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Connectivity, Content and Consumers – Britain's digital platform for growth

Overview

The recent government report [Nesta 2012] stresses the importance of creative skills in supporting innovation for the future vitality of the British economy. The business-oriented psychologist, Sawyer [2007: xiii] agrees, stating: 'Innovation is what drives today's economy, and our hopes for the future – as individuals and organisations – lie in finding creative solutions to pressing problems'.

The way in which we understand experimentation, innovation and the creative economy is through creative entrepreneurship. This is the entrepreneurship of individual artists who strive to share their creations. When people create art works within a digital network, they not only enrich their own lives and personal wellbeing [Belfiore 2010], but as artists or collaborators, they develop transferable skills that enhance their creative and human capitals. They may even start new businesses or careers on the basis of online success.

In the Nesta twelve-point plan [Nesta 2012] for making innovation central to the UK economy its stated objective for education is 'Creating the next generation of "digital makers"' by 'Giving all teenagers the chance to make, to design and to program' [p. 9]. This objective is hampered by lack of information on the state of British 'digital making' (creating works that are uploaded to the Internet). The digital revolution is transforming the ways that people create and distribute art. Inexpensive, professional-quality technologies of creation, like digital cameras and camcorders, photo- and video-editing software, MP3 and digital music recording and manipulation, and even word-processing, make it possible for many people to create art with high production quality. The Internet gives creators a means of low-cost distribution. This combination of digital creation and online distribution is extremely powerful. Online artistic production, supported by digital technologies, enables artists to create works and distribute them to diverse audiences, and to receive feedback.

A potential effect of online distribution is the blurring of artistic boundaries, in some cases, between producer and consumer; in others, between amateur and professional. Moreover, the relative ease of digital creation and online distribution and feedback may lead to production by the masses that rivals production for the masses. The exciting outcome of these developments may be that we are entering a new era for arts, featuring a renaissance of creative potential.

User-generated content practices encapsulated in Web 2.0 are changing businesses [Anderson 2006, Kelly 1999] and consumption patterns [Abercrombie 1998, Jenkins 2006]. The concept of the 'prosumer' was foreshadowed by Toffler [1980], who suggested that, as technology advances, the distinction between the producer of culture and the consumer of it would blur or merge. Rose [2011] discusses the way today's consumers expect to see their favourite stories interlinked across 'platforms' (television, film, Internet). Jenkins [2007] goes further and argues that consumers are no longer consumers. They, or at least certain more advanced consumers, are 'loyals', 'media-actives' or 'prosumers' or, in Jenkins' favourite term, 'fans' [Jenkins 2007]. These active consumers play an important role, both culturally and economically. Indeed, Jenkins [2007] argues that 'fandom is the future': 'fandom represents the experimental prototype, the testing ground for the way media and cultural industries are going to operate in the future.' Jenkins emphasises an active consumer, in contrast to a 'passive' one, but he still focuses on the consumer side of the prosumer. The producer aspect of the prosumer is less well-understood. Internet-based distribution and feedback channels ('creative hubs') are often funded largely or completely by creators themselves. But for more expensive projects, such as making a film or a web series (web-based television series, with multiple 'webisodes'), the Internet provides alternative funding mechanisms, including crowd-funding via 'peer-to-peer' finance with 'small contributions from a large number of sources, rather than large amounts from a few' [Baack 2012: 3].

Recommendations

The creative online world and the fan culture it has produced has had a profound impact on what we do as educators. We have all become students in the face of rapidly changing technologies, and so we need to rethink the role of educators and education. We therefore recommend that the UK government should foster a high level of general education in the digital creative sector. This will create a population which can be agile and adaptive to successive waves of change in technology, and be critical citizens and critical consumers of media. This education should concentrate on digital creativity and imagination, in addition to technical skills such as computer programming, to develop the business and social opportunities offered by digital media.

Funding digital creativity is vital. Thus we recommend that the UK government should investigate and foster new economic models which will enable digital creators to finance their work, through self-support or new grassroots or collective means.

Intellectual Property and Licensing

Issues relating to copyright and intellectual property are embedded in CREATE [footnote]. A key area of friction within digital art worlds, new forms of publishing and music is copyright. Strong copyright is seen to have deleterious effects on creativity [Vaidhyathan 2001].

Currently the UK's copyright law restricts most form of creative re-use. The Hargreave reforms which are to come into force in June 2014 will assist those creators whose work falls into the category of caricature, parody or pastiche, but this is a very limited sub-category of creativity. There is a wide range of creative reuses of copyright works whose production is in the public interest and which would not adversely affect the copyright owner's interests. Amending copyright law to permit such reuses, for example fan works, needs of course to take into account the moral rights of the original creator, and these rights are not well-understood in the general populace.

Recommendation

The UK Government should explore whether a copyright exception for creative reuse could be devised. Our view is that such an exception is achievable, and could comply with the WIPO Copyright Treaty's three-step test (WIPO Copyright Treaty Article 10(2)). A useful starting point would be those elements of the US fair use exception which are based on creativity, as analysed in [College Arts Association 2014]. A creativity-based exception would necessarily be more limited in scope than the US exception, and would be likely to give greater weight to non-commercial reuses.

In parallel, work would need to be undertaken to educate UK creators about moral rights. It might well be that respect for moral rights would be a prerequisite for taking advantage of the creativity exception, but further research will be needed here.

Digital Commons

There are challenges and opportunities for creative cultures in digital spaces, including the potential to nurture creative activities in a 'digital commons' [Miller 2011]. Many existing digital spaces are 'walled gardens'¹, provided under feudal arrangements by digital oligarchs [Silver 2013], and therefore unsuitable for creative cultures. We need to move beyond simply networking creative individuals to establishing diverse communities of practice for innovation through discursive methods. So, integrative socio-cultural collaborative technologies that can support distributed creativity and innovation are a prerequisite for a new digital renaissance. By their very nature, digital commons leave very little scope for income generation by those who provide the necessary spaces. It is therefore unlikely that the creation of those spaces can be left to the commercial sector.

¹ A closed software ecosystem in which the carrier or service provider has control over applications and, restricting (convenient) access to applications or content of their choice.

Recommendation

The UK government should research and explore ways to foster the creation of 'digital commons' to provide shared collaborative spaces for creativity. Content and form cannot be separated, because the infrastructure put in place will determine the content created, as well as the ways it is used. Therefore, holistic approaches to digital commons that include infrastructure approaches, such as Community Clouds [Marinos 2009], and user approaches, such as Creative Gardens [Briscoe 2013] should be considered actively.

As such spaces are public goods, it is likely that public subsidy will be needed. That subsidy might be direct, through financing non-profit spaces, or indirect by giving commercial operators incentives to provide such spaces. The principles of public subsidy linked to regulation, which are key features of Britain's historic approach to public service broadcasting, should have some influence in this debate given the strong reputation of this system internationally. An important element of the research and exploration should focus on the business models of digital commons platforms. Public subsidy will be justified, in our view, by the benefits to the UK economy which would derive from the resulting increase in digital creativity.

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