



“So, We Decided to Make a Film”: Arts-Based Knowledge Translation and/in Information Research

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Abstract

Researchers in information science and related fields have traditionally focused on published research and syntheses of research findings. While these mechanisms are crucial for knowledge dissemination, we advocate for more innovative knowledge translation and mobilization efforts. To illustrate this, we present a unique case study on the employment-seeking practices of immigrant women in STEM in Canada. This study stands out for its groundbreaking arts-based knowledge deliverables, including an animated film, a novel approach that was instrumental in our knowledge dissemination and translation efforts. We delve into the study, the rationale behind these deliverables, and the significance of this approach for information science professionals.

Keywords: arts; immigrant women; knowledge translation; labor market; STEM

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Introduction

Researchers in information science and related fields have traditionally produced and focused their efforts on published research and syntheses of research findings. While these mechanisms play an important role in disseminating knowledge, there is a need for more innovative ways of translating research for different target audiences and creating a range of knowledge translation (KT) products that can be taken up and acted on by different audiences. In this article, we focus on a crucial research topic: the employment-seeking practices of immigrant women in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM) in Canada. This case study, which resulted in various arts-based knowledge deliverables, including an animated film, was produced as part of knowledge dissemination and translation efforts. We will briefly detail the study, examine the rationale and process for producing such knowledge deliverables as an online exhibit and an animated film, as well as discuss the reception of the animated film by a range of audiences to which it was presented. In doing so, we seek to address key questions for any KT work: What does “translation” mean? For whom should research knowledge be translated? In what form? And to what end?

Traditionally, systematic reviews and other syntheses of research findings were the academic epitome of KT. The purpose of these deliverables is to distill key messages for different audiences in a language that is easily assimilated by various publics. There are many KT models derived from different disciplinary traditions. KT is most prevalent in the healthcare field, where it is usually geared towards healthcare professionals, policymakers, and consumers such as “patients,



family members, and informal carers” (Grimshaw et al., 2012, p. 2 of 17). Indeed, the most formative works on arts-based knowledge translation from which we draw are from the domain of nursing (Archibald et al., 2014; Lafrenière & Cox, 2013; Parsons & Boydell, 2012; Rieger & Schultz, 2014). KT frameworks and practices are, however, gaining traction beyond the health sciences (e.g., social sciences, humanities, and education) (Arbuckle, 2020; Lapointe & Boss, 2022; Luka et al., 2022; Rycroft-Smith, 2022).

Over the course of a two-year study (July 2018–June 2020), we examined “workfinding” and immigrant women’s prosperity in STEM based on the labour market integration of STEM-educated immigrant women across Canada. Workfinding is a term coined by Muzaffar that encompasses the spectrum of activities immigrants undertake to navigate and make sense of a new-to-them labour market in the country they have immigrated to, including specific cultural norms and workplace expectations, as well as sectoral, linguistic, and legal contexts. The study was a longstanding collaboration between the founder of TechGirls Canada (TGC), Saadia Muzaffar, and the lead researcher from the University of Toronto, Nadia Caidi. TGC is a non-profit organization that aims to improve women’s economic and social outcomes in Canada’s STEM fields through research, innovation, and partnership. TGC seeds cultural transformation in workplaces by engaging with artists and communities to present their research in beautiful, accessible, and compelling ways. For this two-year study, 74 women were recruited for in-depth interviews in all 13 of Canada’s provinces and territories. The women were recruited based on self-identifying as women between the ages of 18 and 65, having an international STEM degree and job experience of over three years in a STEM field, and having immigrated to Canada in the last 15 years. The participants were asked to reflect on their personal and professional lives pre- and post-immigration, their experiences of resettlement, and their efforts to join the workforce in their chosen STEM fields.

Our findings shed light on the lived experiences of these highly educated professionals who immigrated to Canada to contribute to a growing knowledge and innovation economy with a significant need for individuals with their skills and expertise (Bhuyan et al., 2017; Frank, 2019; Mahboubi, 2022). The women have settled in all parts of the country and have opened themselves up to new opportunities, but they still face many barriers when they seek employment in their field or attempt to fit into their new workplaces. Additionally, these barriers are experienced most acutely by racialized women (Abugala et al., 2014; Caidi et al., 2014). The two-year research study points to how many of these professional women feel betrayed by the Canadian government, which has failed to deliver on the promise of economic success and prosperity. They feel unseen by the settlement workers who do not have sufficient resources to support them and shut out by some employers who exhibit bias towards them on account of their gender, race, or other aspects of their background. Unsurprisingly, these women are confused, frustrated, powerless, and angry toward others.

From an information studies perspective, the two-year study pays attention to how the women accessed information about immigration and job prospects and problem-solved their way through the upheaval of starting new personal and professional lives in Canada. Caidi et al. (2024) report the findings of the two-year study that revealed “challenges associated with employment-seeking and workplace integration for STEM-trained women” (p. 14 of 23). In this article, however, we focus on making the animated film “We Were Here All Along: Canada’s Failed Promise to Immigrant Women in STEM,” which resulted from the research findings of the two-year study. The making of “We Were Here All Along” occurred between February 2021 and May 2022, which was during the COVID-19 pandemic, under stringent lockdowns and public health measures. KT

researcher Elizabeth Kalbfleisch complemented the original team, and we pieced together the process using interspersing entries from Kalbfleisch's fieldwork diary and notes.

After the data was collected and analyzed, and the report was released, funding to hire a researcher to assist in knowledge mobilization and translation was sought through the Canada-based Mitacs Accelerate program, which supports academic-industry collaboration. The first author was hired in this position to complement the team from the University of Toronto and TGC with the aim of targeting and strengthening employer and policy roles in labour market integration of Canada's immigrant women in STEM. The Mitacs researcher was tasked with devising and executing a KT project as part of this academic-industry team, expanding the audience for and utility of the research, and providing multiple access points to the knowledge acquired. Based on the data, a plan of action was devised, which included the following questions:

- In order to be useful and compelling to the women who participated in the project, what form could this KT project take?
- What might hold the attention of frontline workers and policymakers who are inundated with research and reports?
- What other audiences could be reached by presenting the research in a different way?

Luckily, the researcher hired into the position recently graduated from the University of Toronto with a master's degree in information science, with specializations in library and information science and archives and records management. The researcher also holds a doctoral degree in visual and cultural studies, lending both these sensibilities and skills to the project. She had conducted her doctoral work with Indigenous artists and thus shared with the team the ethical imperative to produce research that would involve and serve the communities the research targeted.

The idea of making an animated video slowly emerged and stemmed from a desire to connect people with the stories they shared during the study. The Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR, 2016) defines knowledge translation as a "dynamic and iterative process that includes synthesis, dissemination, exchange and ethically sound application of knowledge" (para. 4). Others have adapted this definition over the past couple of decades for contexts beyond the scope of health research. Irrespectively, the engagement and form KT takes are context-dependent, hinging on the research objectives and design, the findings, and the needs of various stakeholders. In our instance, the influences of our new team member's previous disciplinary roots and experience in the arts led us to attempt to harness art and apply it to this research context.

Arts-Based Knowledge Translation (ABKT)

Arts-Based Knowledge Translation (ABKT) is an emerging form of KT, which is:

a process that uses diverse art genres (visual arts, performing arts, creative writing, multi-media including video and photography) to communicate research to catalyse dialogue, awareness, engagement, and advocacy to provide a foundation for social

change on critical societal issues (homelessness, medical diseases and conditions, sexual orientation, historical learning, among others). (Kukkonen & Cooper, 2017, p. 296)

By making use of an artistic mindset and technical skills, researchers may provide a new entry point into research findings, broadening the scope of research dissemination and impact in meaningful ways and to a wider range of stakeholders, particularly those beyond academic circles. ABKT outputs can coexist with more traditional forms of knowledge dissemination with proven value and impact like reports, academic articles, and policy briefs. Yet beyond transmitting study data in another format, as researchers, we were interested in what art could do when mobilized in the service of our two-year study's findings. We were drawn to art as a means of storytelling, as well as to how we might harness aesthetics and artistic tropes to engage audiences, challenge the intellect, and trigger an effective response. While written outputs, even academic ones, may work toward these same goals, ABKT presented a means of translating the study's findings, the "feelings, sounds, nuances, and movements of human experiences" (Rieger & Schultz, 2014, p. 134), and thus the richness of which was apparent in the study's data.

Upon reading the extensive analysis of the study's data, Kalbfleisch articulated how humane and touching the women's accounts and stories were and suggested that a visual approach would do much justice to their stories. After some back and forth, we reached a consensus. We decided to make a film, a medium through which we could harness those meaningful attributes of art described above and one that could be transmitted widely and experienced repeatedly. In designing an animation, we had an extensive wish list. The film needed to:

- Engage a range of stakeholders, including:
 - The 74 women who participated directly in the study and other STEM-trained immigrant women who did not but are nevertheless impacted by these issues.
 - The employers in STEM industries who are (or are not) hiring immigrant women.
 - The immigrant settlement agencies (ISAs) that support newcomers with integration in their first months and years in Canada and also work with newcomers at a community level.
 - The bureaucrats and analysts designing immigration policy and laying out the immigration pathways for highly skilled immigrants.
 - Information professionals, many of whom work at the community level.
 - A more general audience of students and civic-minded others who need to hear these stories to learn from these experiences.
- Centre the voices of the women to:
 - Keep their perspectives and lived experiences at the fore.
 - Shine a light on the obstacles and gatekeeping they face concerning the labour market.
- Create a usable tool to:

- Inform and challenge assumptions (e.g., the “ideal immigrant” and Canada as the gold standard in immigration policy and integration) and inspire change.
 - Validate the lived experiences of the women who participated in the study and for whom sharing their stories was a galvanizing experience. An animated video might provide them, as well as others, with some collective affirmation and act as a conversation starter or access point for delving further into the issues the study raises.
 - Attract and hold the attention of front-line workers and policymakers in a way that yet another policy brief, white paper, or academic article might not.
 - Showcase and support the work that TGC does with women in STEM.
- Support, not replace or distill, other forms of research dissemination and other knowledge mobilization assets.
 - Make it beautiful. This last point was critical to the team. We wanted to go beyond an infographic or brochure and create something engaging, informative, and aesthetically pleasing.

Creative Collaboration into Animation

Creating this video was a true collaboration and a labour of love. Before drafting the initial script, the team spent weeks discussing the study’s data and the themes that emerged from the participants’ accounts. The initial script was then reworked extensively and iteratively. The team relied closely on the *Workfinding and Immigrant Women’s Prosperity in STEM* report (TGC, 2020) and its analysis and framing of the findings and underlying issues. To create a narrative arc, we drew from the women’s words as closely as possible (Figure 1). As this was a KT project, the KT researcher was also tasked with translating the study’s findings as interpreted by the research team through their unique lens (i.e., policy analysis and information practices) and not just the raw stories.

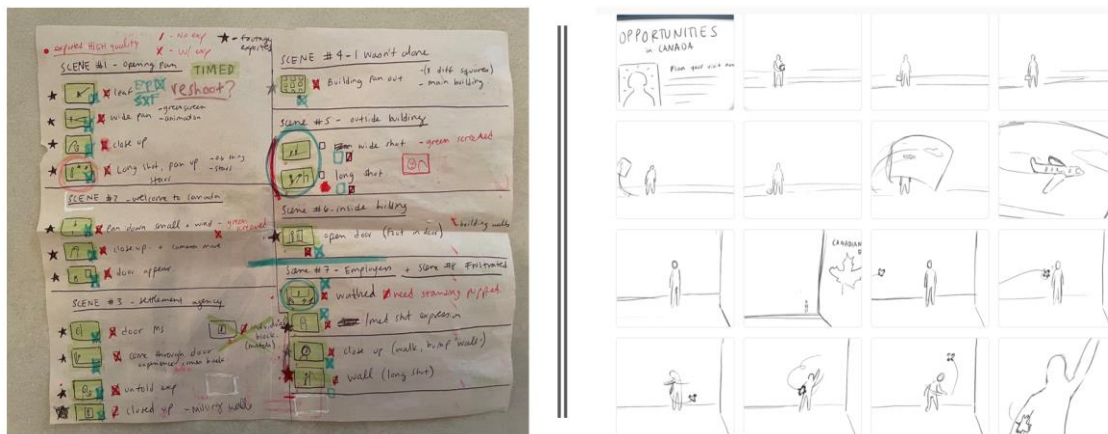


Figure 1. Storyboarding the Animated Film

Lastly, the team had to translate a hundred pages of data, stories, and themes into something that would uniquely suit the format and style of a short, animated film (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Brainstorming Session for the Animated Film

The time also came to look for an animator to develop the film. Kalbfleisch spent weeks looking for an animator. She recalled, "Everyone told me it was impossible; it was too big a project, and our budget too small to do what we wanted to do. It was extremely discouraging ... and then I connected with Dani Elizondo, who gamely agreed to use her stop-motion skills to collaborate with us." Elizondo and Kalbfleisch worked very closely for months to develop the look and feel of the video.

Not only did Elizondo come to believe in the project's power and potential, but she was also receptive to a shared vision. The team members worked to bring the women's stories to life in a way that would honour their experiences with sensitivity and simultaneously inform, move, and empower audiences. In balancing all these critical and sensitive representational requirements, a character slowly emerged. Thus, Maia was born! (Figure 3).



Figure 3. Developing Maia for the Animated Film

Maia was our puppet, the character who leads viewers through the story. The idea came from the animator, Elizondo, who spent time and effort envisioning the puppet in myriad details. Rendering this character was just one example of the constant negotiations among our team. The four of us brainstormed and incessantly reworked Maia's body shape, skin colour, clothing, and hair (Figure 4). Given the diversity of women in the study and the fact that no one body could represent everybody, this was no small task. And yet, that is what Maia and Elizondo's meticulous and detailed craftsmanship had to do.



Figure 4. Styling Maia for the Animated Film

As the project gathered steam, the power of these women's stories and the importance of disseminating the research in a visual and impactful way enabled us to gather a slate of very

talented friends and colleagues who contributed their skills and artistry in the areas of narration, picture editing, sound effects, and music. As Kalbfleisch wrote in her fieldnote diary:

In this respect, I had a stage-managing role as the collaboration intensified. My advice to graduates: take a project management course! The number of balls in the air was particularly challenging, especially as the project was coming to mean so much to different people with different goals, priorities, and investments. Even Nadia and Saadia, as co-researchers on the study, come to that work with different investments and have different perspectives on what this KT project should do and what it should look like. Personally speaking, it felt like a constant negotiation of my interests and goals as an emerging information professional on the one hand, looking at how the women in the study were using information as part of their resettlement and labour market integration, and on the other hand, my arts background which was pushing me to create a particular kind of object that could move and motivate people. It was really a case of exercising all these muscles around information work. (E. Kalbfleisch, personal communication, March 2, 2022)

Through it all, another main driver for the team was accountability to our timeframe and funders.

In addition to Mitacs, the project received funding from SOAR Innovate, a not-for-profit organization that supports business investment and entrepreneurship in rural regions of southern Ontario. Newcomers are much sought after for settling in and contributing to the communities and the local economy outside the significant Ontario cities. For the funders, the story of these immigrant women was important, and they were keen on seeing the finished animation (Figure 5). In addition to the consideration of doing justice to the stories of these women, was the question of accountability to the 74 women who participated in the project. We were in the highly privileged position of having access to their stories and in a position to shape this narrative about them. That accountability, and the trust they had given us with their stories, weighed heavily on us.



Figure 5. Workshopping a Scene for the Animated Film

“We Were Here All Along” was completed in six months, not including the two to three months spent distilling research, writing the script, and looking for an animator. With the video’s length

being just five minutes, the story had to be concise yet nuanced, informative but not essentializing, which was a tall order given the rich data we had collected.

Reception and Next Steps

“We Were Here All Along” was completed by the end of March 2022. The next step for our team was to assess how the film would be received and whether it was “effective,” as we were cognizant of the challenges in assessing ABKT (Archibald et al., 2014; Lafrèniere & Cox, 2013; Rieger & Schultz, 2014). Specifically, we asked ourselves the following questions:

- Is the knowledge gained from the study sufficiently and accurately represented?
- Are its aesthetic dimensions meaningful?
- Will a wide range of stakeholders be able to access it? If so, who and how?
- Does it engage the people who watch it? Build empathy? Motivate?

We had strategized to show it to various audiences, but before its public launch on TGC’s website, we decided that the study participants would be given first access. We did not organize a formal screening because of the COVID-19 pandemic and the different time zones involved. Instead, we emailed the participants a password-protected link to the film. The feedback from the participants was voluntary and confidential. All the emails we received were touching and encouraging. One of the women who participated in the study gave us consent to share excerpts from her email for this article. In it, W. Sabih expressed ideas and feelings that were mirrored in many other comments:

Thank you for sharing the film with me. To be honest, it is a masterpiece! It brought tears to my eyes. Being one of the interviewees, the film brought back memories I had managed to tuck away somewhere in the corners of my brain; the frustration, the sense of isolation, failure, rejection, and wondering why did I leave what I had for this? I love the way [you] have shown the characters, so neutral, yet smartly diverse. The words were excellently selected, one can sense them coming from the heart. I especially liked the part of the film that states that employers need to be trained! That really resonates. I remember we talked about that with [the] author. I really hope from the bottom of my heart that someone will listen with their heart and soul, not only their ears and that it will make a difference for future STEM immigrant women coming into Canada. We may eventually find our way, maybe not in the direction we had hoped, but only after we pay a considerable price. (W. Sabih, personal communication, April 20, 2022)

The film was also shown to other audiences. Students in Nadia Caidi’s classrooms viewed the film, which was accompanied by guest lectures by the first two authors. Caidi also played the film as part of keynotes and other scholarly speaking engagements. It was also shown in conference settings, such as the national immigration conference, Metropolis, in Ottawa in 2023 and at the Information Seeking in Context conference (ISIC) in Berlin in 2022. TGC’s Muzaffar showed the film at community-led film screenings (over 100 attendees), at the 2023 TGC Immigrant Women in STEM conference (250 attendees), the Newcomer Women’s Centre Award Ceremony (75 attendees), the Shared Services Canada meeting (275 attendees), the Schulich

School of Engineering (150 attendees), the Science Communicators Conference (120 attendees), and the Ford Foundation Centre for Social Justice (65 attendees).

In all instances, the film acted as an entry point into discussing issues of migration, workfinding, global competitiveness, and information experiences and into the importance of impactful research. Throughout this process, different stakeholders (settlement workers and policy analysts at the Metropolis conference, future information science professionals in the classroom presentations, and educators and researchers in the academic conferences) were able to use the film as a starting point for meaningful conversations.

Lastly, the film was uploaded to Vimeo in March 2023 (<https://vimeo.com/696563194>). To date, Vimeo analytics indicate that the film has been viewed over 2,300 times; of those, 1,115 were unique views. The top five countries from which the film has been viewed include Canada, the US, Mexico, India, and the UK. However, the film's viewers also hailed from 43 countries, including 15 countries in Europe, six in Latin and South America, six in the Middle East, nine in South and East Asia, seven in Africa, and two in Oceania.

Conclusion and Implications

The Workfinding and Immigrant Women's Prosperity in STEM (TGC, 2020) study exemplifies a longstanding collaboration between TGC, whose role is to advocate for women in STEM, and information scholars and professionals. The outcomes of the study included various KT initiatives, which include the animated film discussed in this article. These efforts represent a different type of information work. As information professionals, we are well-positioned to support knowledge translation and mobilization projects. As Elizabeth's position with the research team came to an end, she wrote in her fieldnote diary:

This has been, without a doubt, the most meaningful experience I have had at the iSchool. It has certainly given me a frame for understanding what we, as information professionals, can do. When I have shared with people in my life what I am up to, the response has invariably been, "But aren't you in library school now?" Which leads me to think, maybe we need to do a better job of promoting the things that we can and do here, and as emerging information professionals. (E. Kalbfleisch, personal communication, March 27, 2022)

As the note suggests, knowledge brokering and KT work provide a unique avenue for librarians and other information professionals to collaborate with academics, community workers, policymakers, and a range of publics, thus fostering the kinds of connections we already value.

In LIS, there have long been calls for revisiting MLIS education (Bertot et al., 2015). The goal of knowledge is the uplifting of all people, and partnerships that respond to the key societal challenges of our time should do so while creating new ways for communities and their members to thrive. Research partnerships, like this one, illustrate the importance of mobilizing knowledge and communities toward positive societal change—including changes in policies, systems, organizations, and communities. This study calls for information professionals to mindfully reflect on our institutions, practices, and mindsets, and to engage in practices of care, continued interaction, and rebuilding trust. In Kalbfleisch's fieldnote diary, her concluding words sum up her experience and speak better than any formal statement:

There is a lot of talk amongst students at the iSchool about the training we receive (and I can only speak to LIS and ARM) - is it too theoretical? Do we get enough practical skills? How do we apply this learning? What kind of job experience are you getting? I really do think our training has provided us with a unique agility with information, we are comfortable supporting other people and entities with their learning; we are already committed to information literacy and knowledge dissemination; and we possess the ability to see the big picture as well as to engage at close range. All these skills came to bear in making this animation. (E. Kalbfleisch, personal communication, March 27, 2022)

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Nadia Caidi (nadia.caidi@utoronto.ca) is a Professor at the University of Toronto's (Canada) Faculty of Information, researching human information behavior and information policy in the context of global migration. Dr. Caidi's contributions aim to inform and promote a critical library and information science (LIS) lens and a public interest approach to the information fields. Her book (co-edited with Dr. Keren Dali), *Humanizing LIS Education and Practice: Diversity by Design*, was published by Routledge in 2021. Caidi was the 2011 President of the Canadian Association for Information Science and the 2016 President of the Association for Information Science & Technology. In 2019, she received the ALISE/Pratt-Severn Faculty Innovation Award.