EUROPEAN PERSPECTIVES ON CULTURE AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGIES

ABSTRACT

This paper sets out to bridge my experience in Canada working in the intersecting space between culture and technology and my more recent experience in Europe as the Canadian director of a European initiative called LabforCulture. The experiences in Europe with respect to the impact of digital technologies on culture and the development of cultural policy are not so different from those in Canada. The issues of culture and technology are decidedly similar and the challenges are shared. What follows is a reflection, briefly and randomly, on overall policy trends across Europe and their similarities to the Canadian situation.

European perspectives on culture and digital technologies

At the outset, it should be noted that I do not represent a particular government perspective – nor even a particular national perspective. LabforCulture is based in the Netherlands, hosted by a private foundation with over 50 years of history – the European Cultural Foundation www.eurocult.org. The interests of LabforCulture and those of the European Cultural Foundation transcend country borders.

The European Cultural Foundation (ECF) is one of the leading independent organisations in Europe devoted to cultural development, and is a passionate advocate of cultural cooperation.

The ECF:

- campaigns for, initiates, develops and supports cultural cooperation activities across the broader Europe;
- develops new cultural experience and media activities by offering grants and by initiating and coordinating programmes for organisations and individuals;
- is actively involved in cultural policy development, particularly for the integration of European society;
- strives to give culture a stronger voice and profile at all levels; and
- works in partnership with other leading European cultural organisations.

The European Cultural Foundation's approach is to focus its work through themes which have a contemporary relevance for culture and civil society. Over a period of three years, from 2006 to 2008, their work focuses on *"the experience of diversity and the power of culture"*.

LabforCulture is an autonomous project within the European Cultural Foundation that seeks to bring policy, research and practice together – to work with the cultural sector in facilitating cultural cross-border activity and to be a conduit connecting the policy makers with work in the field.

One of our current research interests focuses in the uptake of online tools within the cultural sector. Is the sector online and where? If not, why not? Within the sector, there certainly have been and continue to be leaders and innovators – one only need to look to new media artists who not only use, but develop tools and technologies. However, many believe that the cultural sector lags behind, and this becomes most evident in relation to the development of tools such as LabforCulture.

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How are they used and what is their future? We are currently working with the Institute of Network Cultures in Amsterdam (http://www.networkcultures.org), to map out the research in this area and then to consider what gaps can be filled in research and in service provision in order to facilitate the use of digital tools more broadly across the sector.

LabforCulture and the European Cultural Foundation work across Europe, encompassing an area wider than the 27 countries of the European Union. It is a picture of diversity that encompasses countries like Albania to the UK and which presents not only an alphabetical spread, but also a cultural and linguistic diversity and economic, social and developmental extremes. Policies are developed and debated on a local, regional, national and international levels (such as through the European Commission or the OECD). However, even a quick overview of the policy development in individual countries as well as in the European Commission shows clearly that there are similar challenges and opportunities.

If we reflect back to the early 90s, initiatives and incentives of the first "culture and technology" projects focused primarily on:

- digitalisation of national heritage;
- access to technology by citizens; and
- competitiveness of national economies with respect to ICTs.

These areas are general and intersect as well as are interdependent. However, they also often have conflicting or diverging objectives.

No nation wanted to lag behind – and this is still the case. Policies and programmes have been developed to specifically meet these three areas. However, the policies have tended to focus on development and growth of ICTs – not on the impact and effect of ICTs.

The 1998 European Commission Green Paper[1] addressed the convergence of the telecommunications, media and information technology sector and the implications for regulations towards an information society approach. This was followed by the Lisbon Strategy in 2000[2] and eEurope 2002 – An Information Society for All[3] – which integrated the three pillars of the Lisbon Strategy: growth and competitiveness, cohesion and sustainability. eEurope 2002 aimed to "*secure equal access by all of Europe's citizens, to promote computer literacy and, crucially, to create a partnership environment between the users and providers of systems, based on trust and enterprise.*" Following shortly thereafter was eEurope 2005 and now i2010 –"a European Society for growth and employment".[4]

This most recent plan sets out to address what it identifies as the four main challenges posed by digital convergence:

- speed: faster broadband in Europe services to deliver rich content such as high definition video;
- rich content: increased legal and economic certainty to encourage new services and on-line content;
- interoperability: enhancing devices and platforms that "talk to one another" and services that are portable from platform to platform; and
- security: making the Internet safer from fraudsters, harmful content and technology failures to increase trust among investors and consumers.[5]

Programmes such as eLearning and eContent have responded to these directions. Their objective being to achieve an information society that is inclusive, they provide high quality public services and promote quality of life, cultural diversity and digital libraries. With reference to digital libraries, the commission states that "*It will build on Europe's rich heritage combining multicultural and multilingual environments with technological advances and new business models*".

On a European-wide level, two initiatives of the Council of Europe[6] should be mentioned that are excellent sources of statistics, research and policy information:

1. The European Audiovisual Observatory

The European Audiovisual Observatory was established in December 1992 and is the only centre of its kind gathering and disseminating information on the audiovisual industry in Europe. The Observatory is a European public service body with 36 member States and the European Community, and is represented by the European Commission. It owes its origins to Audiovisual Eureka[7] and operates within the legal framework of the Council of Europe.

The Observatory publishes directories and an annual yearbook which provides a synthesis of the basic data in the sector including trends such as the situation in European television, issues of convergence and new technologies etc. Data collection

focuses on "*independence and reliability and is carried out in conjunction with a number of specialist partners.*"

2. The Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe

The Compendium of Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe describes itself as *"An expanding Europe-wide information and monitoring system on cultural policy measures, instruments, debates and cultural trends. It is a joint venture between the Council of Europe and the ERICarts Institute realised with a community of practice of independent cultural policy researchers, NGOs and national governments."*[8]

These are two instruments and indispensable tools that do not make policy, but that track policy across an area wider than the European Union and provide information to inform policy development. The Compendium website provides country by country overviews in a broad range of themes, including that of "new technologies and cultural policies".

When moving from European-wide policies and programmes, to a consideration of national approaches, it is perhaps wise to note again from the European Commission's communication that *"ICTs are becoming more widely used and are benefiting more people. But today over half of the EU population either does not reap these benefits in full or is effectively cut off from them."*[9] As earlier mentioned, the variances from country to country, region to region are influenced by a wide range of factors.

Nevertheless, some common and shared concerns by national policy makers in the area of culture and digital technologies are evident with respect to:

- Languages (a commitment to an internet that is not only English)
- Heritage
- Identity
- Access
- Education
- Competitiveness, in ICT and other industries and also in areas such as tourism
- e-Services
- Support for creation
- Legislation to combat misuse
- Copyright

These areas receive greater or lesser emphasis from country to country and some countries are of course much further ahead in developing policy. As previously noted, others are simply trying to connect their citizens – access and education being their primary interests. For many, the policies reflect the EU Lisbon Strategy and others have been assisted and influenced by outside resources, projects and programmes, from the UN, EU and non-governmental bodies.

For instance, here a few diverse examples drawn from the country profiles provided by the Compendium:

- Austria agreed to an initiative "e-Austria in e-Europe", the main focus being digitalisation of cultural heritage.
- Electron Azerbaijan is a state programme which, along with digitalisation, is paying special attention to the development and establishment of regional information/training centres and Internet stations in local libraries, post offices and schools, so as to widen the access to information resources.
- E-culture Flanders published "E-culture: building stones for practice and policy".
- In Estonia, the enhanced use of new information technologies has belonged to the top priorities of government since the mid 90's.
- In its document "Culture in the Information Society", Finland proposes to strengthen the cultural policy aspects within information society policies in the domains of content industries, cultural heritage, citizen's access to information and cultural services and in international and EU cooperation. Following the proposed plans and strategies, the Ministry has assigned special funding for the development of a "cultural" information society.
- In Greece, the development of the cultural domain in the context of the information society is one of their stated objectives. Notably, they raise the issues of heritage vs creation; industry vs culture and education and the "reluctance" of the cultural sector to embrace information technology and new media (despite sporadic exceptions).

- Ireland notes that policies have had far-reaching effects especially in the field of education. As of yet there has been little or no debate on its implications for the arts.
- Macedonia has proposed a computer for every pupil and internet in every home.
- Poland reduced the VAT on Internet service provision to 7% from 22%.
- Malta is looking for "quality Maltese content on the internet", noting that in 2006, Malta had gained the top position in the world in internet penetration and growth rates.

And of course things happen, across the board and around the world, without national government intervention or incentives. In many European countries, the policies have been driven by external forces, be they private foundation interests such as the Soros Foundation in Bulgaria (for the networking of the Chitalishte libraries) or development initiatives out of the UN such as the e-Moldova programme. There are very interesting models of public/private partnerships that can be investigated and the European Commission recognizes fully the three "players" that it considers in policy and programme development: the Commission, member states and "stakeholders" – industry and civil society partners. Another area that warrants further investigation – and hopefully then action – is a need to work horizontally – to connect the dots – ensuring that culture is "mainstreamed" to use some European Commission language. Where better than in this area of digital technologies?

I would like to close with where I began – with this notion of linking policy and practice and a reflection on what is happening on the ground. In May 2007, the Virtueel Platform organized a conference entitled "Cultuur 2.0" and in the introduction to the recent publication stemming from the conference, they posited:

> *"Web 2.0 is a term that is often bandied around but not always understood. Virtueel Platform took on the challenge of looking at its impact on the arts and culture sector. The aim was not so much to "teach" the cultural sector about web 2.0 as to introduce the "web 2.0 mindset" into the creative processes and strategies of cultural and art institutions and artists. Why is this important? Currently very little use is made by arts organisations in the Netherlands of new software applications that are primarily focused on user-generated content, social software. At the same time, the Dutch new media culture sector has long been at the forefront of developing user-centred software and interfaces and the arts sector is a key source if valuable content that lends itself to web 2.0 type applications."*[10]
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> Cathy Brickwood, Director,
> Virtueel Platform

The implications of Web 2.0 and specifically user generated, or user created content is perhaps the most active area of debate and discussion. The "Participative Web" is the title of a major study that was published by the OECD in early 2007.[11] The significant shifts in the way that work is created, produced, distributed and experienced (or consumed) have had a major impact on the sector – positively in some areas and to great complaint in others. The cultural sector will just get on with it I think – or at least some of the sector will and policy makers will try to make sense of it. However, it is difficult to keep up and it will not get easier – the document referred to was written, after months of research, in late 2006 and was made public in April 2007 – by which time Web 2.0 was already being referred to as "a myth" to be debunked in some quarters – and some were moving on to Web 3.0 – whatever that entails!

References

[1] See http://europa.eu/scadplus/leg/en/lvb/l24165.htm.

[2] See http://ec.europa.eu/growthandjobs/pdf/lisbon_en.pdf.

[3] See http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/2002/index_en.htm.

[4] See http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/index_en.htm.

[5] See http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2005/com2005_0229en01.pdf, page 4.

[6] See http://www.coe.int.

[7] See http://conventions.coe.int/Treaty/EN/PartialAgr/Html/Observ9270.htm.

[8] See http://www.culturalpolicies.net/web/index.php.

[9] See http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/site/en/com/2005/com2005_0229en01.pdf, page 9.

[10] See http://www.virtueelplatform.nl/article-5716-en.html.

[11] See http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/57/14/38393115.pdf?contentId=38393116.