

NOW & NEXT – S2E3 – ENGLISH TRANSCRIPT

- Leora Kornfeld: [00:08](#) Welcome to Now and Next. It's a podcast that looks at the ways technology is changing media and entertainment, and it's brought to you by the Canada Media Fund. I'm Leora Kornfeld.
- Leora Kornfeld: [00:23](#) On this episode: Alanis Obomsawin. She's made over 50 films in 50 years, making her one of Canada's most distinguished documentary filmmakers. And before we started recording the interview, I joked with her that she's been working at the speed of a YouTuber; however, the product is anything but YouTube. Alanis' work is characterized by a really minimalist style. Not a lot of fancy production techniques or special effects or editing tricks, just a very honest stripped down record of the events as they unfold and she herself is usually the narrator. One of her best known films is her documentary on the Oka Crisis, the 1990 standoff between the Mohawk Nation and the people and provincial police in the town of Oka.
- Leora Kornfeld: [01:34](#) A lot has changed in the world of documentary since Alanis started making films in the 1960s. Documentaries have actually become a pretty good business. In the past handful of years, we've seen films like RBG, about Ruth Bader Ginsburg, and Won't You Be My Neighbor?, the documentary about Mr. Rogers, having enormous success.
- Leora Kornfeld: [01:56](#) But, on the other hand, according to the 2018 report from the IDA, that's the International Documentary Association, 42% of documentarians reported that their most recent film generated no revenue, as in none. Still, things like Netflix and Amazon have made documentaries way more popular with audiences. So what does a legendary filmmaker now in her late 80 make of all these changes? In just a second, you'll find out as I sit down with Alanis Obomsawin.
- Leora Kornfeld: [02:34](#) During a panel at TIFF last year, I remember hearing Darlene Naponse, she's an Indigenous filmmaker. You know Darlene.
- Alanis O.: [02:42](#) Yes.
- Leora Kornfeld: [02:42](#) And she said something very, very interesting. She was talking about the value of Netflix and the On Demand streaming platforms specifically for Indigenous communities in remote areas where they don't have a lot of broadcast TV options. And what she said was that now people in those are seeing films, they're seeing TV shows that they otherwise wouldn't have seen and they're also seeing themselves in those shows. And I'm wondering if you're hearing a similar sentiment in the communities that you know and that you work with?

- Alanis O.: [03:14](#) Yes, I think they have access to so many things that's never happened before so it makes a big difference. In the last perhaps 20 years, many of the communities have their own radio station, which also is very important to the people. And there's also a lot of young people across the country that are so interested in making videos, and people have cameras. It would be very different now, let's say if a situation like a Oka Crisis would happen, a lot of it would be covered with their own equipment that they have as the everyday phone, where they can take photographs and stuff like that. It's available and very much part of the everyday life. So that has to do with the new technology.
- Leora Kornfeld: [04:15](#) Well, this is something I wanted to ask you about because over the years that you've been making films, sometimes if you were not the first, you were one of the first to get your cameras into places that were the heart of the story, where things are happening. And now of course, everybody with a phone in their pocket has a great camera, and we've got Twitter to get the story out, and Instagram Live and all of these types of things. So how do you look at the role of the documentary filmmaker now in that environment?
- Alanis O.: [04:46](#) I don't think that it affects the documentary work as threatening. I don't think that because even though you can have all the equipment in the world, you still have to be able to tell the story and to really do it where people will sit down and hear and listen and learn something about the history and what's happening in the everyday life. People will cover a lot of things themselves, but it won't be like a documentary, like a story not necessarily. But they will have a lot of photograph images that would be very useful for a person who would want to make a documentary.
- Leora Kornfeld: [05:26](#) What's your relationship with all the new technologies?
- Alanis O.: [05:30](#) Well, a lot of it, at first, I was very reluctant to change from 16mm, for instance, to video camera. When we were covering in 1990 what happened in Kanehsatake, they would call it [gus 00:05:46] dinosaurs. Everybody else had the video cameras and there we were doing 16. And I didn't have much confidence in terms of the image and the quality of the new video material, but now I must say I'm very happy because it's so much easier.
- Alanis O.: [06:07](#) Especially that in most places that I go to are very far, isolated in the North and you have to go there, switch to small planes, and even when you arrive with so much equipment they'll say, "Oh well, we can get all this today. You'll have to..." So it's very

annoying. So now at least with much less equipment and also people, it makes life easier for sure. Eventually, I think people are going to... Already some people are making films with their phone.

Leora Kornfeld: [06:45](#)

And what do you think of that?

Alanis O.: [06:46](#)

Well, I think it's great. No matter what, you have access, you have any kind of a modern equipment and you're taking images, it's great. But it doesn't mean that you can produce... First of all, it depends on who's doing it and what kind of experience you have into making films. To tell stories you have to be a good storyteller, but it's very useful to cover whatever is happening at the time with images that you can use in a document to make the whole story.

Leora Kornfeld: [07:26](#)

And that's the thing, because you can now draw from this pool of images. Do you use or does anybody in your crew use Twitter and Instagram to source images of events?

Alanis O.: [07:37](#)

Not necessarily. But lately, even this last film, there's a few photographs that was used from the internet that people... There's so much material there. I think eventually people are going to use stuff just what they can get out of the internet, but that is dangerous because that's far from the people.

Alanis O.: [07:58](#)

And for me anyway, I'm not there yet because I feel I have to meet, I have to touch, I have to hear the people themselves and direct in the community. For me, that's very important. I will never change.

Leora Kornfeld: [08:12](#)

The relationship.

Alanis O.: [08:13](#)

Yes.

Leora Kornfeld: [08:16](#)

The relationship between the people and then the media.

Alanis O.: [08:17](#)

The voice. For me, the voices first before the image. Before I start making a film, I spend a lot of hours with the people that are going to be in it just listening to them. I don't want any cameras. I want to hear and I want to understand a story. And I am not going to start having a crew before I think I know the story, that I think I figured out what's the beginning, what's the end, what happened here, how do the people feel; and then I'll come with the crew. And I'm never going to say to a person, "Could you repeat what you said to me like you did..." Never, because that's an insult.

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- Leora Kornfeld: [09:04](#) In 50 years, you haven't had to do that?
- Alanis O.: [09:06](#) No, I don't do that. What I do is I start interviewing someone on camera about the story that we have been talking about with sound, just words. And as we get into to the same story, the person's going to talk differently. And what I do, as I'm sure you understand, you see this person in sync on camera and then I get other images about whatever this person is talking about. And then I go back to the first sound because the first sound is so sacred, because people will tell you things you never said before. A person feels intimate and there's nobody... You don't have to worry is my hair okay, what am I wearing, is my kitchen... all that stuff.
- Alanis O.: [09:57](#) And you develop a relation that is so beautiful. For me, that's the main part. And then later on, I can go back, and as long as you have professional equipment, I can go back and use the first sound of what that person said and how it was said and how this person felt, use it on another image, not necessarily in sync. And then you have all that beautiful feeling and the trust, all that is there. You can't get that by using images you take off those machines. You get that being there with the person, and for me that will never change.
- Leora Kornfeld: [10:52](#) You use the word sacred, and I know you use it quite a bit when you talk, and this is something that I've really been thinking about. So it has a lot to do with the way that people tell their stories and then how the viewers then take that in. And when you think of the new ways of viewing... So I'm sure you're familiar with the binge watching on Netflix for example. How you're watching something and if you want to watch six episodes in a row, you can do that. And there's even a little timer that comes on at the end of one episodes says this is going to happen in eight, seven, six...
- Alanis O.: [11:32](#) Oh my God.
- Leora Kornfeld: [11:32](#) It counts down. You don't have to leave your couch. You can watch for hours and hours. And I'm wondering how you're seeing these new ways of consuming affecting that sacredness, that one of kindness of the story that you talk about.
- Alanis O.: [11:47](#) Well for me, I couldn't work like that, and besides an old lady. I come with my experience of always being at the community with the people and understanding them. I couldn't just work like that.

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- Leora Kornfeld: [12:08](#) Do you watch a Netflix or Amazon or anything like that?
- Alanis O.: [12:12](#) No, but Amazon bought the one of my last film I think. It's wonderful, it's very useful, and I was very happy about it because that brings a whole other crowd of people. It's a big plus, so that's wonderful. And it's also, they make their own film and they've encouraged a lot of Indigenous people also, so everything is good, everything counts.
- Leora Kornfeld: [12:45](#) In the Indigenous communities, which you're very familiar with, are you seeing the young people with the phones using them to do things like make videos and make short films, things like that?
- Alanis O.: [12:56](#) I haven't, but I know that they're taking a lot of images. There's a lot of young people that are doing video but have other kinds of equipment. And also we have a PTN that trains a lot of people and they put on everything as long as it's done professionally. All the work that everyone is doing appears on that channel for sure.
- Leora Kornfeld: [13:23](#) If you were just starting out today, do you think you... You should see the face that you're making. You're just like, "I can't even imagine that." But do you think you would have chosen feature length film documentary as your medium with all of the other options out there?
- Alanis O.: [13:41](#) I think so, and I think documentaries and even long ones are very, very important today and will always be because that's history. You can't make history so short that you're missing half of it just to please yourself in terms of time. And I think a documentary will always have its place. And you cannot tell a life story. You think, "Oh, this is interesting, but I just have five minutes to listen to you." No.
- Leora Kornfeld: [14:25](#) It can't be done? So you don't have a lot of optimism about shorter form documentary?
- Alanis O.: [14:32](#) No, I don't have anything against it. As a matter of fact, I did a short thing a year or so ago. It's called Walking is Medicine.
- Leora Kornfeld: [14:41](#) Walking is Medicine, yes, yeah.
- Alanis O.: [14:44](#) It's a very short film and I love it.
- Leora Kornfeld: [14:45](#) You can see it online.

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- Alanis O.: [14:46](#) Yeah.
- Alanis O.: [14:59](#) I took it from another documentary that I made, which is called Trick or Treaty? And I don't think you could learn about what is a treaty in five minutes, and that's what I'm talking about, the history and what that meant to the life of people then and what it means to the life of people today. Treaties are very important to understand, not just ourselves, but all the people who live here in this country. In the past, we say, "Oh, this is treaty number nine. This is treaty number... " Say, "Oh, what's that? Don't talk about that. That finish doesn't... " It means it has a no life or no value or it doesn't affect people. It's not true. And to explain the ABCs, it takes a little bit of time. No matter how modern it gets, you'll never know until you hear the whole story. That's what I think.
- Leora Kornfeld: [16:00](#) When you experimented with the shorter form videos on YouTube, like Walking is Medicine, what did you find about working in that shorter format?
- Alanis O.: [16:07](#) I loved it. It was part of a whole big documentary that I did. Especially when you're telling a long story and you're trying to make people understand the past or whatever or how people feel today, the connections is because I spend a long time making this long thing that I can take any anything out of there and it would be very valuable. But it doesn't come from me or saying to somebody, "Talk to me for five minutes. I'd like to hear this."
- Alanis O.: [16:46](#) It doesn't work like that, not with me. I don't go to places to hear something I want to hear. What I want is to hear the people themselves, how they feel, what they have to say. I want them to feel comfortable and feel I'm not coming there to trick them. And all that takes a lot of time, and I still work the same way.
- Leora Kornfeld: [17:11](#) In the last couple of years, there have been documentaries, some people say it's like the documentary boom going on, and there've been documentaries with box office \$10 million, \$20 million, which is very unusual outside of a few people like Michael Moore. He's one of the very few people that gets big box office revenues for his movies. So with that going on, are you seeing any differences in the way that documentaries are getting funded or financed because of that documentary boom?
- Alanis O.: [17:45](#) Well, it actually has been difficult all people who make documentaries to get funds. There's a change now, especially of course, I'm talking about Indigenous people. If ever there was a

time that there are monies and places available to help you make a documentary if you're Indigenous, it's right now. It's incredible across the country what's happening.

Alanis O.: [18:13](#) And in all our institution in this country, there's a space there where years ago you'd get very intimidated to walk into the Canada Council or the Film Board or a Telefilm, all those places. Now, there is a place especially for Indigenous program, Indigenous languages, and there's encouragement for people to get into this and do it. This is the time. It's wonderful.

Alanis O.: [18:43](#) I am so happy to have lived this long to see the difference because it's been bloody hard for a very long time. And not only that, everything in terms of racism; in terms of, if you're Indigenous, you're less than others. It's changing. And it's the first time, I would say perhaps the last 10 years, more so the last five years that reconciliation has done an incredible job, so you feel that. I travel all the time, that Canadians want to see justice and Canadians are listening. You have a feeling that they're really listening to what you're saying and don't have a response like in the past, say, "Ah, Indians, they're always complaining. They don't pay tax. They're drunks. They're lazy." I don't hear that so much anymore, and that's gift. And I'm so happy.

Alanis O.: [19:42](#) And I think because the history was so false in the teachings in the classroom for many, many generation, that is where you get your education and your education was to make sure that we were savages and all that kind of language. At least these books are out of the classroom now and people realize, but do you know how long it took? It's many of us who have been fighting it. Like we're an army of people that in all our ways, all the artists, the educational system, name it, we have people in every discipline in this country that are at the head of something. We have doctors, we have lawyers, we have judges, photographers, filmmakers. We have our own channel. This is a long walk. It's just incredible what people have done and how they've come up. I think our people don't know how beautiful they are.

Leora Kornfeld: [20:58](#) It sounds like you're also very optimistic for the new generation of Indigenous filmmakers.

Alanis O.: [21:04](#) Definitely. And not just filmmakers, in any discipline. Just think of the past, 1951 was the first time that because of a paragraph that was changed in the Indian Act that an Indigenous person could go to university without having to deny his race, first time. Before that you had to be a Canadian citizen, and we were never a Canadian citizen until 1960, so just think how young

that is in terms of time and the changes. So we've come a long way, and the system of residential school is dead, thank God of that.

Alanis O.: [21:46](#) But the result of all that painful way of being treated is still there. The children of those who went to residential school, all that, it takes generations to heal. And now here we are, and so much wonderful things is happening to our people. And our young people have a place. And this Walking is Medicine is a good example. To see these young people walking and the way they talk, they talk like old people. They're 16, 18 and they have that language realizing that you're not going to get better through drugs or alcohol or foolish things; but, you will get better if you start looking within yourself. What's in your heart? What's my gift? What would I like to do and do well?

Alanis O.: [22:53](#) And know your history and know how our people survived and the wonderful things they did. And that's where you feel better about yourself, that you feel it's okay. I'm an Indigenous person and I can do this. I want to do this. I'm allowed to dream. I'm allowed to make my life a good life. I'm allowed to have something to teach my child, and that's what it's all about. And it's to feel good about what you are because we are beautiful people and we are good people. And there's a lot of good people across this country, and this is who I like to meet or hear now. I just say, "I want to see there's good people everywhere who I think love us and want to see us in a good place."

Leora Kornfeld: [23:50](#) Thank you very much, Alanis.

Alanis O.: [23:51](#) Okay.

Leora Kornfeld: [23:56](#) That's documentary filmmaker, Alanis Obomsawin. And by the way, when I asked her, if at the age of 87 she ever thinks about retiring, she had a great answer. "I don't have time to retire." And indeed that appears to be true. Alanis' 53rd film, Jordan River Anderson, The Messenger recently premiered at TIFF.

Leora Kornfeld: [24:21](#) And this has been Now and Next, a podcast brought to you by the Canada Media Fund. You can find us in all the usual places you find your podcasts. And if you'd like what you heard, please tell your friends, tell your colleagues, and even better subscribe or jot down some comments on iTunes because reviews are the currency of the podcast world. Thanks for listening. I'm Leora Kornfeld.