

New Canadian blockchain registry aims to help artists protect their work in digital world

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A Canadian blockchain registry is being developed to protect artists, who have long struggled to keep their work from being used and circulated online without their permission.

The blockchain database, being created by the artists' advocacy organization Canadian Artists' Representation/Le Front des artistes canadiens (CARFAC) and Access Copyright, will offer Canadian visual artists a place to register their work. The registry will link content to its creators – a key safeguard to ensure artists don't lose out on valuable publicity and financial compensation.

Roanie Levy, president and chief executive officer of Access Copyright (a Canadian non-profit copyright collective), said failure to properly attribute content means artists lose compensation for their work. In the digital age, copies of works are easily downloaded and shared online with little regard for rights-holders, an issue she said can be solved by an attribution ledger, made with blockchain technology.

“All of a sudden with blockchain, creators are going to be able to get their rightful due – something that they haven't been able to get on the internet,” Ms. Levy said.

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Blockchain is a shared ledger or database that no one person controls, she said. Individual records are grouped together into blocks and the blocks are linked together in a chain. Ms. Levy said the database is protected by cryptography, a method used to secure information through coding.

When an artist registers a creation, the work receives a unique identifier, essentially a digital fingerprint, that contains data about the work, such as the artist and copyright holder, Ms. Levy said. The ledger can be used by digital-service providers to ensure that the individual claiming copyright of a work is the legitimate copyright holder, and that there is no infringing content on their sites. Royalty payment and licensing services can link with the ledger so payments go to the rightful owners, she said.

The registry will also be useful in the non-digital world, Ms. Levy said. If an Indigenous art gallery wants to guarantee the authenticity of a work, it can match the identifier on the physical artwork to the blockchain database.

Paddy Lamb, an artist and director and co-chair for Copyright Visual Arts, a subsidiary of CARFAC, said stolen or improper use of work is rampant. He said CARFAC's offices regularly receive calls from artists who've had their work exploited online and aren't sure how to respond.

Mr. Lamb also said he's seen copies of his art circulating online without permission.

"In my own practice as an artist, just talking to peers – you hear about it all the time," he said.

When corporations use artists' designs on clothing or other commercial products without permission, he said artists suffer financial losses and miss an opportunity to publicize their work.

April Britski, the national executive director of CARFAC, said the blockchain database will be public so artists can share it and advertise their work. For visual artists who choose to register, their work will be compiled into one Canadian database.

"It's been a struggle to ensure that content is publicly accessible while artists are also getting paid," she said.

Ms. Britski said artists don't always know where their work ends up, but the registry will allow artists to track the life of their creations.

"It's pretty cool to see where Canadian art is actually living and being used, and by whom," Ms. Britski said.

Phase One of the project, which is funded through a Canada Council grant of \$495,000, is expected to launch before the end of the year, and artists can register their work free of charge.

The registry will first be used for living Canadian artists, but Ms. Britski said they may expand it to include work of visual artists who are no longer alive. She said additional phases might incorporate media art, such as film, and performance art.

Ms. Levy said Access Copyright will be working with visual artists to start injecting information about their work into the attribution ledger, and artists looking to get involved should visit prescientinnovations.com.

<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/arts/article-new-canadian-blockchain-registry-aims-to-help-artists-protect-their/>

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