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Virtual Networks in Culture: Between Citizens and Consumers

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Introduction

The fast development of the Internet and ICT sector in general is affecting the work of the cultural sector. There is a new context that cultural institutions must adapt to in the information society. ICT can enable new ways of working, but this is not achieved simply by applying new software, and cultural institutions must rely on strategies of the sector in general as well as on their own individual strategies. Legislation and especially copyright are crucial in determining what new services can be provided to users, and the commodification of culture could pose a threat to the free exchange and sharing of information and knowledge. Knowledge-sharing is what culture is all about, the and cultural field must ensure that the knowledge recorded in our cultural resources remains available to the public and serves as a source of inspiration for further creation.

The cultural heritage sector, such as libraries, museums and archives, has always ensured open access to information and knowledge for the general public, and it forms an important infrastructure for knowledge preservation and dissemination in the information society. New possibilities, which were brought about by ICT, resulted in some new structures of cooperation, such as virtual networks or portals, that could give a stronger voice to small, independent players in culture and ensure the infrastructure through which they can be more visible. But this is still quite an early phase of their operation, and their further development will largely depend on imposed legislation and copyright laws in particular. A future shape of an information society depends largely on balance achieved between money-driven, for-profit initiatives and public domain services, which ensure that available knowledge can be used for the benefit of the citizens/users. This balance will determine whether we shall just be consumers of information or active citizens and contributors to the process of global communication and knowledge exchange.

Cultural sector in the information society

The information and communication technology (ICT) revolution started some decades ago, but its development towards network logic, which was brought about by the Internet, gave it an extra push. The concept of an information society suggests universal and free access to information services (thus knowledge) for all citizens/users/consumers and the possibility for active participation in knowledge sharing. The rapid growth of the Internet, in number of users and in terms of the available information and services that can be accessed through it, indicates the importance of activities taking place in the virtual domain. Culture, as the glue of our everyday life, is reflected in cyberspace through initiatives undertaken by cultural institutions and also through the many citizen initiatives in the form of virtual communities, discussion forums, etc. Interactivity is a characteristic that mostly defines new ways of communication through the Internet, but its potential must be realized by building adequate services to serve the citizens/users.

The cultural infrastructure is a complex system of relationships among individuals and institutions, and it represents the repository of our collective culture and source of inspiration for tomorrow's generation of thinkers and artists. The cultural infrastructure, such as memory institutions (museums, libraries and archives) along with other cultural institutions that present our cultural richness to the public, play an important role in the information society. According to Monroe Price, 'the challenge in the information society is its capacity, and the capacity of its citizens, to integrate the new, to bring values to bear on technology, to adjust to a society in which transformation is breathtakingly rapid. Cultural richness can help sharpen these capacities and thereby render more productive the process of change.' (cited in the study *Access and the Cultural Infrastructure*, 2002) Access to culture takes different forms such as physical access to different venues, access through traditional media (print communication, recorded music, broadcasting) and access through new media. The latter is becoming increasingly important, as it is quickly becoming pervasive throughout society.

The potential of the Internet is not limited by its organisational network logic, but its limits are set mostly by the existing infrastructure, by the financial limits and interests of commercial enterprises and, of course, by the 'industrial society' legislation. Don Foresta distinguishes between 'cyberspace', which he describes as a cosmopolitan and liberal universe, myth, and a vision of a virtual and 'information superhighway', which he describes as an industrial project and a powerful instrument in the advanced marketing of audio-visual products and other services for pay (Foresta, Mergier, Serexhe, 1995).

What kind of information society we will live in depends largely on the balance achieved between money-driven, for-profit initiatives and the public domain services, which ensure that everyone can participate and use the available knowledge to his or her own benefit. Knowledge-sharing was the basic idea that triggered the development of the Internet. Stadler and Hirsh claim that the spirit of free sharing, which characterized the early days of the Internet, is increasingly being challenged by commodity-oriented control structures that have traditionally dominated content industries (Stadler, Hirsh, 2002). Values that are hoped to be achieved in the information society on a global level, like democracy, tolerance, cultural diversity, pluralism, etc., must be ensured by planning the concrete structures that support knowledge dissemination and allow the participation of users. Virtual networks in the cultural field are one of the tools for transmitting available information to targeted users and for voicing new initiatives and ideas.

The Internet is not a free-of-charge tool, as it requires investments in computer infrastructure, software, maintenance, education, etc. The financial imbalance between the rich media and businesses and the much poorer cultural and NGO sector creates a certain imbalance, as in most cases they cannot afford to buy the same tools for organising their information services and thus they offer simpler services. Language barriers and the dominance of English also create an unequal position for resources in other languages that prevents the wide use of some existing resources, and the translation of all existing on-line resources is organisationally and financially impossible.

The existing cultural and other public policies and strategies are changing slowly to adapt to the new context and are dealing with issues such as a changed environment for copyright, new services and new relationships with users, matters related to new ways of organising knowledge and to complex dynamics information structures. They are also treating issues concerning the protection and efficient management of information, fair use and privacy protection, bridging the existing information gap, education of users, etc. Faced with these complex and evolving challenges, governments, the private sector and civil society should agree on a common objective that could bring new forms of solidarity, partnership and cooperation in achieving the democratic and participatory information society. Many international organisations such as UNESCO, WIPO, WTO, ITU, etc. are already participating in this process, trying to monitor, promote and regulate its different aspects. The World Summit for Information Society (WSIS) was an attempt to carve a path towards a participatory information society - ensuring that all citizens can benefit from the ICT revolution, but some civil society activists are questioning its real agenda and usefulness.

Public domain information and the commodification of culture and knowledge

Copyright issues are crucial for the development of services on the Internet, and they are extremely relevant to the public, to the artist and to the cultural field. Digitisation and the development of computer networks have changed the context of copyright, as it is no longer necessary to have physical copies of most works. Users can simultaneously access the same resource and can make perfect copies of the document or other creations, eg. music. They can store it on their own disk, send it to someone else, or modify or edit it in any manner they choose. It is difficult to control access rights in many situations involving the Internet. This has changed the situation from the previous one, where physical documents (eg. books, journals) have been sold, to the new one, where information goods/services are 'leased' and never stop being the property of the author, who can remove them from public use whenever he/she wishes. This is significant because it introduces problems into the limits of the 'public domain'.

The preservation of the public domain is very important, and the changing context for library services and other cultural heritage services such as museums and archives must be carefully examined in order to make sure that they can continue developing their services for all citizens (regardless of their financial situation). The cultural industry field, on the other hand, is trying to build its business on creativity, and it is very important for it to protect authors' rights and ensure that they are adequately compensated for their work. Most legal systems recognise that copyright is essential to promote innovation and creativity. Copyright should provide a balance between creators/authors and the users of these materials. Copyright issues are crucial in determining

whether users will have a right to freely access information in the public domain or if the information society will be available only to those who can afford it.

Copyright laws are strong tools that big businesses and media conglomerates are using to protect their business and maximise profit from their products, and the cultural sector is voicing its concern about the impact that this has on cultural diversity and artists' and citizens' possibilities for choice. In the words of Shalini Venturelli, 'without an enriched and expanding public domain the new knowledge will not lead to more new knowledge, thus restricting social participation in the production and distribution of ideas and inexorably slowing the pace of innovation throughout the economy' (Venturelli, <http://www.culturalpolicy.org/pdf/venturelli.pdf>).

This is an issue that is being discussed in many civil forums, but so far no acceptable solution has been found, as the logic of the civil society and the business sector is starting in each case from diametrically opposed premises. As Konrad Becker has said: 'a society shaped by technological systems and digital communication should keep a perspective where cultural freedom can be actively pursued and in which use and value are not exclusively determined by profits.' (Becker 2002).

Throughout history, the richness of public information has inspired creativity, and creators have used pre-existing materials in developing new works. This shows that the cultural heritage and open access to its resources are important to the creative process that keeps our culture alive. Copyright legislation is turning the bigger part of our cultural heritage into a commodity, meaning goods which are owned and controlled, and this trend will have significant implications for both creators and the civil society. The legal mechanisms, which permitted access, reinterpretation and recontextualization of pre-existing works, were protected by such principles as a robust public domain, time limits for copyright monopoly, fair use and first sale (Besser 2002). Howard Besser claims that the changes in copyright legislation, brought about in the 1990s by the new Internet context, are affecting these principles, and that this could have serious effects on the future information society, in which creators may not be permitted to make free use of pre-existing materials, not allowed to make critical remarks about them or recontextualize them. It may even go to such extremes that users would not be permitted to freely sing copyrighted songs.

All of these trends are affecting the position of citizens in the virtual sphere - will they be information producers/providers or information consumers in this new space? And through which kind of mechanisms can they actively participate and effectively voice their opinions and concerns? At this point free sharing of information is becoming more and more an exception, although there are examples of free sharing in Open Source projects and in established cultural networks which are trying to enhance opportunities for cultural cooperation. It seems that businesses are taking over the Internet and are trying to impose their logic as well as the restrictive copyright legislation that will bring them the most profit. Knowledge sharing is what culture is all about, and the cultural field as a keeper of knowledge recorded in our cultural resources has an important role to play in ensuring that this knowledge remains available to the public and serves as a source of inspiration for further creation as well as a basis for development projects. This does not mean that the cultural sector has no interest in making a profit from its activities, but making profit is not its exclusive purpose. Besides, the process of contemporary artistic creation is based on communication and interaction as well as on previous creations, so the rules of competition do not always apply.

Virtual networks

The Internet has the potential to be more than just a distribution channel for the established cultural industries. Its two-way communication provides new opportunities for involving users. In order to give a stronger voice to small, independent players, it is necessary to build some common mechanisms through which they can be more visible such as virtual networks or portals. In order to make the Internet work for the cultural sectors, clear objectives should be set by the cultural institutions, networks and NGOs, and a regulatory framework should be put in place by implementing cultural and other policies related to ICT.

The future shape of the information society depends on achieving a balance between commercial and non-commercial initiatives. Within the cultural sector it is especially difficult. The significance of the cultural heritage goes far beyond its commercial use, and it is important to preserve it as well as to communicate those cultural elements which are not necessarily commercially profitable. On the other hand, the cultural sector must ensure the sustainability of its services, which means not only having a sound financial base, but also well targeted and profiliated virtual products that are intended for specific users. Joint efforts in building such services could also be achieved through virtual networks, both as a structural platform for building common projects and as a communication tool that enhances cooperation possibilities by providing opportunities for information exchange, knowledge sharing and voicing particular issues of network members.

According to the Dicult Report, 95% of all cultural institutions in the European Union are small cultural institutions with limited resources, and for them it is particularly difficult to position themselves on equal terms with the big media houses and even with the big cultural institutions with their rich resources and established reputations (the Dicult Report, 2002). Still, those numerous small museums, archives, libraries and other types of cultural institutions hold significant amounts of recorded knowledge about our heritage, especially local or regional heritage. Most ICT development strategies emphasise that the development of more individual educational resources would be an important asset in the information society and that culture should be an important learning resource for education projects. This will not happen just because cultural institutions have web pages with basic information, but targeted virtual products must be developed. Such projects would not always have mass audiences, and, judging by the business criteria, they might be considered unimportant and unsuccessful. Still, such projects would greatly contribute to the diversity of choices and should be considered as an important element for knowledge sharing in the information society.

The DIGICULT Thematic Issue 4 emphasises that cultural heritage institutions need to improve their relevance for the education sector and lifelong learners in attractive, efficient, and sustainable ways. Simply displaying collection objects online is considered useful for informal learning, but it is not enough. They emphasise that what is called for are learning objects: highly interoperable and reusable modular building blocks for e-learning content, based on widely shared specifications or standards. Providing such objects demands closer collaboration between the heritage and e-learning sectors that concentrates on the enhancement of e-learning interoperability, both in terms of technical standards and in terms of appropriate forms of learning. DigiCULT regards such collaboration as crucial to unlocking the richness and diversity of Europe's cultural and scientific heritage for e-learning within the knowledge-based society. Again, such collaboration needs to be sustained through some adequate structures, and virtual networks could be a possible framework that might prove to be useful for the realisation of such

projects. They may vary in their objectives from building a portal that allows users easy access to the resources developed in different cultural institutions, to building a common virtual project and sharing its expenses, or to enabling the exchange of information among cultural professionals in order to establish some cooperative project.

Looking at some existing virtual networks in the cultural field, they have either started from a base of real cultural networks of existing members and have then extended their activities in the virtual domain (such as, for example, Culturelink Network, but also many others), or they have started with the objective of providing an infrastructure to cultural organisations and end users who first must be motivated to cooperate, such as is in a case with many existing CultureNets. But in most cases they are trying to balance a technological base with communication and information elements in an attempt to provide their members and users with the services they need.

Cultural networks are an organisational form, through which independent cultural professionals, NGOs and cultural institutions try to influence national and international cultural policies. In fact, they can be looked at as a way that civil society organises itself in the cultural field and in its diverse segments. Networks also provide more visibility to their members, as they provide opportunities within a network for members to find partners who share their interests or concerns and then provide them with the opportunity to communicate their joint concerns outside of a network. Free sharing of information is the basis of cultural networking, and, unlike different discussion groups, networks have more diverse activities, and they often have joint projects, meetings and different exchanges. In order to ensure the continuous activities, networks, unlike online discussion groups, have some basic structure that keeps in place its resources and ensures continuation of activities even if the members in the network change.

Cultural networks have recognised the fact that free sharing of information is not a threat to their work, and it has nothing to do with altruism either. It is motivated by the fact that in complex collaborative processes it is difficult or impossible to differentiate between the raw material that goes into the creative process and the product that comes out. As long as they are pursuing the same goals and objectives, the sharing of knowledge contributes to everyone's work in achieving joint goals: 'Even the greatest innovators stand on the shoulders of giants. All new creations are built on previous creations and provide inspiration for future ones. The ability to freely use and refine those previous creations increases the possibilities for future creativity'. This is how Felix Stalder explained his motivation for collaboration in Open Source projects. As long as the involvement of the members is flexible and focused, they will give and receive optimum from this free collaboration. Networking principles are based on similar principles to those of the Open Source projects, and a great deal can be learned from them.

Conclusions

According to Manuel Castells, networking principles seem to work well for the business sector and can be recognised in 'the network enterprise', where the traditional vertically oriented enterprise structure changed to fully grasp benefits and opportunities that were brought by ICT and its diverse applications, which resulted in the information technology paradigm. The cultural sector could use similar principles to ensure the preservation of the many small cultural organisations which are working to preserve the public domain of our heritage and to develop the new creative elements that will constitute the heritage of our future. Through their work they are

contributing to the cultural diversity that is today threatened by the big media industry, which operates under strictly profit terms.

Although the networking principles could contribute to solving some organisational problems of many small cultural organisations, this is still just a part of a problem that civil society is recognising when it looks at the information society which is currently being shaped on a global level. If we want a free, democratic and participatory society that will bring benefits to all its citizens, we must make sure that the voices of the small can be heard and that cultural freedom does not become limited by the lack of choices or the impossibility of having insight into our common heritage in the virtual or real sphere. This is why copyright issues are so significant, as they directly influence all segments of our creativity, and why public domain must be preserved. Otherwise, we might end up being silent users whose voices will not be heard. We must agree with Jim Bower, who claims: 'If one assumes that the arts are a cornerstone of civil society, than access to information about the broadest spectrum of those arts is essential' (cited in the study *Access and the Cultural Infrastructure*, 2002). We could broaden statement to apply to culture in a more general sense as well.

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