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On the Boards TV: Innovation, Leadership and Practice

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Abstract

Emerging technology is a term that too often scares off arts leaders who already have so much on their plates. Yet used creatively, new technologies can yield powerful results. In 2009, On the Boards took such a leap, implementing high-quality video technology to vastly expand access to their contemporary performance space in Seattle. This case study explores On the Board TV (OtBTV), the platform that stemmed from the innovation, leadership and practice of On the Boards.

On the Boards TV: Innovation, Leadership and Practice

Warren Bennis, the noted scholar and writer on leadership said, “the organizations of the future will increasingly depend on the creativity of their members to survive” (Bennis & Biederman, 1997, p. 8). This is especially true of the arts sector, where survival depends upon cultural significance, creative innovation and audience access to the work. How can we adapt our practices to the high-speed world evolving all around us? Arts products, unlike other goods, often rely on an in-person experience. Or do they? This case study explores the impact of innovation through an exploration of On the Boards TV (OtBTV). OtBTV is a website that delivers full-length, high-quality video recordings of contemporary performances to your TV, desktop or mobile device. Understanding OtBTV’s impact on the Seattle arts ecosystem requires an exploration of its history, evaluation of leadership, and assessment of its effects on the larger arts ecosystem.

The History Behind the Idea

OtBTV was launched in 2010 by On the Boards, “a producer and presenter of unique performance projects by leading contemporary artists in Seattle” (B. Rass-Bergquist, March 15, 2019). Originally based at Washington Hall in Seattle’s Central District, On the Boards moved to their current venue in the lower Queen Anne neighborhood in 1998. The capital campaign to acquire their own building was partially funded by the Wallace Foundation, an institution on a mission to “foster improvements in learning and enrichment for disadvantaged children and the vitality of the arts for everyone” (Wallace Foundation, n.d.). In 2009, the foundation had launched an initiative to support creative projects using digital technologies to connect with new audiences in new ways. On the Boards joined the Seattle Opera and Pacific Northwest Ballet as part of a Seattle Center cohort charged with inventing ways to deepen their existing audience

relationships and develop new ones through the use of high-quality video within their programming (Harlow, 2015).

While the opera and ballet capitalized on the technology to modernize marketing techniques, On the Boards tried a less conventional approach. In partnership with presenting artists, they decided to use multi-angle film production to document mainstage performances and create a streaming platform where audiences worldwide could pay to watch remotely. In a 2010 interview with Claudia La Rocco of the New York Times, Sarah Wilke, Managing Director of On the Boards said, “What we’re doing is creating the live-art equivalent of a museum catalog. The world is definitely moving toward a wider view of experience. I think the arts are in danger of losing market share if we don’t provide a parallel experience” (para. 8).

Monique Courcy was the On the Boards’ TV and Media Manager in the early years of OtBTV, heading the effort that brought the streaming service to life. “The whole idea of On the Boards TV came from conversations about access to contemporary performance... It’s super niche and there are only a handful of presenting organizations.” Courcy explains that, due to the small number of presenters, international artists rarely perform in the United States more than once. “If you missed it, you missed it... There was conversation around how to change that” (personal communication, February 28, 2019).

In 2008, when the project earned funding from the Wallace Foundation and DanceUSA, recording technology was not as pervasive as it is today. Mobile devices were just beginning to stream video content. Few presenters had the capacity to produce high-quality film. The value of high-quality recordings was enticing to performing artists. Artists used work samples to earn grants, though making these samples was a costly practice. “Not only did we take the cost out of the equation for the artists, we paid them 50 percent of the royalties” (M. Courcy, personal

communication, February 28, 2019). Caleb Hammons, produced *The Shipment*, a play by Young Jean Lee, one of the earliest performances that was filmed for OtBTV. Hammons told the New York Times, “It gives you a new sense of worth, that somebody went to the effort to record your work” (La Rocco, 2010). On the Boards TV’s business model gave artists an added incentive to collaborate and it attracted top talent.

Lane Czaplinski was the Artistic Director at the time of OtBTV’s launch. Courcy describes him as a sports fan. “He believed in the idea that sports are very accessible. You can stream them, you can play them on your phone. You have many different ways to access them” (personal communication, February 28, 2019). Why then couldn’t contemporary performance do the same? In 2008, few arts organizations were experimenting with the emerging technology of streaming. This gave On the Boards a head start. The benefits weren’t limited to the artists. Courcy said, “All of a sudden we were able to film performances in New York, Austin and Portland” and make them available to their Seattle audience (personal communication, February 28, 2019).

In their online archives, On the Boards describes the importance of OtBTV: “We believe OntheBoards.tv will help encourage people to go see live performances and participate in the ongoing dialogue about exciting new art, technology and ideas” (On the Boards TV, n.d., para. 3).

Towards Innovation

In order to execute such an innovative project, the team at On the Boards had to work through the process with a great deal of flexibility. What they were doing had not been done before, so there was little data to guide them. As manager of On the Boards TV, Courcy felt like she was being thrown into the fire from the beginning. “Everything was new to me. Even the data side, that seemed boring in theory, was new to me, so it was exciting. It was a new way of

thinking and I was stretching my skills” (personal communication, February 28, 2019). Courcy had started at On the Boards as a communication intern. During the accelerated period of growth caused by the launch of a new program, lots of opportunities arose. Courcy was one of the emerging leaders who would rise to the challenge.

Once OtBTV was online, the leadership at the organization realized it needed someone to focus their full attention on the audience numbers that were coming in. Courcy was eventually promoted to lead these efforts. “We weren’t sure what was going to happen, so my first job was data analysis... We were concerned with website traffic, tracking purchases, and responding to questions as they arose.” She recalled a university librarian who inquired about licensing of films. The organization had not anticipated that OtBTV could function as an educational resource. They quickly adapted the product to include an educational component that could be sold to schools. “OtBTV gave us a new way to do programming” (personal communication, February 28, 2019). It was that flexibility that ultimately resulted in success. Today OtBTV is a valuable product for educators who teach contemporary performance in areas where presenters don’t exist. It allows students to see artists online that they couldn’t see otherwise.

More than just a successful product, OtBTV engaged staff in professional development. Keeping staff engaged is a key component to retaining talent. According to Deloitte’s 2017 Human Capital Trends Report, providing growth opportunities was identified as one of the key factors in providing a great employee experience (Bersin, Flynn, Mazor & Melian, 2017). The early years of OtBTV was a period of fast growth that stretched the staff’s skills. The results paid off.

On the Boards TV was recently named a 2015 Arts Entrepreneurship Awards honoree for their pioneering work in providing high definition video content to the contemporary

performance world. On top of that their business model shares half of its profits directly with the artists. (Tseng, 2015)

“We host a lot of artists who don’t get to be seen broadly in the United States,”

Czaplinski told Fractured Atlas, “I feel like providing access to that is a service in and of itself” (Tseng, 2015, para. 2). According to Courcy, artists agreed. “It was really inspiring to have a new way to interact with artists, and the artists were excited too,” she said. “It felt like a bunch of pilot tests over and over again” (personal communication, February 28, 2019).

Seattle and Beyond

In 2009, access was defined differently. In today’s context, when one considers access to the arts, we often do so within the framework of diversity, equity and inclusion. Whether or not it was intended, as OtBTV grew, its programming became part of an international dialogue about inclusion. On the Boards’ Development Director Beth Rass-Bergquist, described how OtBTV became a vehicle for a new outreach initiative. They partnered with Boom Arts, a live performance incubator in Portland that focuses on “building cross-cultural bridges, sparking community conversations about important issues, connecting Portland performing artists with their national and international counterparts, and contributing to Portland’s culture of compassion, curiosity, and creativity” (Boom Arts, n.d., para. 1). After recording *Amarillo*, a multi-media theater work about a journey across the U.S.-Mexico border by Teatro Línea de Sombra, Courcy and Ruth Wikler-Luker, the founder of Boom Arts, traveled around Oregon and Washington, screening *Amarillo* in communities of migrant workers (On the Boards TV, 2013). Courcy said, “We would do an educational component that incorporated community leaders, artists and the public to discuss ethics, art and the communities that are affected” (personal

communication, February 28, 2019). Rass-Bergquist used this program to attract new funders (personal communication, March 15, 2019).

OtBTV went on to redefine industry standards. A New York Times article credited the program with seeking “to create a new audience for contemporary performance by offering a sophisticated alternative to the back-of-the-house recordings — often fuzzy and hard to hear — that are standard issue in the field but not always readily available to the public” (La Rocco, 2010). OtBTV increased access to performances for audiences old and new, by artists young and old, throughout the industry.

The New Normal

The day-to-day operation of an arts organization can feel like a battle to keep the lights on. Opportunities to innovate seem few and far between. This should not be the norm in a creative industry. Case studies like On the Boards TV remind us to challenge the status quo. OtBTV’s support from the Wallace Foundation illustrates the direct relationship between innovation and funding.

Certain take-aways seem valuable to the industry overall. Through innovation via technology, On the Boards was able to engage staff in a way that retained talent. For Monique Courcy, this fast-tracked her career in the arts sector. Artists and funders were engaged in the collaborative process. Not only did the Wallace Foundation grant allow for new ways of doing business, it paid for additional staff hours. For the emerging arts leader, this is an opportunity to grow one’s responsibility.

On the Boards gained an international audience and enriched their local audience with performances from outside their geographic area. This opened the door to engagement with new

cultures. For Beth Raas-Bergquist it created new avenues to advance the mission of On the Boards.

For Lane Czaplinski it posed new questions. In a New York Times article titled “Recording Staged Work for All to See” he said, “One of the big questions is: Does it promote and help the case of these artists and therefore contemporary performance as a whole, or does it muddy the waters? Clearly you know where we’re putting our chips. But it’s still an open question” (La Rocco, 2010, para. 18).

The world of contemporary performance received a new way of presenting work. This is especially important in the arts sector, where survival depends upon cultural significance, creative innovation and audience access to the work. OtBTV is a model of adaptation to the high-speed world evolving all around us. As the Seattle arts ecosystem continues to grow and intertwine this is one example of innovation, leadership and practice that paid off.

Method note:

This case study was developed by David Kisan, MFA 2019, as part of Seattle University’s MFA in Arts Leadership applied research seminar focused on the Arts Ecosystem Research Project. Interviews were conducted with Monique Courcy, OtBTV’s first Media Manager, now Executive Director of TeenTix; and Beth Raas-Bergquist, On the Boards’ Director of Development; as part of this research during Winter Quarter 2019. Susan Kunimatsu provided editing.

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