

Leora Kornfeld ([00:09](#)):

Welcome to Now and Next. It's a podcast about innovation and emerging trends in the media and entertainment industries. Now, when you think of 2020, the word social probably isn't the first one that comes to mind. For most of us life since mid-March has been a bedroom to kitchen commute followed by hours spent on Zoom and Google docs, and maybe, just maybe, a walk or a jog squeezed in there. But how about another maybe? Maybe activities that have become solitary could turn into social ones, like say watching movies, Fiona Rayher and Hilary Henegar think so. They're two friends from BC who started out promoting small, in-person viewing events for handpicked films. This was all pre COVID, of course, and now have shifted their model to online group screenings of movies that they call Hoovies. They describe their endeavor as the world's first, truly social independent cinema platform.

Hilary Henegar ([01:16](#)):

Hoovies started off as more of a solution for filmmakers, but as Hoovie got going, we realized that people were really using Hoovie to build community and to find each other and forge relationships using cinema as a tool.

Leora Kornfeld ([01:30](#)):

My conversation with Fiona Rayher and Hilary Henegar from Hoovie is coming right up.

Leora Kornfeld ([01:37](#)):

So Hilary, let's say I'm one of the Dragon's Den people. We all know them. And you're the entrepreneur pitching. Give me your best elevator pitch for Hoovie.

Hilary Henegar ([01:46](#)):

Hoovie is a platform that gives you everything you need to watch a great film with other people and have a rich conversation afterwards.

Leora Kornfeld ([01:53](#)):

I get the feeling you've said that before, have you?

Hilary Henegar ([01:56](#)):

For three years.

Leora Kornfeld ([01:58](#)):

For about three years, that's good. So it just rolls off the tongue. So Fiona, this whole thing started out as in-person events in Vancouver. And that was a few years ago. And if I have it right, part of the impetus for this was to create an antidote to loneliness in the city. Is that right?

Fiona Rayher ([02:15](#)):

That's right. That was one of the reasons Hoovie exists. Hoovie started off as more of a solution for filmmakers. It was solving a film distribution problem. But as we got going, we realized that people were really using Hoovie to build community and to find each other and

forge relationships using cinema as a tool. So that is the number one differentiator and the number one reason we exist now. Although, as a filmmaker myself, I definitely in part started Hoovie because there's so few revenue streams for [inaudible 00:02:55]. So I wanted to create one. When I finished making my last film, people oftentimes ask me, "Are you going to make another film?" I was like, "You know what? I just, I want to make it better for filmmakers before jumping into filmmaking again." So here we are.

Leora Kornfeld ([03:08](#)):

So psychological loneliness, but also loneliness for filmmakers.

Fiona Rayher ([03:12](#)):

Yeah. As a filmmaker, I realized when I was distributing Fractured Land, that there's very few ways for people to meaningfully experience cinema with other people. People want to watch films and talk about them and they want to do so in much more meaningful environments and spaces. That a-ha moment also sparked Hoovie.

Leora Kornfeld ([03:32](#)):

And now with COVID, this has become a tech platform. So Hilary, what are you looking at building out next? Can you describe what it is that you're building and what the plan is? The technology roadmap? I think that's the technical term.

Hilary Henegar ([03:47](#)):

As one of our users has said from our offline experiences, you can actually feel the audience in the room and that's been a real guiding light in how we build the technology. We want people to feel like they really are watching this film together, and we hear that they feel that now with the opening welcome, but we want to give them the ability to give emotive feedback. So to be able to, in very plain speak, sort of play on an emoji. So you're watching the film and it's a horror film and you put the oh gross symbol up, but how can we go further than that? And so we're looking at different ways.

Hilary Henegar ([04:21](#)):

One of our ... This is just an idea that we've been playing with, but how cool would it be if you could essentially spacebar to kind of take a quick photo of yourself at a moment where you're like, "Oh, reaction shot." You can't believe the thing that just happened and you give that photo. And then that gets marked on the timeline. Then after the film, you can go back and look at all these different places where people had reactions and that can spark conversation about the film.

Hilary Henegar ([04:44](#)):

We're also looking at ways that the users can submit questions and thoughts and conversation prompts into a thought box. So that during the film, we're not distracted by people kind of typing away and chatting, but they can put that thought they had at the moment they had it and save it for after the film. But then the host could also look at all the different questions and they would, might be able to just cherry pick them and choose them. Or you might even have something where you could up-vote certain questions and prompts and have those be the ones that are the ones that are discussed.

Hilary Henegar ([05:17](#)):

I actually found that the conversations in some ways are almost more juicy and intimate in the virtual space. And I haven't quite put my finger on why maybe it's something to do with the fact that you're literally face-to-face with other people. I use my friend, Ben as an example. He's one of the smartest people I know, and he loves Hoovie and he comes to many offline screenings and he's very shy. And he never says anything to the point where I sometimes I wonder whether he likes Hoovie at all. And of course he does. That's why he keeps coming back. But the virtual screening he recently attended was a scifi film. He expressed himself like nothing I've ever seen before. He was fully engaged in the conversation. I mean, he's so smart. He had incredible things to say. And I was like, "Wow, Ben, I've never seen you like this." And so that was a kind of an aha moment that, "Wait a second, maybe the virtual space, for some people, is more special and can help open people up."

Leora Kornfeld ([06:18](#)):

Well, there's this whole theory that telephones are more, or can be more, intimate than person to person or face-to-face communication too. So there's something about that. It's interesting what you said too. It sounds like when you were doing the in-person events that Hoovie became a bit of a dating app, is that right?

Hilary Henegar ([06:37](#)):

Yeah.

Leora Kornfeld ([06:37](#)):

You didn't mean for it to happen that way, but it sounds like it did.

Hilary Henegar ([06:41](#)):

The whole point of Hoovie is to find like-minded people. So if you go to a movie screening, there's a film in our catalog, for example, about the formation of Greenpeace. So you go to see that film, you're probably going to meet people who care about movement building and who care about the environment. So yeah, that's a great way to meet anyone, but definitely a romantic partner, for sure.

Leora Kornfeld ([07:01](#)):

I guess we'll find out in the years to come as it builds out who the Hoovie honeymooners are.

Hilary Henegar ([07:06](#)):

Yeah.

Leora Kornfeld ([07:07](#)):

So Hilary, I attended a Hoovie last week and not a single person I saw was eating popcorn. Have you ever seen people eating popcorn during Hoovies?

Hilary Henegar ([07:17](#)):

Yes. I do a regular Hoovie night and one of my guests, she loves popcorn so much and she makes feminist popcorn.

Leora Kornfeld ([07:26](#)):

Feminist popcorn?

Hilary Henegar ([07:27](#)):

Yeah, she just loads it up with whatever she wants she says. And she doesn't worry about anything other than how it tastes and how she wants it.

Leora Kornfeld ([07:35](#)):

Okay. You'll have to tell me what this is. What is it?

Hilary Henegar ([07:38](#)):

So basically it's popcorn for her. She loves Parmesan cheese and lots of salt and lots of butter. And she just, doesn't worry whatsoever about her waistline or what anyone else is going to think. And she actually loves it because the virtual Hoovie, because it means that she can make her popcorn the way that she likes it and she doesn't have to feel like she needs to apologize to anybody else around because it's been loaded with this rich and indulgent ingredients.

Hilary Henegar ([08:07](#)):

Then there's also another one of my regular guests who she just started coming. I had not met her before. She's such an amazing woman. She's an entrepreneur and a creative and she's a foodie. And so her ritual is to make herself some sort of new dish. And it always looks amazing when she shows up on the screen. And then she always has either a really fancy cocktail or a new wine that she's trying out. And so that becomes something that she's sort of, it's her contribution in a way it's like, she doesn't even have to ... she doesn't want to talk about anything personal. She always has this incredible food that she can share. And we're all drooling watching.

Leora Kornfeld ([08:50](#)):

So yeah, it's a whole other thing. And it's just bringing that aspect to, it reminds me of like probably familiar with, is it the Alamo Drafthouse chains [[crosstalk 00:08:59](#)] That kind of thing, which are actually, they go beyond just the popcorn where you can, at your seat, you can order a beer, you can order food. So it's kind of some of that it sounds like.

Hilary Henegar ([09:11](#)):

Well, if we go back to the original vision, and there will be a day when we can get back to this, which is that Hoovie experience, was happening offline, it was happening in people's living rooms. It was happening in zero waste grocery stores. It was happening in workspaces, in all sorts of delightful, unique spaces. And when people invite someone into their home in particular, the foods and snacks that they serve becomes part of the experience and adding that bit of hospitality to it really, it takes the whole experience to a whole other level. I mean, it's so generous and caring and intimate, and the food is always an exciting part. And that's what we really want to encourage hosts to think about the whole experience. They

can also just whatever, like have a bag of popcorn, no big deal or nothing at all, and tell people to BYO, but there is something really special when a host takes the time and care to have a nice spread of cheese and wine or whatever.

Leora Kornfeld ([10:14](#)):

Well, I mean, food is inherently social, and it's one of those things we're all looking for new ways to be, I guess you could call it, alone together. We're all doing things online in groups that we used to do in person, or that we used to do alone meetings, concerts, following hashtags while we watch movies. And I see things out there like Amazon Prime has just added a watch party feature in groups of up to a hundred. There are ways to do this on YouTube and on Twitch and on Facebook. So what do you see as the unique proposition that Hoovie has here? Because those companies that I just mentioned, those are tough competitors. So how do you compete with them? How do you differentiate your offering from what they're doing?

Hilary Henegar ([10:59](#)):

Well, there's a few ways I would respond to that. First is that when you are doing a watch party, that's just you and the people you know, so you're not, there's no new people that you're including in that there's no serendipitous connections happening as a result of you hosting a watch party. So that's one. Hoovie does allow you to meet new people by making, having the option to do a public Hoovie movie means that you are saying, "Yeah, sure. If there's somebody else who wants to watch this film, I'm curious to meet them and watch it with them and hear what they think." We've always had this vision that people would be meeting their next best friend or their future partner or they're sparking the next Greenpeace at a Hoovie screening.

Hilary Henegar ([11:49](#)):

So that's one. Two is that our film catalog is highly curated. Not just any film is a Hoovie film, not just any film is a proper social cinema film. So the films in our catalog are all conversation starters, usually award winners, or somehow recognized for their quality and they're either timely or timeless. One of the defining characteristics that we've come to understand about a Hoovie film is that you just can't stop thinking about it. It's almost like an ear worm where it comes to you for days and days afterwards. And those are the films that people want to have a conversation with and that are going to catalyze the kind of conversations that allow people to really express themselves and to go beyond just small talk.

Hilary Henegar ([12:34](#)):

The other thing I would say is that independent film is uniquely suited to a social cinema model. If you're looking to meet like-minded people or connect over things that you have in common, in mainstream film, a studio film is often not going to do it. I mean, there's definitely some out there that can do that for you, but just by their very nature, independent films are somewhat niche. And so the people who are attracted to watch a specific film are more likely to have something in common with each other, or have some points of interest that they share than two people watching a superhero movie. Of course, superhero movies are super fun. And there's a lot of fans out there who for sure have lots in common, but

there's the nature of making a film that's going to make hundreds of millions of dollars is one where you're going to sort of pander to the center and there's going to be something lost in terms of helping people almost define themselves by selecting that to watch.

Hilary Henegar ([13:35](#)):

The types of films also that we have in our catalog being independent, it means that they are, again, going to attract the kind of people who are going to find each other and discover kindred spirits.

Leora Kornfeld ([13:48](#)):

Now, Fiona, what are you hearing from people who were attending the Hoovies? What do they seem to like the most?

Fiona Rayher ([13:55](#)):

They love the juicy conversation. They love the films, but more than the content, they love the conversation afterwards. And they love the ways in which people feel like they can be vulnerable with each other. So for example, there's a film in our catalog about, it's called 112 Weddings by Doug Block. And it's about marriage and relationships and love and what it all means today. And the conversation at those screenings are not so much about the film, but about people's relationships and their marriages and how hard it is. You know, I was in this moment in time where I wanted to tear my husband's hair out, but I also was like, I don't know what I would do without him. So being vulnerable about all these feelings that I had about my marriage and it was refreshing and relieving to have a group of people that I could share that with.

Leora Kornfeld ([14:45](#)):

And what are you hearing from filmmakers about this new way for getting their work screened? You mentioned, or we were talking about how this could be another window after film festivals. And I think a lot of people don't realize that you can get into the big film festivals and still not get distribution. Which is hard to believe. In fact, that's one of the reasons people want to be in film festivals is so they can secure distribution deals, but not everybody does. So what are you hearing from filmmakers about this, about what you're offering them?

Fiona Rayher ([15:14](#)):

Number one is that filmmakers, they don't make and I'm stereotyping here, but I think it's true, they don't make their films just to have some short shelf life that does the gamut of theaters and all of that, which doesn't inspire conversation and community. People want their films to have more community juice. The filmmakers that I speak to, they're really inspired by Hoovie being a way in which inspires conversation in a way that attending a theater doesn't, especially these days when theaters are closed or half empty. So yeah, I would say filmmakers use Hoovie because we have the capability to create fans and not just views.

Leora Kornfeld ([16:02](#)):

I'm also curious about films that don't yet have a distributor. So for example, you go after a lot of films that have been at Sundance, at film festivals, on the art house circuit, but what about those indie or DIY types of movies that don't yet have a distributor. Hilary, I'll throw this one to you. Are you able to work with those films that don't yet have a distributor?

Hilary Henegar ([16:27](#)):

Absolutely. We, and in fact, we love those films. In some ways it's more resource intensive to deal with a filmmaker for a one-off film. With a distributor, we can acquire 50 new films with a single contract versus one film with one filmmaker. It's the same amount of work.

However, we love working with these folks because they're so passionate about their film and they also can offer real insights in terms of what conversations were sparked when they were screening that film, when they did their screening tour. They usually have different kinds of discussion materials, film discussion materials, that they can support us with. They've usually got different marketing collateral that we can support us or inform ours. And they're really paying attention.

Hilary Henegar ([17:12](#)):

Having a relationship with a filmmaker and sharing with them about a Hoovie experience that we may have participated in of their film. I mean, they're just, they love it. I mean, there's one filmmaker in New York, documentary filmmaker, he's so loves the Hoovie model because that is ... When he makes his films, that's exactly how he would like to have people experience them in these intimate gatherings, where they can talk about them and really turn them around and look at his films from different angles and really interact with them. And he's like, "If anyone ever wants to do a Q and A, I'd be very happy." And this is a very successful documentary filmmaker. He's a busy guy, but he just, he loves the format so much.

Hilary Henegar ([17:59](#)):

And there's a woman who, she's a local filmmaker to Vancouver named Carmen Pollard, and she made this absolutely devastatingly. Beautiful documentary, very personal film about a man who's dying of cancer. And I just got chills just thinking about it. It is so beautiful, this film, and it really is a film that it would not be ideal to watch it by yourself, which is probably how most people would watch this film because they would see it through the knowledge network or something like that alone at home. But when you watch it with other people, you can't have a superficial conversation after sharing that experience together. And the screening that I joined of that one, there was a woman from Australia there and she had experienced this with her sister and she just ... It was fascinating to get to know this woman so deeply, so quickly just by virtue of having shared the experience of watching the film. It was just a really profound experience. And so being able to then share that with the filmmaker, I mean, she was just so lit up because this is why she's doing it. This is why she's sacrificing to tell these stories is because they need to be told and she wants to connect with people and in their hearts. And yeah, so that's what I love about working with individual filmmakers.

Leora Kornfeld ([19:20](#)):

But before those stories can get out there, and can you explain a bit about this, because you kind of have to be on the inside of the system to explain how it works. There are all of these issues around rights and licenses and how they're only available for specific geographies. Can you explain how all of that works and what those challenges are and how you're overcoming them?

Hilary Henegar ([19:41](#)):

It's so complicated. And of course when you get into the thing, like part of being an entrepreneur is having no idea what you don't know and how foolish you are for doing something. And then you just can't help yourself. So you jump right in and you start trying to license films, and it can be very complicated. Some films you can acquire the rights for only Canada and not the US. You can acquire rights for only streaming, but not public screenings. So for us, actually, we have actually invented a new type of license, which fits sort of somewhere between a community screening license and a streaming license. We essentially have a license that allows us to screen the film anywhere other than a theater or a military venue, or there's a couple of weird random places like that.

Hilary Henegar ([20:35](#)):

And for us, so our screening licenses are per ticket, so each ticket sold, the filmmaker gets 60% and Hoovie takes 40%, with exceptions. Sometimes if there's a host who wants to use Hoovie to raise money or to make money, they're going to work really hard for each ticket. So we reduce the take from the film rights holder and the Hoovie take and give them actually 30% because we know they're going to sell more tickets and it's going to net out better for the filmmaker in the end this way. And so that's per ticket, but other screening licenses like a community screening license is a flat fee. So the host would have to spend \$300 to 500 for a single, for a license for a single evening, for example. Then they'd probably have to rent a venue and this and that. And they would have to do all the promotion that they need to do in order to recoup the costs of all of that.

Hilary Henegar ([21:34](#)):

Our goal in designing our business model this way, by doing it per ticket and putting the burden essentially on the guests to pay for the film license was so that it would take the stress away from the host because it's so critical that hosts do this really important work of bringing people together of building community in this way. So we wanted to take some of the pressure off of them and stress and make it essentially free for them to do that work.

Leora Kornfeld ([22:05](#)):

I understand that the Criterion Collection is interested in working with you two, and I saw that you posted on Facebook. I did a little bit of snooping around that you got a mail from someone, or was it an email from someone at Criterion, what was the story there?

Hilary Henegar ([22:22](#)):

It's such a strange situation. So just sort of to set the scene, I went to film school at NYU. I was in the experimental filmmaking track. I was a total film nerd and would spend my weekends watching Criterion films, which are, if anyone out there doesn't know, Criterion films are highly curated they're films that are timeless and they're art films, they're films that

have something to say. And Criterion is the reason why most people watch films in letterbox format right now, 16:9, because before that all films were formatted for a TV screen. So anyway, I'm a huge fan of Criterion and Fiona and I have long been relishing the day where we would be able to have Criterion films screening through Hoovie, a collection that we helped to curate.

Hilary Henegar ([23:14](#)):

And anyway, we got an email from our lead investor, our board chair, Vallejo Gafner in New York, who besides investing in projects like ours, he's an performance art curator and producer. And he also works for the Onassis Foundation and he runs the granting program. And he had received an email from one of his grantees who just so happened to be the founder of Criterion Collection saying, just checking in on grant and "Hey, have you heard of this thing? It's called Hoovie, alas such an unfortunate name, but it looks pretty interesting." And he goes on to quote our website. So anyway, Vallejo forwards that email to us, and we're sort of still screaming our heads off, "Oh my god." And yeah.

Hilary Henegar ([24:07](#)):

Vallejo, he responds to Bob saying, "Yes, I know Hoovie. I actually came up with the name and I was the first investor." And so that has sparked now this relationship with Bob that ... We're still getting to know each other, but he hosted his Hoovie a couple of weeks ago and is really offering some interesting insights and becoming somewhat of a trusted advisor in terms of the visions for where we can go and what he knows of the landscape in terms of distribution.

Leora Kornfeld ([24:47](#)):

Okay. So let's hear from Bob, the founder of the Criterion Collection.

Bob Stein ([24:52](#)):

25, 30 years ago, you went to the movies and you watched something and you would come out afterwards and you would talk to people. Or you'd watch on television and people would talk to each other. But the reality is that in both those cases, the depth of the conversation has always been limited because the experience of watching was in the past. And when you got to the point where you're ready to talk about it, you no longer sort of had the thing there to refer to.

Bob Stein ([25:31](#)):

When Twitter came along, the incidence of synchronous television watching, where people were watching at the same time everybody else was, went up by 20% because people found that they loved being able to tweet commentary to other people while they were watching The Sopranos, The Wire, et cetera. And this was revelatory for many of us, sort of seeing that hunger for people to communicate in real time about something while they were consuming.

Bob Stein ([26:08](#)):

That's what's exciting about Hoovie, is that they are potentially attacking are the two most important things going on here. One is building community. The other is designing, creating, encouraging new ways to consume media that makes sense in the era of the digital network.

Bob Stein ([26:31](#)):

I have a feeling sometimes that the assumption is because this is coming out of Canada, that there must be dozens of things around the world that are just as interesting or ahead of where Hoovie is. But I don't think that's the case. I think Hoovie is actually in an interesting spot right now, and that's partially because of the pandemic, but they have sort of lucked into a first mover status. I think what they're doing is potentially the future of distribution of media, because depending on how they develop it, what they've figured out is that the future of media consumption is social.

Leora Kornfeld ([27:19](#)):

And that's it for this episode of Now and Next, this podcast is brought to you by the Canada media fund, thanks to today's guests, Fiona Rayher and Hilary Henegar from Hoovie and Bob Stein from the Criterion Collection. Don't forget to head to the CMF Trends website for a transcript and show notes for this episode and all of the episodes of this podcast, if you're interested. And also, as always, you can help us out with some word of mouth recommendations and/or a rating or review for the show in your podcast app. It just takes the swipe and some taps and away you go. It's a really big help. In the meantime, thanks for listening. I'm Leora Kornfeld and I'll see you next time for more Now and Next.