
Understanding Content Creativity

Simon Jones

Human Computer Studies
Laboratory, University of
Amsterdam.
Kruislaan 419, 1098 VA
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
sjones@science.uva.nl

Pieter W. Adriaans

Human Computer Studies
Laboratory, University of
Amsterdam.
Kruislaan 419, 1098 VA
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
pietera@science.uva.nl

Vanessa Evers

Human Computer Studies
Laboratory, University of
Amsterdam.
Kruislaan 419, 1098 VA
Amsterdam, the Netherlands
vevers@science.uva.nl

Abstract

The examples and experiences of the new European creative eco-system anchored in cities, plural in language, rich in relationships and distributed by cell phones will play a pioneering role in speaking to the future of creativity. This paper outlines and analyses its distinct form and function .

Keywords

Creativity, Content, User-Generated.

ACM Classification Keywords

K.0 Computing Milieux, general. J.5 Computer Applications, Arts and Humanities

Introduction: Polyphony

Creative people can be uncongenial. Undesirable were they inessential: truculent, idiosyncratic, neurotic, obsessive, prone to real or imagined slight and extraordinarily self-regarding. Yet, their transitory and often flawed creations are the torchlight by which we glimpse our lives in context and the searchlight by which new meanings may be gained or assailed. We ignore them at personal, cultural and economic peril and thus study them to comprehend the complexities and interactions of a key social and economic sector of the future.

This position paper draws together disparate strands of experience and reflection on the nature of creativity in content generation, its sustainability and utility. It is Euro-centric in disposition and personal in predilection. It builds on 3 distinct elements. Firstly, experience in

Copyright is held by the author/owner(s).

Presented at:

Supporting creative acts beyond dissemination.

Creativity and Cognition 2007, June 13, 2007.

Washington DC, USA.

creating a European media lab in the cash-awash, liberalizing yet still ultra-montane Ireland of the early 2000's [8]. Secondly a large, on-going European Commission project 'Med-Ibtikar' [6] which attempts to unleash creativity for personal, social and economic growth around the North Africa region - an area of the world where a resurgent all-embracing ideology clashes with nation-centric and tribal-centric visions of human creativity in a recognisably zhadanovite manner. Thirdly, SMART [2] a European Commission policy-oriented project which looks at how goal-driven research policies can be adjusted to enable the development of creative ideas and their effective harnessing to social and economic goals.

Our starting point is creation of content as solipsism until experienced, shared and hence transmuted into impact that alters human perception, cultural beliefs or economic performance. Furthermore, we argue that the creative, social, and economic domains have to be seen as an integrated eco-system if we are to understand it in a meaningful manner. Unless we consider this endogenous system *in vivo*, rather than a reductionist *in vitro* manner, our understanding of creativity and creative processes will be episodic not systematic. Furthermore, the nature, complexity and timescales of the constituents of these systems are far broader and more interconnected than traditional models portray.

This is particularly true in Europe where different governance models interact with a coalescing continent of 'an enlarged Europe' and as an emerging, technology-driven community of shared content and connectivity struggles out of the morass of linguistic, religious and national identity that has both plagued us and defined us for a thousand years.

Context: Europe

The European continent, for centuries awash with greed, murderous religiosity and unbounded cruelties has simultaneously fostered authentic musical, visual and literary creations. Perhaps because of, rather in spite of its callous intemperance, it can lay claim to some of the most significant expressions of human creativity. Moreover, its wealth, trade network and unflinching imperial sentiments afforded the widespread, albeit intermittently enforced, appreciation of its ingenuity.

Decades after the mayhem of the 1914-1945 period, Europe remains confused: timid, awkward and uncertain both of its own creative powers and its ability to project and influence. As a response to this, Europeans have looked to familiar, sometimes imagined institutions to enable their creativity. The creative elements that characterise our era: movies, TV, popular music, Internet and content by and for cellular telephony remain largely the concept of the United States and the materiel of China. European content creativity dithers: torn between historical tradition and 'cultured' verisimilitude. As such, we both imagine and create our ecosystem in the hope that desire married to infrastructure re-kindles inspiration.

Mainstream creative endeavour within Europe looks not to the individual but to the institution as partially-imagined totem of continuity. For example, art school or university, regional or state authority and the international amalgam of European Commission funding as enabler. As such, creativity in Europe sees itself as part of a mechanism rather than spontaneous instigator. Without understanding this and its difference from a US approach, the initiation of creative activities

in Europe will forever stutter and stall as we try to pilot an airplane using the control strategies of a ship.

Dublin 2000

In the early 2000's the MIT Media Lab opened two 'branches' of its operations in India and Europe (Republic of Ireland). Others must speak to the demise of Media Lab Asia, but Jones was the last CEO of Media Lab Europe and played a role alternating between leading actor and anxious spectator as American models of creative vigour were superimposed on a conservative Ireland whose instinctive rejection of foreign cultural hegemonies, so deeply implanted by the British for over 300 years, never succumbed to the palliative therapy MIT repeatedly deployed.

However, out of this came a clear and pragmatic model of how to sustain content-driven creativity in a diverse group of people set ashore in a different landscape and in a manner that reflected well the structure of European creative practices. To software engineers, they will recognize the process as a form of multi-disciplinary rapid application development (RAD or Extreme Programming) [3]. As mundane in prescription as impressive in impact; bringing users, strangers, the inexperienced and the willfully different into the design conceptualization resulted in powerful expressions of creativity and compelling content. In the ICT and Media sector, where content awkwardly embraces technology in the hope of renewed impact, the role of the creative person now becomes the re-interpreter of critique as much as the persuader and provoker of passion. This communalization, if not quite collectivization, of creativity challenges as much as it endows, not least of which is how the traditional European notions of *Droit d'Auteur* can survive this complex genesis.

The Media Lab Europe approach [6] to creativity relied on small (typically 6-8 members) teams who worked 50% of their time on a specific joint project and 50% on whatever they wanted individually or as a part of other teams. The purpose of this strategy was to maximize the diversity within the team (in terms of skill sets and approach) and maximize the diversity of activities each individual was exposed to (to ensure a continuous refresh of ideas and experience). On top of this, each team would have 6-12 sponsors who were interested in the work. Sponsors influenced work by persuasion not contract. Finally there was a network of extended contacts involving similarly minded individuals and institutions and the larger acquaintance people working in this field naturally develop. Of course this was an arrangement continually threatening to break down in chaos. Indeed it regularly did. Key to success was a small cohort of individuals who had the empathy and insight to keep the process just the right side of the line between chaos and constructive exploration. While the temptation to personalise leads to the assumption that these individuals are the 'creatives'. In practice it was the process that delivered creativity. Individuals played a part but it was as part of a creative team not as the creative part of a team.

Paul Valery [9] said "no work of art is complete, it is only abandoned" This notion of an everlasting debate and reinterpretation fits well with this putative collective-creation model where the skill set required usually extends outside any one individual and where the diverse ramifications of IP-delivered creativity osmose well beyond the creative communities and their natural audience. It has been said that 'Science and Technology are the Humanities of the 21st Century' [4]. This is perhaps overstatement but few will deny

that the impact of internet, cellular telephony and enhanced design tools makes art as much a part of science as science is now a part of art.

Amsterdam 2005

While this example is of one such organization it is fair to say that some of the most impressive creative centres within Europe also operate on a similar model. Within the Netherlands, the Waag Society and V2 connect artists, philosophers, scientists, and the wider communities both engaged and disenfranchised. The Waag and V2 build on the long Dutch tradition in the visual arts, and mutate this ethos into a challenging mixture of willful disobedience to artistic notions and unorthodox opportunities for social or commercial gain. Other examples of this type include IVREA in Italy and the Interaction Lab in Sweden. Seen in this European context, the individual becomes part of an ecosystem in which institutional succour allied to diverse critique is the route to valued creativity. In such a model the role of the individual artist or visionary is nugatory, any such stand-alone individuals remain un-touched and un-touchable unless and until through distributive mechanisms and collaborative technology they create a physically separate but collectively embedded networked community.

Amman 2006

Outside Europe, the challenge of creativity grows more complex: on the southern shores of the Mediterranean, lie a range of countries with a mixture of colonial histories, recent liberation movements, relative economic deprivation, and vigorous religious and social movements. Yet it has a cultural and creative tradition at least as rich as Europe. Parts of the region represent nodes of high technology and creativity (e.g. Turkey or

Israel) others suffer from conflict or the consequences of conflict. Yet more are engaged in a protracted dialogue between tribal, national and caliphatic viewpoints. Med-Ibtikar is a program of the European commission while economic in purpose and infrastructural in ethos, also understands the centrality of creativity in contemporary economies. Jordan in some sense represents an example of how creativity can shine in a non-developed context. Rather poor, due to its absence of oil resources, home to significant numbers of displaced Palestinians and Iraqis, uncomfortably positioned between quarrelsome nations, it has both context and motivation to see creativity as centerpiece to its national development. Significant FDI (Foreign Direct Investment) has enabled Jordan to develop creativity as a means of national renewal and economic progress.

A good example of an alternative approach to creativity is in the Princess Sumaya University. In comparison to the traditionally instruction-intensive educational philosophy of the region, the students are free to pursue their own visions of creativity. Inevitably they focus on matters relevant to their own experiences which include social networking in a country when introduction is prerequisite to debate and new models of television and film (as a result of the astonishing popularity of Al-Jazeera). In this model, the creative individuals are left alone to pursue their own vision in self-selecting groups, rather than participate in a semi-structured system. Partially this is due to the relative affluence and self-confidence of the student body, partially due to the low levels of creative input Faculty can provide and partially because in Arab culture, family and tribe provide framework rather than society or institute. Either way, anyone who has experienced

their creations is left in no doubt that a different yet compelling variant of the creative process is emerging.

Brussels 2007

The concept of Europe is based on planning, largely from the headquarters of the European Commission in Brussels. It is no surprise then that policies & plans for creativity form an important element of the European response to the challenge of creative societies. Compared to the United States, the regions of Europe and especially their great cities have a much larger involvement in the creative process, its sustainability and its transferability. Effective creativity in this context will depend on city/state support and involvement. Indeed, for us the impact of global connectivity has increased the role of the city-region-state triple in order to ensure the quiet voices of smaller nations are not overwhelmed by market-fed cacophony. In Europe recently, the proportion of GDP spent on supporting artistic and technological creation has increased significantly [1]. Partially this is because small, linguistically discrete cultures need assistance but also ICT growth now drives 50% of European GDP growth [5] and the creative content sector forms an increasingly larger part of this. For example, in the Amsterdam region, some 15% of the local GDP is driven by the creative sector and has a CAGR (Compound Annual Growth Rate) twice that of the other sectors.

The European Commission plays an important role in the scientific and technological activities in Europe. Their SMART project recognizes that Brussels commits significant resources to creativity but its formal mechanisms result in the eutrophication of the creative lake engendered. Key to the SMART project is the

discovery that 2 distinct types of creative network exist within Europe. Firstly of size 6-8 *actors* (*actors* can vary between large companies and individuals). Typically this form of creativity addresses creative pieces, creative methods and tool kits. In contrast there are also larger groupings of around 20 or so *actors*. These groupings address the engagement of communities with the created content. Not just in terms of dissemination but importantly in terms of the experience generated from access to the content and the impact on communities and regions. Intriguingly there seems to be little overlap in membership between the groups. This may be evidence of a dissonance between creative communities and the ways in which it is experienced and valued or simply a consequence of an already accepted European cycle whereby creators morph into curators. While more study needs to be done here, it further delineates the rich and integrated role public bodies play in the creation of content and the subsequent ascribing of impact and value.

User-Generated Content: Enigmatica

User created content is not just an emblem of our times, it is if anything the emblem of all times. It has a long history as the dominant form of artistic and cultural expression. Temporarily subservient in Europe a half-century, as film and radio technology demanded specialisation and authoritarian governments imposed controls, it has now re-emerged as social networks, handsets and user centred design tools rebalance creative ascendancy from technician to citizen. To anyone reared in the European cultural traditions, particularly the oral traditions of the western coastlines, user created content is Content period. From Viking *sagas*, to Welsh *Mabinogion*, from Basque *Bertsolaritza* to German *Volkskunde*, these peoples of Europe have

always created their own individualised cultural expressions. In a more literate context the diary, perhaps the quintessential European user-generated content, has re-emerged as blogging after a perilous period where self-expression was precursor to denunciation. If there is a surprise to the arrival of user generated content, it is that it has been away so long not its discovery. Seen in this sense, the European creative ecosystem with its rich institutional infrastructure, allied to a tradition of self-expression, now embedded in a powerful network of wired and wireless communications seems a marriage made in heaven. Indeed, we would go so far to argue that because of this fortunate juxtaposition, the models and methods for future user-generated content may well be discerned more clearly by study of European practice than elsewhere.

Summary: Reflections

The European approach to creativity is characterized as the individual as *actor* not instigator, in a communitarian but only loosely collectivized process. The approach that works for Europe has distinct characteristics that serves it well but will need careful consideration and adjustment to survive outside its unique and distinctive infrastructure and heritage. The European approach to this survival challenge has been in part traditional and in part re-inventive. The *traditional part* is the centrality of small communities of diverse individuals. The *re-invention* is now elaborated through trans-disciplinary groups such as Waag and V2 that address new disciplines but in a way that mixes creation and commerce immediately recognizable as part of our renaissance period Guilds and city-states. This has allowed the diversity of European perspectives

to flourish within its own communities even as it struggles outside its fractured linguistic domains.

Citations

- [1] Commission of the European Communities. *i2010 - Annual Information Society Report 2007*, http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/eeurope/i2010/docs/annual_report/2007/comm_pdf_com_2007_0146_f_en_acte.pdf.
- [2] Communication and information Unit, Enterprise and Industry DG. *Putting Knowledge into Practice: A Broad-based Strategy for the EU*, European Commission Brussels Oct 2006.
- [3] S. McConnell. *Rapid Development: Taming Wild Software Schedules*, Microsoft Press Redmond, WA, USA, 1996.
- [4] R. Dettmer, Innovation is Good for You, *IEE Review*, February 2004, pp 32-35.
- [5] European Commission Information Society Press Release. *ICT drives 50% of ICT growth, says commission's annual report on the digital economy*. Reference: IP/07/453 Date: 30/03/2007. http://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/cf/itemdetail.cfm?item_id=3303.
- [6] European Commission. Mediktibar: Euromed Innovation and Technology Program. <http://www.medibtikar.eu/spip.php?rubrique51>
- [7] S. Jones. From Idea to Income, In R. Heller, E. De Bono (Eds) *CEO Today*. Sovereign Publications Limited, London. Issue 1 Volume 1, 2007.
- [8] R. Khamsi, 'MIT Wraps up Dublin Lab', *Nature* pp 325-326, Volume 433, Number 7021, January-6, 2005.
- [9] P. Valéry, *The Art of Poetry*. Transl. Denise Folliot, Ed. T.S. Eliot. London: Routledge & Kegan 1958.