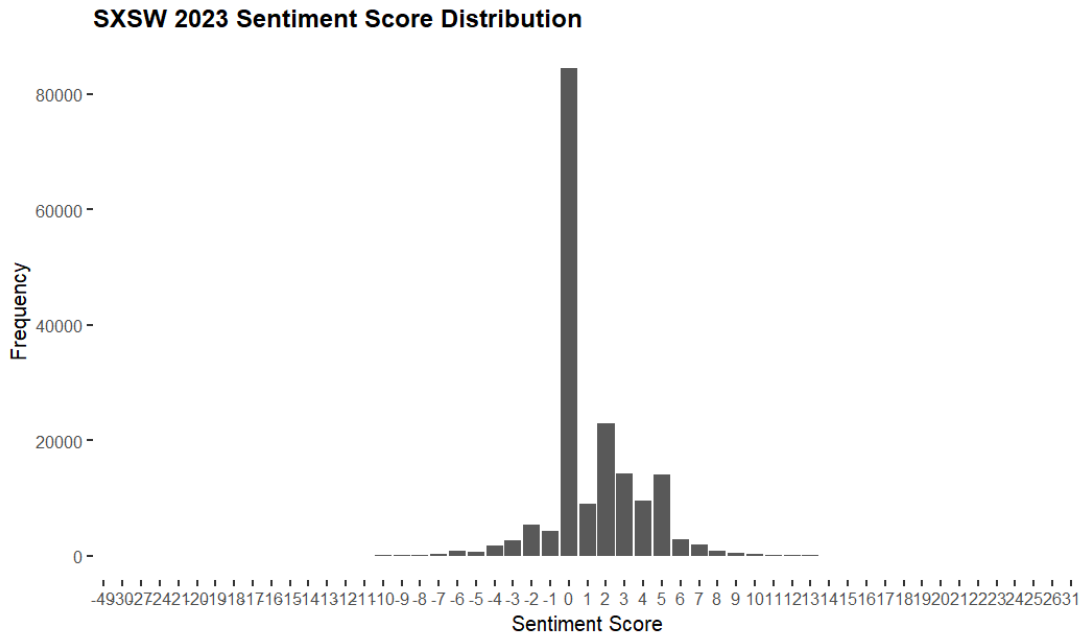
Figure C.7: Post-hoc sentiment analysis indicating positive skew.



Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

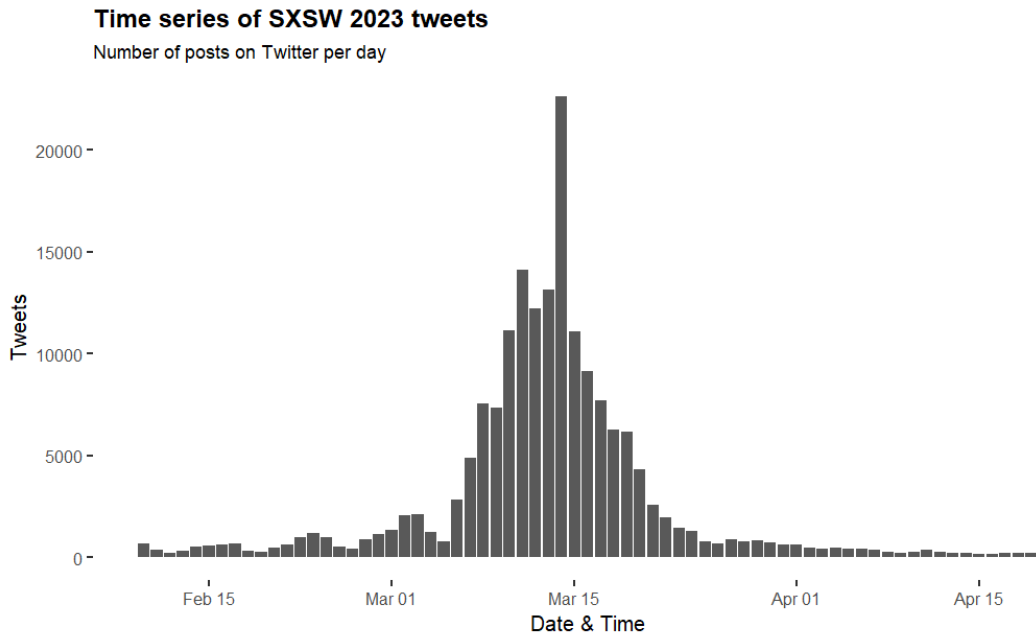
Figure C.8: Time series of social media attention to SXSW 2022.

South by Southwest 2023



Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

Figure C.10: Post-hoc sentiment analysis indicating strong positive skew.



Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

Figure C.11: Time series of social media attention to SXSW 2023. It is similar to 2022 apart from a spike on March 14 related to a sweepstakes held by Avocados from Mexico as part of their marketing activation at the event.

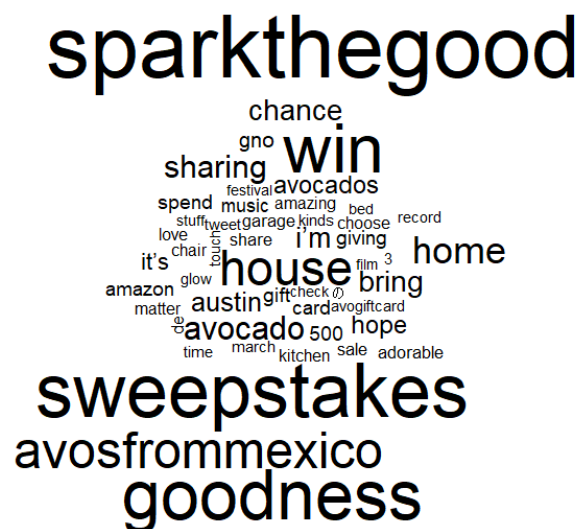


Figure C.12: Word cloud of top 50 words in the dataset. Avocados from Mexico features largely due to sweepstakes winners being determined by engagement with their social media posts (Avocados from Mexico, 2023).

Tweet Text	Likes	Retweets	Replies	Quote
Disney shows off their “real” lightsaber at #SXSW https://t.co/e3AqDRV53P	47054 (1 st)	3618	590	1958
9 years ago today; Tyler, The Creator was arrested for “inciting a riot” at SXSW. The famous mugshot 🤪 https://t.co/EpAnidKSbs	22014 (2 nd)	2279	58	142
A Behind the Scenes look into the making of ‘aespa VR Concert at KWANGYA’ with @AmazeVR! #aespa #에스파 #SXSW #AmazeVRConcerts https://t.co/KIBcHbsDh9	21590 (3 rd)	5542	82	166
Chloe Bailey on how Damson Idris made her comfortable filming her first love scene in ‘Swarm’ #SXSW https://t.co/jKhKmlTHj4	18210 (6 th)	1589	209	500
It has been exactly one year since our film premiered at SXSW. I tried (and failed) to sum up all of my feelings in a far too sincere instagram post you can go and find if you're curious (or bored). https://t.co/8yyWAVgXip	6494 (23 rd)	476	56	64
Great minds think alike! IC and federal partners @NSAGov, @NGA_GEOINT, @NatReconOfc, @NSF, and @FAANews were at #SXSW2023 to educate attendees on what we do and talk to them about opportunities to put their expertise to work. #CIASXSW #SXSW #Technology #EmergingTech #STEM #STEAM https://t.co/2CemmV8jWA	487 (577 th)	164	1521 (1 st)	22

Table C.4: Top tweets from the SXSW 2023 dataset. The characteristic mix of tech, music, and film/TV is joined by the CIA and US Gov. Notable is the ongoing use of association with the SXSW brand for promotional purposes.

Austin Film Festival 2020

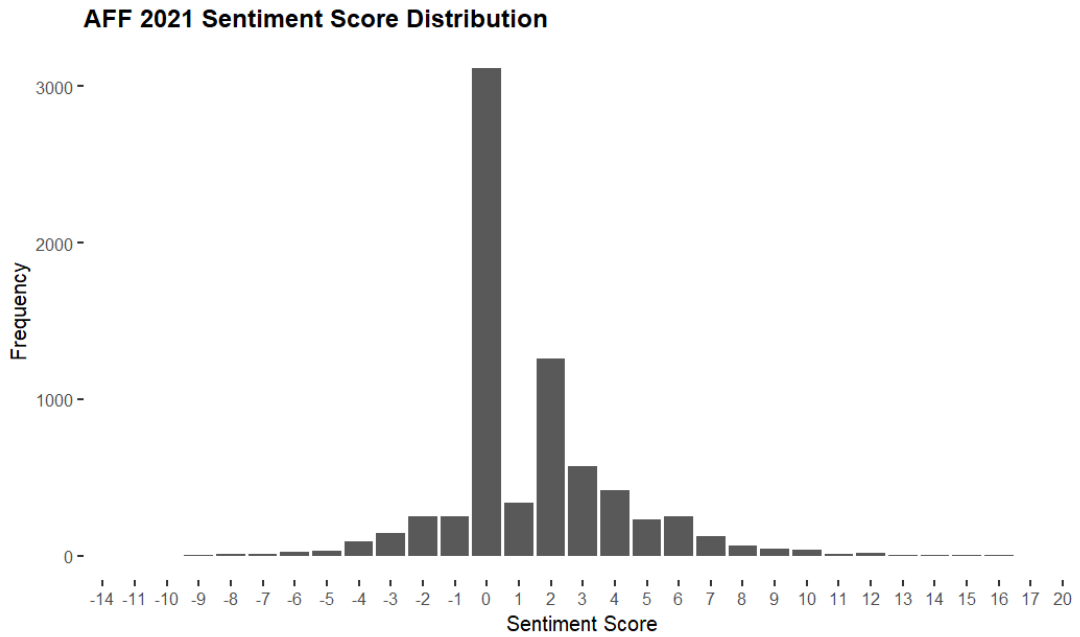
A walkthrough of the computational analysis completed on tweets that were streamed in real time during AFF 2020 is presented in Appendix D. It includes the post-hoc sentiment analysis, time series, and word cloud graphs in context of the code used to produce them.

Here, I only present top tweets from the AFF 2020 dataset that was later collected in November 2022. This additional dataset was collected because streamed tweets do not have engagement metrics.

Tweet Text	Likes	Retweets	Replies	Quote
Brothers of Destruction, an upcoming @WWENetwork documentary about The @undertaker and @KaneWWE, will make its world premiere at the Austin Film Festival. @austinfilmfest https://t.co/fzmGAPMxcQ	3904 (1 st)	724	83	113
I'm bad at sharing success and promoting myself. I'm trying to be better! So: One of my pilots, "Uncharted Waters," has advanced to the Semi-Finalist round at Austin Film Festival. Another, "Pilcrow Books," is a second-rounder. Very grateful to have some good news right now	1044 (3 rd)	19	17	0
I've been sitting with this for a few days just to be sure it's all real, but as of last week, I'm also repped by UTA! And my pilot is a semifinalist in the Austin Film Festival! It's crazy and wonderful and I'm so honored to add UTA to my team. Excited to see what's next! https://t.co/joUBGE2ue9	568 (4 th)	19	87	7
I know I'm late to the party but my pilot script Mantis made it on the 2nd Rounders under the Drama teleplay pilots list for Austin Screenplay Competition for @austinfilmfest. Just want to say congrats to the semifinalist and other 2nd rounders. https://t.co/XZGwmsjC6c	324 (6 th)	20	56	6
Context: I met ___ at the start of 2015 at a mixer she was having for creatives of color. We stayed in touch and the pic above is later that same year at the Austin Film Festival, where she was a panelist and I was just a baby writer trying to get break in...	206 (13 th)	6	1	0

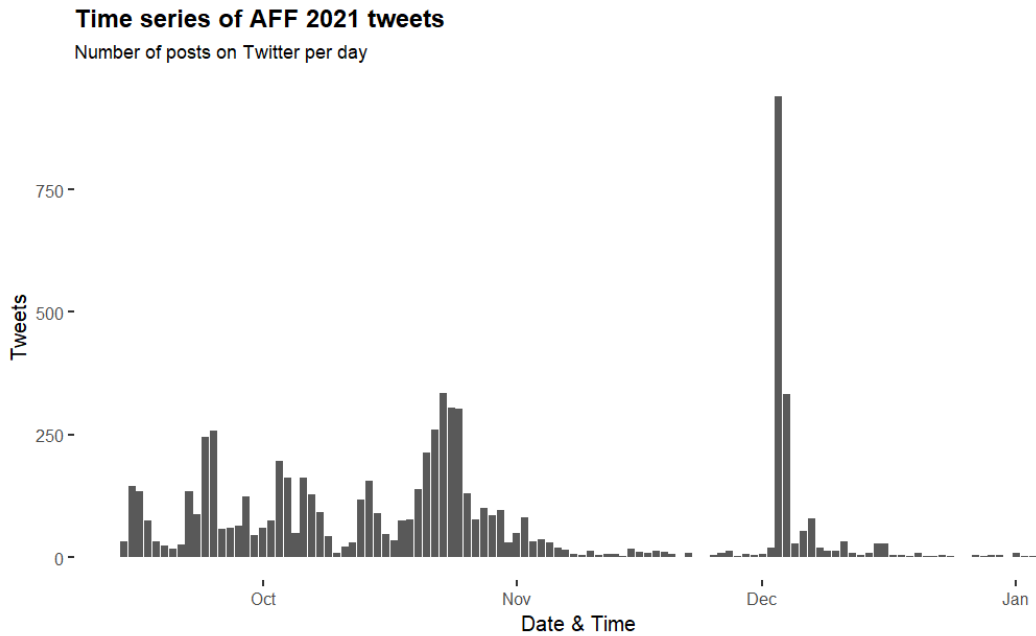
Table C.5: Top tweets from the AFF 2020 dataset as collected later in November 2022. Apart from a documentary world premiere, what is notable is use of the platform for self-promotion and camaraderie. A mixer for creatives of color is also mentioned.

Austin Film Festival 2021



for Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

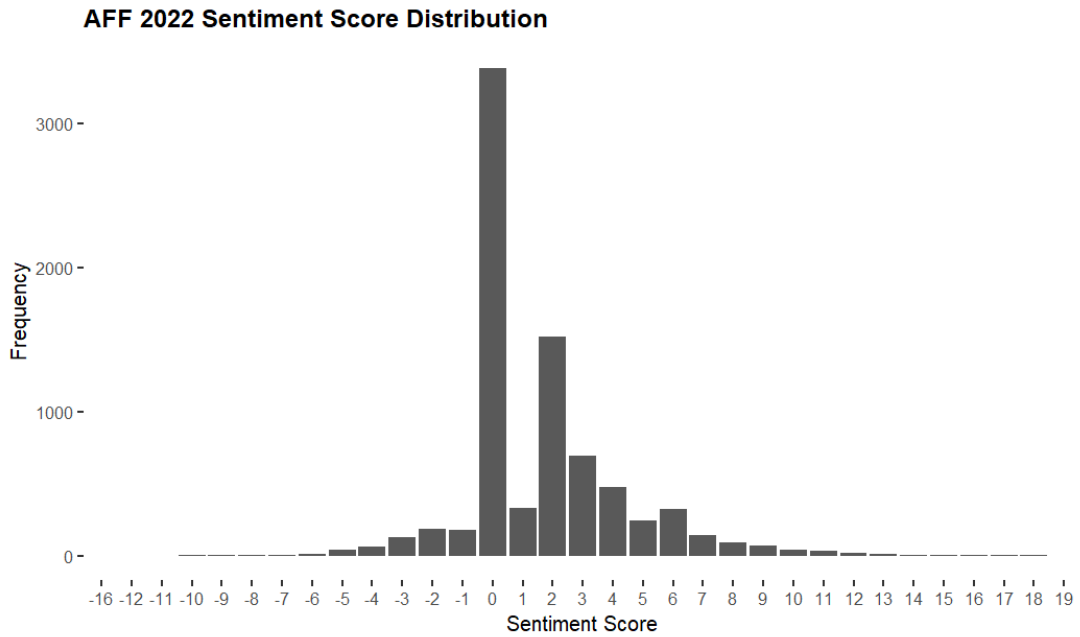
Figure C.13: Post-hoc sentiment analysis indicating strong positive skew.



Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

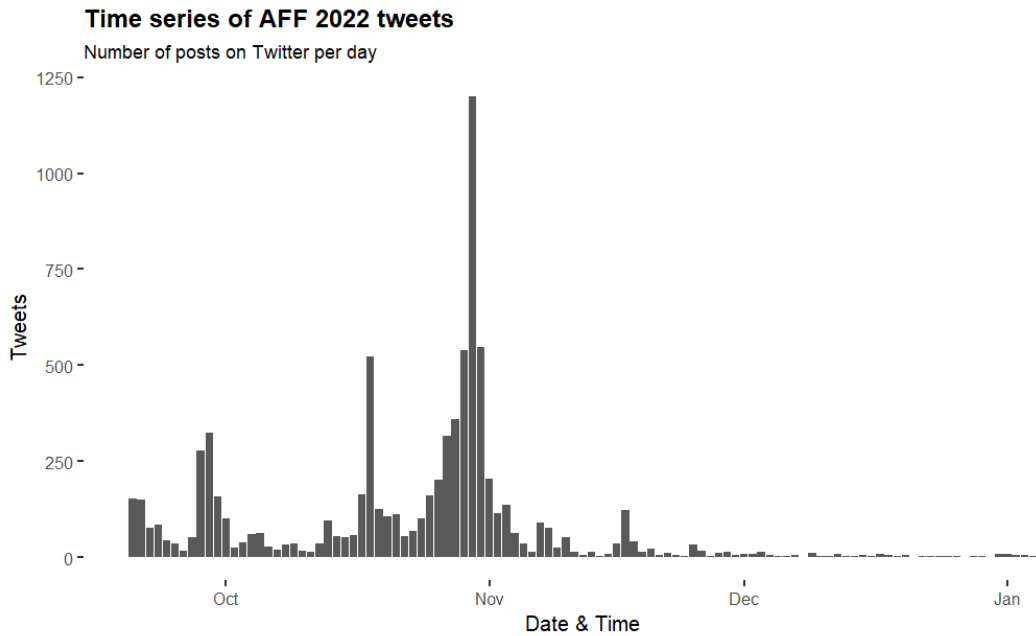
Figure C.14: Time series of social media attention to AFF 2021. The spike in December indicates the reader feedback controversy discussed in Chapter 6.

Austin Film Festival 2022



for Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

Figure C.16: Post-hoc sentiment analysis indicating strong positive skew.



Closing the Inspiration-Impact Gap

Figure C.17: Time series of social media attention to AFF 2022. Similar to AFF 2021, attention prior to the festival is due to competition announcements. Some comparatively minor dissatisfaction over script reviews appeared in November.



Figure C.18: Word cloud of top 50 words in the dataset. Once again, Twitter handles are prominent and the tone is celebratory.

Tweet Text	Likes	Retweets	Replies	Quote
I just won the Women & Animation Fellowship Award at Austin Film Festival for my @AllegraSparkle script! This is bonkers!!!! 🍀🍀🍀 https://t.co/32RmJ9iwWj	1208 (3 rd)	56	163	3
A magical weekend at #austinfilmfestival was capped off by winning best drama teleplay spec script (for The Crown). Reconnected with old friends, made new ones, and stockpiled inspiration for the ages #AFF29 https://t.co/58B4TcweUd	577 (8 th)	39	75	4
FYI- Austin Film Fest has mistakenly notified hundreds of people that they're semifinalists. Double check the list on their website, and maybe shoot them an email to confirm if you received an email today. Man this is gonna be a messy day for them/people who submitted... 🙄	396 (14 th)	49	47	39 (2 nd)
Huge thanks to @austinfilmfest 2022 for my Outstanding Television Writing Award. Honoured to share the stage with The Outlaws co-creator Elgin James (plus some hi-vis fans) plus fellow awardees Darren Aronofsky, James Gray, Nikyatu Jusu and Dede Gardner. https://t.co/K4AqW73awr	278 (19 th)	12	16	1
The @austinfilmfest will start Wed., and with it plenty of wins, meet-ups, random encounters, drinks, fun and new friendships. This will be my 5th year going (went in '17, '18, '19 and '21), and I've had my share of luck at the Fest. Here's my attempt at some helpful advice! 1/?	220 (26 th)	27	11	22

Table C.7: Top tweets from the AFF 2022 dataset highlighting self-promotion, advice, and appreciation of the experience, but also more missteps by the festival.

APPENDIX D: COMPUTATIONAL METHODS WALKTHROUGH

Introduction

This walkthrough describes computational analyses conducted in R 4.0.3 (R Core Team, 2020) on data streamed during the 2020 Austin Film Festival.³⁵ I repeated these procedures when analyzing datasets collected following subsequent editions of AFF and SXSW in 2021, 2022, and 2023 as explained in Chapter 3: Methods. Differences in data collection, cleaning, and wrangling for streamed tweets and tweets accessed via the full archive of tweets published on Twitter are described in the initial two sections below. Other procedures and code remained the same when I analyzed each dataset.

The following packages were necessary:

```
library(tidyverse)
library(rmdformats)
library(rtweet)
library(academictwitterR)
library(httputil)
library(ggplot2)
library(tidytext)
library(tokenizers)
library(wordcloud)
library(textdata)
library(topicmodels)
library(stm)
library(igraph)
```

Data Collection

A corpus of tweets ($N = 3,944$) was streamed from Twitter API using the `stream_tweets2()` function of the `rtweet` package (v0.7.0; Kearney, 2019). The data collection period spanned two weeks (October 19 to November 1), beginning three days

³⁵ This walkthrough is the product of a graduate-level seminar with Dr. Jo Lukito at the University of Texas at Austin. The code found here is adapted from Dr. Lukito's tutorials.

before the start of the festival and concluding three days after its end. I targeted tweets that mentioned the festival's name as follows:

```
stream_tweets2(q = "austin film festival,#austin film festival,austin
                film fest,#austin film fest,#aff27,aff27,
                austinfilmfest,@austinfilmfest,#austinfilmfest",
               timeout = 86400, dir = "aff_stream", parse = FALSE)
#streams for 24 hours
```

The code used was tested in the week prior to the data collection period. This ultimately resulted in a total of 20 .json files of data over the two-week period.

When collecting datasets for subsequent events in 2021, 2022, and 2023, and when collecting a new sample of AFF 2020 tweets in November 2022, the `get_all_tweets()` function of the `academictwitteR` package (v0.3.1; Barrie & Ho, 2022) was used to query Twitter's full archive:

```
get_all_tweets(q = ("\"austin film festival\"") OR ("\"#austin film
                  festival\"") OR ("\"austin film fest\"") OR ("\"#austin
                  film fest\"") OR #aff27 OR aff27 OR austinfilmfest OR
                  @austinfilmfest OR #austinfilmfest",
               "2020-09-15T00:00:00Z", "2021-01-05T23:59:59Z",
               bearer_token, data_path = "all/", n = 100000)
```

Data Cleaning and Wrangling

I began the data cleaning and wrangling process on the streamed AFF 2020 dataset by using the `parse_stream()` function in `rtweet` to parse the .json files. I then combined the data into a single dataset with the base R function `rbind()`:

```
day_0_1 <- parse_stream("Day 0-1.json")
day_0_2 <- parse_stream("Day 0-2.json")
day_1 <- parse_stream("Day 1.json")
day_2 <- parse_stream("Day 2.json")
day_3_1 <- parse_stream("Day 3-1.json")
day_3_2 <- parse_stream("Day 3-2.json")
day_4 <- parse_stream("Day 4.json")
day_5_1 <- parse_stream("Day 5-1.json")
day_5_2 <- parse_stream("Day 5-2.json")
day_6 <- parse_stream("Day 6.json")
day_7 <- parse_stream("Day 7.json")
```

```

day_8 <- parse_stream("Day 8.json")
day_9_1 <- parse_stream("Day 9-1.json")
day_9_2 <- parse_stream("Day 9-2.json")
day_10 <- parse_stream("Day 10.json")
day_11 <- parse_stream("Day 11.json")
day_12 <- parse_stream("Day 12.json")
day_13 <- parse_stream("Day 13.json")
day_14_1 <- parse_stream("Day 14-1.json")
day_14_2 <- parse_stream("Day 14-2.json")

AFF_tweets <- rbind(day_0_1, day_0_2, day_1, day_2, day_3_1, day_3_2,
                    day_4, day_5_1, day_5_2, day_6, day_7, day_8,
                    day_9_1, day_9_2, day_10, day_11, day_12, day_13,
                    day_14_1, day_14_2)

```

With my dataset together, I used the `select()` and `distinct()` functions of the `dplyr` package (v1.0.2; Wickham et al., 2020) and `str_replace_all()` function of the `stringr` package (v1.4.0; Wickham, 2019) to narrow the variables down to the essentials and remove duplicate `status_ids`, extra character encodings, and the other clutter that comes with tweets from Twitter API. The “text” column was my main object of analysis, and I confirmed that it was a character-type variable before proceeding:

```

tw_data <- AFF_tweets %>%
  select(status_id, created_at, screen_name, text)
tw_data <- distinct(tw_data, status_id, .keep_all = TRUE)

tw_data$text <- str_replace_all(tw_data$text, "\\r", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("\\n", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("https://t.co/\\S{10}", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("<U+.{2,10}>", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("&", "and")

```

Finally, I used the `filter()` function in `dplyr` to only include tweets from 12:00am on 10/19 until 12:00am on 11/02:

```

tw_data <- filter(tw_data, created_at >= as.POSIXct('2020-10-18 19:00')
                 &
                 created_at < as.POSIXct('2020-11-01 19:00'))
#time is offset by 5 hours due to UTC

```

Data collected via `get_all_tweets()` of the `academictwitteR` package required a slightly different cleaning process than streamed tweets due to different variables present in the dataset—most notably public metrics—and the inclusion of “RT” in the text column of retweets. I used the `dplyr` function `filter()` and base R function `grepl()` to

```
remove these retweets (see highlighted text):
tw_data <- AFF_tweets %>%
  select(id, created_at, text, public_metrics)
tw_data <- distinct(tw_data, id, .keep_all = TRUE)

tw_data <- tw_data %>%
  filter(grepl("(?RT)", text, perl = TRUE))

tw_data$text <- str_replace_all(tw_data$text, "\\r", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("\\n", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("https://t.co/\\S{10}", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("<U+.{2,10}>", " ") %>%
  str_replace_all("&", "and")
```

Time Series

I used the `ts_plot()` function in `rtweet` to create daily and hourly time series and looked for spikes in mentions of AFF on Twitter. I then used `ts_data()` and the `dplyr`

```
filter() function to explore these spikes more closely:
tweets_day <- ts_plot(tw_data, by = "day") +
  geom_line(color = "white") +
  geom_bar(stat="identity") +
  labs(
    x = "Date & Time",
    y = "Tweets",
    title = "Time series of Austin Film Festival tweets",
    subtitle = "Number of posts on Twitter per day",
    caption = "for Platforming Inclusion", fill = ""
  ) +
  theme(plot.title = element_text(size = 12, face = "bold"),
        plot.subtitle = element_text(size = 9), plot.caption =
element_text(size = 8),
        axis.title = element_text(size = 10), axis.text =
```



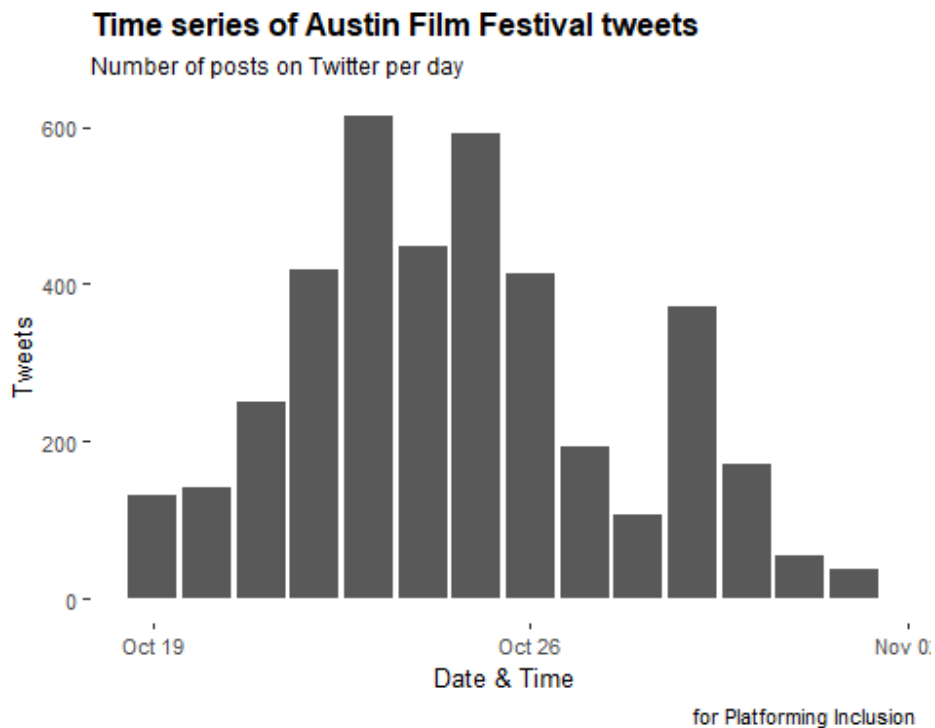
```

element_text(size = 8),
  panel.grid.major = element_blank(),
  panel.grid.minor = element_blank(), panel.background =
element_blank()
)

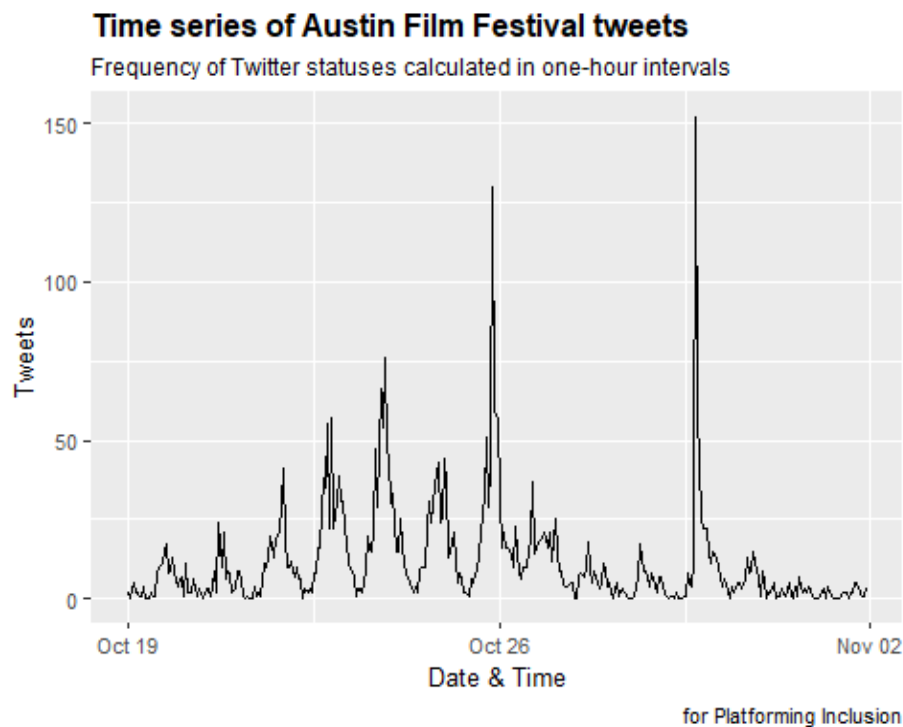
tweets_hour <- ts_plot(tw_data, "hours") +
  labs(
    x = "Date & Time",
    y = "Tweets",
    title = "Time series of Austin Film Festival tweets",
    subtitle = "Frequency of Twitter statuses calculated in one-
hour intervals",
    caption = "for Platforming Inclusion", fill = ""
  ) +
  theme(plot.title = element_text(size = 12, face = "bold"),
        plot.subtitle = element_text(size = 9), plot.caption =
element_text(size = 8),
        axis.title = element_text(size = 10), axis.text =
element_text(size = 8)
  )

tweets_day

```



tweets_hour



The time series of tweets reveal a number of things about the shape of engagement with AFF on the platform during the festival period. First of all, if we look at posts per day, mentions of AFF on Twitter were most frequent during the first five days of the film festival (10/22-26), which are coincidentally the dates of the writers' conference. With the exception of 10/29, the final three days of the festival (10/27-10/29) and three days preceding the start of the festival (10/19-21) had comparatively moderate amounts of AFF mentions. The number of posts related to AFF dropped dramatically in the three days following the end of the festival (10/30-11/01). Together, these observations suggest that interest in AFF this year began ramping up towards the start of the festival (i.e., promotion/anticipation), climaxed during the writers' conference, and then dropped during the final days of screenings before more or less coming to an end.

Two “Viral” Moments

If we look at the time series of tweets calculated in one-hour intervals, we see two spikes that occurred on 10/25 and 10/29. Using `view()`, I was able to identify these times as 21:00 on 10/25 and 17:00 on 10/25. I then isolated the tweets for each of these hours to see what exactly had gone (comparatively) viral:

```
tweets_hour_count <- ts_data(tw_data, by = "hours")
view(tweets_hour_count)

tweets_spike_one <- filter(tw_data, created_at >= as.POSIXct('2020-10-
                                                                25 16:00')
                           &
                           created_at <= as.POSIXct('2020-10-25 17:00'))

tweets_spike_two <- filter(tw_data, created_at >= as.POSIXct('2020-10-
                                                                29 12:00')
                           & created_at <= as.POSIXct('2020-10-29
                                                                13:00'))

view(tweets_spike_one)
view(tweets_spike_two)
```

In the first instance (10/25), the spike in activity was due to the makers of short documentary *Blood On Our Side* announcing their award win on Twitter in both English and Spanish:

We won the @austinfilmfest jury award !!and have now qualified for the Oscars Thank you to the judges for the honor and to @athemachine and Casey Baron for believing in our film. We couldn't be more grateful to @pohsi @AJWitness pic.twitter.com/BJ1vsQt43k

— Muzungu Producciones (@Muzungu_) October 25, 2020

¡¡Hemos ganado el premio del jurado en el @austinfilmfest!! Nos llevamos el Oscar Qualifier Award. Gracias al jurado, a @athemachine y a Casey Baron por confiar en nuestra película. Estamos increíblemente agradecidos a @pohsi y @AJWitness pic.twitter.com/oAap6vDuC9

— Muzungu Producciones (@Muzungu_) October 25, 2020

This spike is a great example of how film festivals add value to the filmmakers and films they screen, particularly those which win awards. More than just media attention (though at time of writing the English language post has 45.3k video views, 156 likes, and 42 “people are Tweeting about this”), the filmmakers received enough cultural capital with their win to pursue an even more prominent accolade (i.e., the Oscars). Such distinctions contribute value to awarded work and the careers of the filmmakers involved.

In the second instance (10/29), the spike was triggered when the WWE Network’s official Twitter account promoted their documentary before its AFF world premiere. It had over 1.8k likes and 329 “people are Tweeting about this” at time of writing:

Brothers of Destruction makes its world premiere TODAY at the Austin Film Festival. 🍷🔥 Catch it on WWE Network on Sunday, Nov. 15! [📄] #Undertaker30 @undertaker @KaneWWE @austinfilmfest pic.twitter.com/4gsvlQvKxy

— WWE Network (@WWENetwork) October 29, 2020

During the “Opening Remarks” that kicked off the film festival, AFF’s Creative Director Colin Hyer mentioned the WWE Network as one of the festival’s “studio partners,” a promotion intended to go both ways.

With these two spikes excluded, the time series otherwise suggest that AFF-related mentions on Twitter centered on the period of the writers’ conference.

Natural Language Processing

Word Clouds and N-Grams

The corpus of tweets was also analyzed with a number of “bag of words” strategies via the tidytext package (v0.2.6; Silge and Robinson, 2016) as part of the natural language processing portion of this study. The goal was to uncover latent patterns present in the corpus of tweets that might indicate festival agendas and help to guide later qualitative analyses. I used the `unnest_tokens()` function of the `tokenizers` package

(v0.2.1; Mullen et al., 2018) to tokenize the text data from my corpus of AFF-related tweets and convert the resulting words to lowercase. I then used `anti_join()` to apply the default `tidytext` stopwords list to remove common words irrelevant to identifying topics of discussion or debate:

```
tweet_tokenized <- tw_data %>% unnest_tokens(word, text, to_lower =
                                         TRUE)

tweet_tokenized <- tweet_tokenized %>%
  anti_join(stop_words)

## Joining, by = "word"

head(tweet_tokenized$word, 50)

## [1] "owner"           "hideout"         "typically"       "aff"
## [5] "venue"           "badge"           "2012"            "thrilled"
## [9] "attend"          "austinfilmfest" "winner"          "script"
## [13] "competition"    "virtual"         "driskill"        "bar"
## [17] "saturday"       "night"           "connect"         "owner"
## [21] "hideout"        "typically"       "aff"             "venue"
## [25] "badge"          "2012"            "thrilled"        "attend"
## [29] "austinfilmfest's" "panels"          "winner"          "script"
## [33] "competition"    "virtual"         "driskill"        "saturday"
## [37] "night"          "connect"         "planning"        "week"
## [41] "holy"           "crap"            "austinfilmfest" "week"
## [45] "fun"            "pick"            "panels"          "home"
## [49] "convince"       "conference"
```

I then used the `dplyr` `count()` function and the `wordcloud()` function from the `wordcloud` package (v.2.6; Fellows, 2018) to get a sense of the most common words, with retweets included, in order to gauge what topics had been amplified the most:

```
tweet_tokenized %>%
  count(word, sort = TRUE)

## # A tibble: 6,088 x 2
##   word          n
##   <chr>        <int>
## 1 austinfilmfest 2349
## 2 film          1423
## 3 festival      1079
## 4 austin        1066
```


related to the WWE Network documentary (WWE, undertaker, kane, destruction) and words related to Blood On Our Side's award win (hemos, ajwitness, pohsi).

The amplification of certain messages due to retweets is important to consider, as we have in the above analyses, however it also obscures the diversity of conversations. I therefore repeated the process after further cleaning the data by using the base R duplicated() function to remove retweets from the dataset (now $n = 2,389$) and adding my search terms to the stopwords list using rbind():

```
tw_data_final <- tw_data[!duplicated(tw_data$text), ]

tweet_tokenized_final <- tw_data_final %>% unnest_tokens(word, text,
                                                         to_lower = TRUE)

final_stop <- data.frame(word = c("austinfilmfest",
                                  "austinfilmfestival", "film", "festival",
                                  "austin", "aff27"),
                          lexicon = "custom") %>%
  rbind(stop_words)

tweet_tokenized_final <- tweet_tokenized_final %>%
  anti_join(final_stop)

## Joining, by = "word"

head(tweet_tokenized_final$word, 50)

## [1] "owner"           "hideout"         "typically"       "aff"
## [5] "venue"           "badge"           "2012"            "thrilled"
## [9] "attend"          "winner"          "script"          "competition"
## [13] "virtual"         "driskill"        "bar"             "saturday"
## [17] "night"           "connect"         "owner"           "hideout"
## [21] "typically"       "aff"             "venue"           "badge"
## [25] "2012"            "thrilled"        "attend"          "austinfilmfest's"
## [29] "panels"          "winner"          "script"          "competition"
## [33] "virtual"         "driskill"        "saturday"        "night"
## [37] "connect"         "planning"        "week"            "holy"
## [41] "crap"            "week"            "fun"             "pick"
## [45] "panels"          "home"            "convince"        "conference"
## [49] "phonebank"      "time"

tweet_tokenized_final %>%
  count(word, sort = TRUE)

## # A tibble: 6,082 x 2
##   word          n
```

```
##      <chr>          <int>
## 1 virtual          197
## 2 watch            161
## 3 panel            113
## 4 love             103
## 5 time             102
## 6 congrats         91
## 7 tonight          89
## 8 daniellenicki   84
## 9 i'm              80
## 10 story           79
## # ... with 6,072 more rows

tweet_tokenized_final %>%
  count(word, sort = TRUE) %>%
  with(wordcloud(word, n, max.words = 50, scale=c(3.5,.35)))
```



The results of this word count are a lot more diverse. A view() search for “daniellenicki” also revealed that Nicki, a 2020 script competition finalist according to

the AFF website, started a long Twitter debate about the conference panel “Writing Sexuality in Film and TV” that received well over 100 replies:

I'm watching the "Writing Sexuality in Film and TV" panel at @austinfilmfest and I'd love your thoughts on whether writing and showing sex scenes (covid notwithstanding) is actually necessary? In the past, 5-minute long scenes were common, now I'm seeing more implied sex.

— Danielle Nicki (@DanielleNicki) October 23, 2020

Finally, I conducted n-gram analyses with the same `unnest_tokens()` function from the `tokenizers` package and used `count()` once again to see if there were any prevalent two, three, four, or five-word phrases in the corpus of tweets:

```
tweet_bigram <- tw_data_final %>%  
  unnest_tokens(bigram, text, token = "ngrams", n = 2)
```

```
tweet_bigram %>%  
  count(bigram, sort = TRUE) %>%  
  head(20)
```

```
## # A tibble: 20 x 2  
##   bigram                                n  
##   <chr>                                <int>  
## 1 film festival                        333  
## 2 austin film                          306  
## 3 of the                                185  
## 4 at the                                160  
## 5 for the                               157  
## 6 thank you                             149  
## 7 the austin                            123  
## 8 the austinfilmfest                    118  
## 9 in the                                 103  
## 10 to the                                93  
## 11 at austinfilmfest                    91  
## 12 daniellenicki austinfilmfest         83  
## 13 on the                                75  
## 14 to be                                 71  
## 15 the virtual                          66  
## 16 austinfilmfest i                     59  
## 17 murder bury                          59  
## 18 pm cdt                               58  
## 19 to watch                             58  
## 20 bury win                             57
```

```

tweet_trigram <- tw_data_final %>%
  unnest_tokens(trigram, text, token = "ngrams", n = 3)

tweet_trigram %>%
  count(trigram, sort = TRUE) %>%
  head(20)

## # A tibble: 20 x 2
##   trigram                n
##   <chr>                  <int>
## 1 austin film festival   275
## 2 the austin film       111
## 3 <NA>                   87
## 4 murder bury win       57
## 5 at the austin         48
## 6 at the austinfilmfest 43
## 7 austinfilmfest thank you 42
## 8 leftovers_movie austinfilmfest bensamuels1 39
## 9 at austin film        32
## 10 of the austinfilmfest 32
## 11 blood on our         30
## 12 on our side          29
## 13 looking forward to   27
## 14 austin film fest     26
## 15 one of the           25
## 16 thank you for        25
## 17 undertaker kanewwe austinfilmfest          24
## 18 athemachine pohsi ajwitness                23
## 19 austinfilmfest athemachine pohsi          23
## 20 film festival and                          23

tweet_quadgram <- tw_data_final %>%
  unnest_tokens(quadgram, text, token = "ngrams", n = 4)

tweet_quadgram %>%
  count(quadgram, sort = TRUE) %>%
  head(20)

## # A tibble: 20 x 2
##   quadgram                n
##   <chr>                  <int>
## 1 <NA>                   160
## 2 the austin film festival 99
## 3 at the austin film      45
## 4 blood on our side       29
## 5 at austin film festival 27
## 6 austinfilmfest athemachine pohsi ajwitness 23

```

```

## 7 virtual austin film festival 21
## 8 austin film festival and 20
## 9 thank you so much 19
## 10 wwenetwork undertaker kanewe austinfilmfest 18
## 11 austin film festival 2020 16
## 12 for the audience award 16
## 13 to your content library 16
## 14 muzungu_ austinfilmfest athemachine pohsi 15
## 15 the virtual austin film 14
## 16 foote the road to 13
## 17 horton foote the road 13
## 18 the road to home 13
## 19 as part of the 12
## 20 one of the best 12

tweet_quintgram <- tw_data_final %>%
  unnest_tokens(quintgram, text, token = "ngrams", n = 5)

tweet_quintgram %>%
  count(quintgram, sort = TRUE) %>%
  head(20)

## # A tibble: 20 x 2
##   quintgram n
##   <chr> <int>
## 1 <NA> 250
## 2 at the austin film festival 40
## 3 muzungu_ austinfilmfest athemachine pohsi ajwitness 15
## 4 foote the road to home 13
## 5 horton foote the road to 13
## 6 the virtual austin film festival 13
## 7 as part of the austinfilmfest 9
## 8 virtual badge film pass or 9
## 9 zanzibarlivematter zanzibarlivematter zanzibarlivematter zanzibarlivem~ 9
## 10 à la carte for 20 8
## 11 austinfilmfest thank you so much 8
## 12 available to purchase à la 8
## 13 carte for 20 a session 8
## 14 la carte for 20 a 8
## 15 pohsi austinfilmfest nelpidas rginomo ajwitness 8
## 16 purchase à la carte for 8
## 17 sanjaraic1 luis1989manuel lizlreed oculuswriter varmaila 8
## 18 thank you so much for 8
## 19 the austin film festival and 8
## 20 to purchase à la carte 8

```

There was little of note in my n-gram analyses. One finding was the phrase “thank you” ($n = 149$) near the top of the bigram count, as “thank” had been removed by the

default tidytext stopwords list in the previous word counts. The n-gram results also turned up a number of film titles, such as *Murder Bury Win* among the trigram results, *Blood on Our Side* among the quadgram results, and *Horton Foote the Road to Home* clearly visible among the quintgram results (though broken up). The appearance of these titles in the data highlights the attempts by the filmmakers to use their festival screenings to generate buzz.

Structural Topic Modeling

In order to look for latent topics beyond individual words and phrases, I also did structural topic modeling. This involved recleaning the data with the `textProcessor()` function, setting a lower threshold of 20 with `prepDocuments()`, and selecting a K value based on the results of the `searchK()` function, all of which are a part of the `stm` package (v1.3.6; Roberts et al., 2019). The threshold set with `prepDocuments()` caused another reduction in the number of tweets in the dataset ($n = 2,164$).

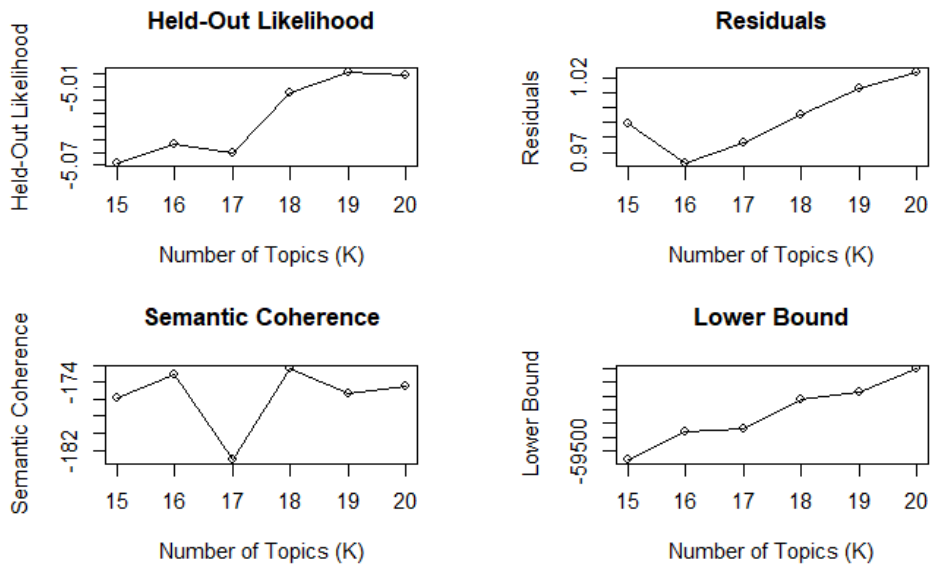
```
tweet_processed <- textProcessor(tw_data_final$text,  
                                metadata = tw_data_final,  
                                striphtml = TRUE,  
                                customstopwords = c("austinfilmfest",  
                                                    "austinfilmfestival",  
                                                    "film", "festival",  
                                                    "austin", "aff27"))  
  
## Building corpus...  
## Converting to Lower Case...  
## Removing punctuation...  
## Removing stopwords...  
## Remove Custom Stopwords...  
## Removing numbers...  
## Stemming...  
## Creating Output...  
  
view(tweet_processed)  
  
out <- prepDocuments(tweet_processed$documents, tweet_processed$vocab,  
                    tweet_processed$meta, lower.thresh = 20)
```

```
## Removing 5253 of 5489 terms (14059 of 25705 tokens) due to frequency
## Removing 210 Documents with No Words
## Your corpus now has 2164 documents, 236 terms and 11646 tokens.

tnum <- searchK(out$documents, out$vocab, K = c(15: 20),
               data = out$meta)

plot(tnum, main = "Topic model search")
```

Diagnostic Values by Number of Topics



Plotting of searchK() results.

After graphing the results of searchK() with the base R plot() function, I decided to go with a K value of 19. I then ran my analysis using the stm() function with EM iterations set to a max of 50 and with the method of initialization conservatively set as Spectral for convenience:

```
tweets_stm <- stm(documents = out$documents, vocab = out$vocab,
                 K = 19,
                 max.em.its = 50,
                 data = out$meta,
                 init.type = "Spectral")
```

After 21 iterations the model converged. I used labelTopics() to explore the topics

that the algorithms had found:

```
labelTopics(tweets_stm, c(1:19))
```

```
## Topic 1 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: one, good, movi, new, work, thing, job
##   FREX: good, one, thing, job, movi, luck, hard
##   Lift: luck, hard, job, thing, good, sure, movi
##   Score: luck, job, good, movi, one, new, thing
## Topic 2 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: congrat, congratul, way, leftoversmovi, even, everyon, that
##   FREX: leftoversmovi, congrat, everyon, way, that, congratul, even
##   Lift: leftoversmovi, that, everyon, saw, congrat, way, even
##   Score: leftoversmovi, congrat, congratul, way, that, everyon, saw
## Topic 3 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: thank, team, onlin, athemachin, festiv, run, start
##   FREX: thank, athemachin, onlin, team, start, 've, festiv
##   Lift: athemachin, thank, onlin, team, festiv, run, start
##   Score: athemachin, thank, team, onlin, festiv, run, congrat
## Topic 4 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: documentari, today, well, lot, life, wwenetwork, wwe
##   FREX: documentari, well, wwenetwork, today, wwe, life, lot
##   Lift: wwenetwork, wwe, well, documentari, life, lot, today
##   Score: wwenetwork, documentari, wwe, well, life, lot, today
## Topic 5 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: script, amaz, bensamuel, happi, awesom, find, yes
##   FREX: bensamuel, amaz, happi, yes, script, awesom, read
##   Lift: bensamuel, yes, amaz, happi, read, star, via
##   Score: bensamuel, amaz, awesom, script, yes, happi, news
## Topic 6 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: love, see, make, excit, share, wait, kaneww
##   FREX: love, excit, wait, kaneww, make, share, see
##   Lift: kaneww, wait, excit, cool, love, share, make
##   Score: kaneww, love, excit, wait, make, see, cant
## Topic 7 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: just, screen, know, best, featur, part, blood
##   FREX: screen, best, blood, part, know, just, don't
##   Lift: blood, screen, part, best, don't, special, free
##   Score: blood, screen, know, part, best, just, don't
## Topic 8 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: win, check, review, buri, murder, comedi, fugit
##   FREX: buri, review, murder, fugit, win, comedi, home
##   Lift: fugit, buri, murder, review, home, douglaslaman, michaelovan
##   Score: fugit, buri, murder, win, review, check, comedi
## Topic 9 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: year, come, miss, last, feel, back, confer
##   FREX: year, last, back, miss, come, confer, feel
##   Lift: ago, back, event, last, year, confer, miss
##   Score: ago, year, miss, come, last, confer, back
## Topic 10 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: watch, can, now, want, vote, link, right
##   FREX: vote, watch, link, can, side, right, want
##   Lift: side, vote, link, right, tix, watch, want
##   Score: side, watch, vote, link, can, tix, now
```

```

## Topic 11 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: get, will, dream, play, give, hour, avail
##   FREX: dream, play, give, hour, will, get, togeth
##   Lift: dream, hour, give, play, togeth, follow, will
##   Score: dream, get, will, hour, avail, play, follow
## Topic 12 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: much, panel, realli, next, talk, enjoy, hope
##   FREX: much, realli, enjoy, talk, hope, creativ, wonder
##   Lift: much, theaprentic, realli, enjoy, wonder, creativ, hope
##   Score: much, realli, enjoy, panel, theaprentic, talk, next
## Topic 13 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: great, writer, screenwrit, got, pitch, write, made
##   FREX: screenwrit, great, pitch, writer, meet, second, mani
##   Lift: meet, second, experi, rounder, pitch, screenwrit, mani
##   Score: meet, great, writer, pitch, screenwrit, rounder, second
## Topic 14 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: premier, short, tonight, ticket, world, tomorrow, undertak
##   FREX: premier, undertak, world, ticket, program, tonight, content
##   Lift: undertak, content, program, rebootcampfilm, world, ticket, premier
##   Score: undertak, premier, ticket, short, tonight, program, world
## Topic 15 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: muzungu, ajwit, happen, filmmak, start, forward, proud
##   FREX: ajwit, muzungu, happen, filmmak, start, forward, proud
##   Lift: ajwit, filmmak, happen, muzungu, start, forward, proud
##   Score: ajwit, muzungu, happen, filmmak, start, forward, proud
## Topic 16 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: pohsi, won, nelpida, director, award, honor, big
##   FREX: pohsi, nelpida, won, director, big, honor, award
##   Lift: pohsi, nelpida, big, director, won, honor, award
##   Score: pohsi, nelpida, award, won, director, honor, big
## Topic 17 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: stori, daniellenicki, scene, look, sex, show, charact
##   FREX: daniellenicki, sex, scene, charact, stori, show, look
##   Lift: behind, sex, daniellenicki, scene, charact, think, show
##   Score: behind, daniellenicki, scene, sex, charact, stori, look
## Topic 18 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: virtual, day, aff, first, attend, film, night
##   FREX: aff, night, attend, first, day, virtual, bar
##   Lift: bar, driskil, night, run, aff, attend, two
##   Score: bar, virtual, aff, attend, driskil, day, night
## Topic 19 Top Words:
##   Highest Prob: time, like, que, join, also, produc, say
##   FREX: que, time, like, produc, also, join, say
##   Lift: que, produc, time, say, also, join, like
##   Score: que, produc, time, like, join, also, say

```

I then converted the theta scores into a data frame, connected the `status_id` vector to this data frame, used the `pivot_longer()` function of the `tidyr` package (v1.1.2; Wickham, 2020a) to make the data “long,” then finally used the `dplyr` `group_by()` and `slice_max()` functions to extract top theta scores for the purpose of assigning each

document (i.e., tweet) to the topic it belonged to the most. I then plotted the results using the `ggplot()` function of the `ggplot2` package (v3.3.2; Wickham, 2020b):

```
theta_scores <- tweets_stm$theta %>% as.data.frame()
theta_scores$status_id <- out$meta$status_id
view(theta_scores)

topics_long <- theta_scores %>%
  pivot_longer(cols = V1:V19,
               names_to = "topic",
               values_to = "theta")

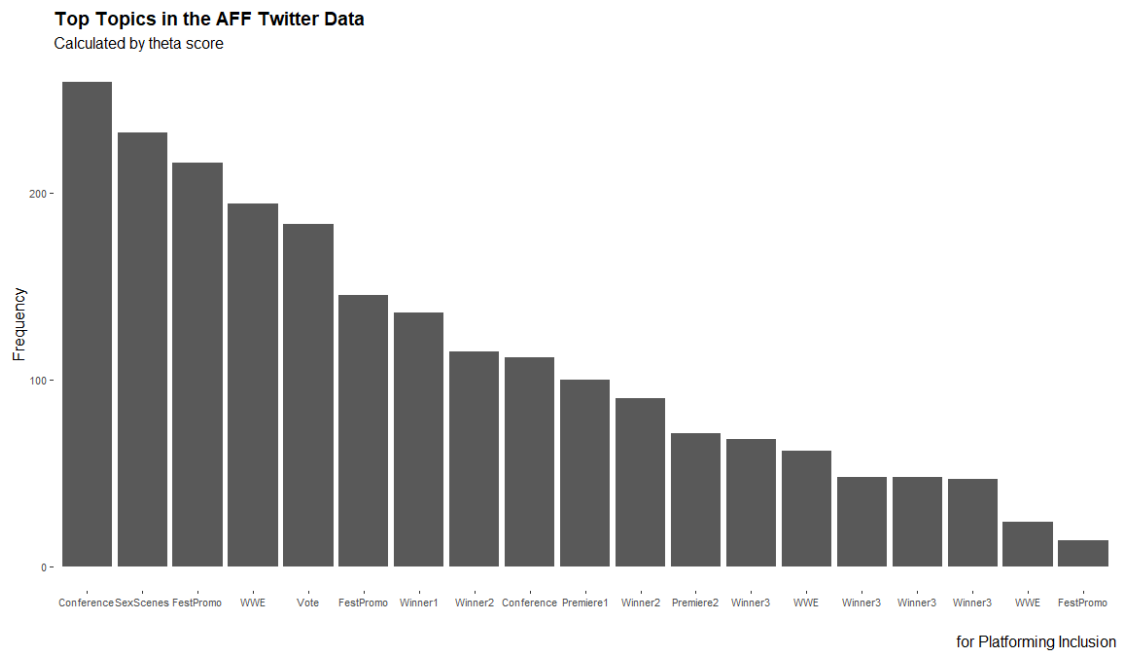
toptopics <- topics_long %>%
  group_by(status_id) %>%
  slice_max(theta)

colnames(toptopics)[1] <- "status_id"
colnames(toptopics)[2] <- "topics"
toptopics$status_id <- as.numeric(toptopics$status_id)

table(toptopics$topics) %>% as.data.frame() %>%
  ggplot(aes(x = reorder(Var1, -Freq), y = Freq)) +
  geom_bar(stat = "identity") +
  scale_x_discrete(labels = c('Conference', 'SexScenes', 'FestPromo',
                              'WWE', 'Vote', 'FestPromo', 'Winner1',
                              'Winner2', 'Conference', 'Premiere1',
                              'Winner2', 'Premiere2', 'Winner3', 'WWE',
                              'Winner3', 'Winner3', 'Winner3', 'WWE',
                              'FestPromo')) +
  labs(
    x = "",
    y = "Frequency",
    title = "Top Topics in the AFF Twitter Data",
    subtitle = "Calculated by theta score",
    caption = "for Platforming Inclusion", fill = ""
  ) +
  theme(plot.title = element_text(size = 14, face = "bold"),
        plot.subtitle = element_text(size = 12), plot.caption =
element_text(size = 12),
        axis.title = element_text(size = 12), axis.text =
element_text(size = 8),
        panel.grid.major = element_blank(),
        panel.grid.minor = element_blank(), panel.background =
```



```
element_blank()  
)
```



The algorithm recognized multiple topics within some of the larger topics of interest already discussed. For example, the Twitter discussion on sex scenes triggered by Danielle Nicki (labeled “SexScenes”) ranked second among top topics in the model, while there were also a total of three topics related to the WWE Network’s promotion of its documentary (labeled “WWE”) and four topics related to *Blood on Our Side* (labeled “Winner3”). The model revealed that there were also at least four other projects that used Twitter to promote their AFF victories or premieres. This includes *Richmond Underground* that won the Drama Teleplay Pilot Award (labeled “Winner2”) and *Murder, Bury, Win* (labeled “Winner1”), whose makers used Twitter heavily to not only announce their selection as an AFF “Staff Pick,” but also to promote their film and the reviews of it that had appeared online during the festival period. *Hard Luck Love Song* (labeled “Premiere1”) and *Fugitive Dreams* (labeled “Premiere2”) used Twitter to promote their festival premieres.

This leaves the remaining topics in the model, which include some of the largest: “Conference,” “FestPromo,” and “Vote.” The “Conference” topic, with words like “great,” “writer,” “pitch,” “meet,” “experi-,” “panel,” “enjoy,” “wonder-” seemed to convey the sense that attendees were getting a lot out of their experience of the writers’ conference offerings. The “FestPromo” topic captured the ways in which AFF and other stakeholders on Twitter had promoted the festival, with words like “attend,” “virtual,” “join,” “back,” “come,” “confer,” “miss,” and “last” illuminating the transient nature of the festival. The “Vote” topic highlighted how audience members were encouraged to vote via Twitter, though it is unclear whether this encouragement came from the festival, the filmmakers, or both.

Post-Hoc Sentiment Analysis

The results of the text analysis and structural topic modeling suggested a certain positive sentiment present in the data, leading me to explore further with a sentiment analysis. I used the tidytext `get_sentiments()` function and the dplyr `inner_join()` function to apply the AFINN dictionary to the final tokenized dataset:

```
afinn_dictionary <- get_sentiments("afinn")

word_counts_senti <- tweet_tokenized_final %>%
  inner_join(afinn_dictionary)

## Joining, by = "word"

senti_frequency <- sort(table(word_counts_senti$word), decreasing=T)
view(senti_frequency)
head(senti_frequency, 20)
```

##					
##	love	congrats	amazing	win	congratulations
##	103	91	73	71	65
##	murder	join	fun	excited	comedy
##	65	61	54	49	46
##	dreams	award	happy	awesome	miss
##	45	44	43	40	40
##	won	creative	hope	loved	share
##	37	33	33	32	31

Retweets and search terms had already been removed, but I further removed the words “murder,” “win,” “blood,” “destruction,” and “dreams” that had appeared in film titles by applying a custom stopwords list with the `anti_join()` function:

```
afinn_dictionary <- get_sentiments("afinn")

afinn_stop <- data.frame(word = c("murder", "win", "blood",
                                "destruction", "dreams"),
                        lexicon = "custom")

tweet_tokenized_final_afinn <- tweet_tokenized_final %>%
  anti_join(afinn_stop)

## Joining, by = "word"

word_counts_senti_clean <- tweet_tokenized_final_afinn %>%
  inner_join(afinn_dictionary)

## Joining, by = "word"

senti_frequency_clean <- sort(table(word_counts_senti_clean$word),
                              decreasing=T)
view(senti_frequency_clean)
head(senti_frequency_clean, 20)

##
##      love      congrats      amazing congratulations      join
##      103         91         73         65         61
##      fun      excited      comedy      award      happy
##      54         49         46         44         43
##      awesome      miss      won      creative      hope
##      40         40         37         33         33
##      loved      share      missed      favorite      hard
##      32         31         30         29         27
```

A look at the AFINN dictionary words appearing most frequently in the corpus suggests an overall positive sentiment, with the top 20 words all reflecting the celebratory, festive, and inspiring atmosphere of the film festival. The exception is the word “miss,” possibly due to the fleeting nature of a festival (i.e., “Don’t miss ____!”).

I then used the `dplyr` `group_by()` and `summarize()` functions to calculate a sentiment score for each tweet and then `full_join()` to add the scores to the data frame:

```

tweet_senti <- word_counts_senti_clean %>%
  group_by(status_id) %>%
  summarize(sentiment = sum(value))

tw_data_final_senti <- tw_data_final %>%
  full_join(tweet_senti)

## Joining, by = "status_id"

tw_data_final_senti$sentiment[is.na(tw_data_final_senti$sentiment)] <-
0

summary(tw_data_final_senti$sentiment)

##      Min. 1st Qu.  Median    Mean 3rd Qu.    Max.
## -14.000  0.000   0.000   1.527   3.000  18.000

table(tw_data_final_senti$sentiment)

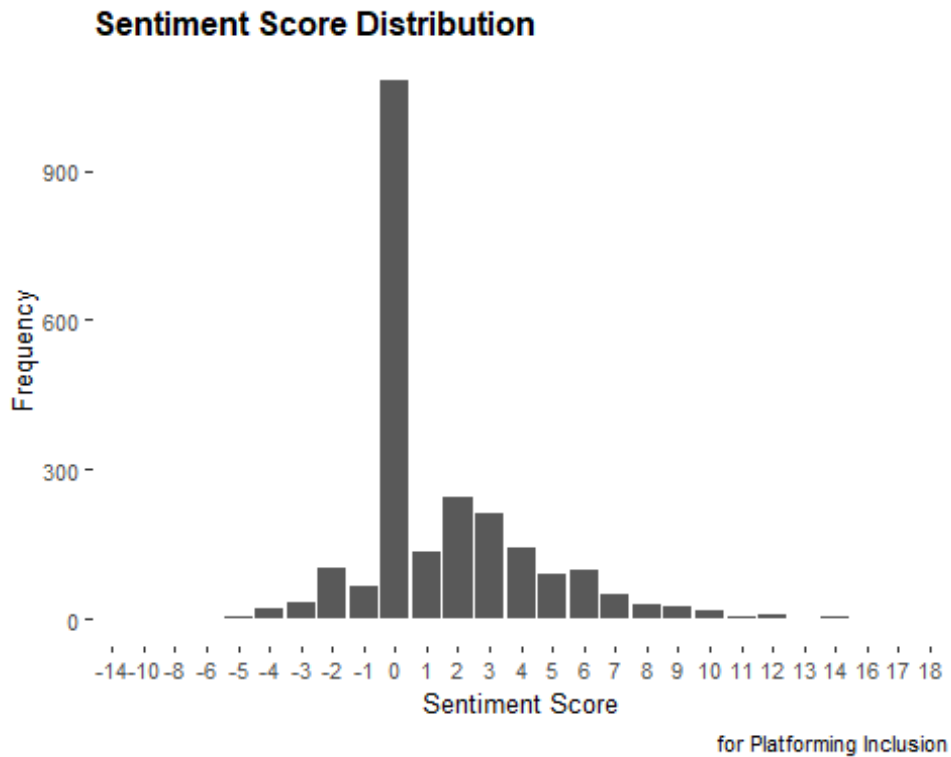
##
## -14 -10  -8  -6  -5  -4  -3  -2  -1  0  1  2  3  4  5  6
##   1   1   3   3   7  20  32  101  68 1079 136 244 214 144  90  99
##   7   8   9  10  11  12  13  14  16  17  18
##  49  29  26  19   4  11   2   4   1   1   1

freq_per_senti <- table(tw_data_final_senti$sentiment) %>%
as.data.frame()

senti_plot <- ggplot(freq_per_senti, aes(x = Var1, y = Freq)) +
  geom_bar(stat="identity", position=position_dodge()) +
  labs(
    x = "Sentiment Score",
    y = "Frequency",
    title = "Sentiment Score Distribution",
    caption = "for Platforming Inclusion", fill = ""
  ) +
  theme(plot.title = element_text(size = 12, face = "bold"),
        plot.subtitle = element_text(size = 9), plot.caption =
element_text(size = 8),
        axis.title = element_text(size = 10), axis.text =
element_text(size = 8),
        panel.grid.major = element_blank(),
        panel.grid.minor = element_blank(), panel.background =
element_blank()
  )

senti_plot

```



Beyond graphing the results with `ggplot()`, I also used the base R `subset()` function to look at the tweets with the highest scores (equal to or greater than 12, $n = 20$) and lowest scores (equal to or less than -5, $n = 15$):

```
lowest_scores <- subset(tw_data_final_senti, sentiment <= -5) %>%
  select(text)

print.data.frame(lowest_scores, right = FALSE)

highest_scores <- subset(tw_data_final_senti, sentiment >= 12) %>%
  select(text)

print.data.frame(highest_scores, right = FALSE)
```

Looking at tweets with the highest sentiment scores offers detailed examples of what the data explorations above have so far alluded to: virtual attendees were ultimately “blown away” or “damn happy” or “proud” with their experience at a “wonderful festival” with “priceless panels” and “amazing premieres.” Even tweets with low

sentiment scores still tended to be positive, because the AFINN dictionary cannot account for negative grammatical structures.

Given the strong sense of community and camaraderie that I witnessed in AFF's Discord server and in the conference panel chats, the sentiment analysis revealed what I had expected to see: an overall positive sentiment in the Twitter discourse surrounding the festival.

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