6th International Culturemondo Roundtable Report
"Bringing Practice into Digital Cultural Policy"

Saturday 25th September 2010, Trouwgebouw, Amsterdam
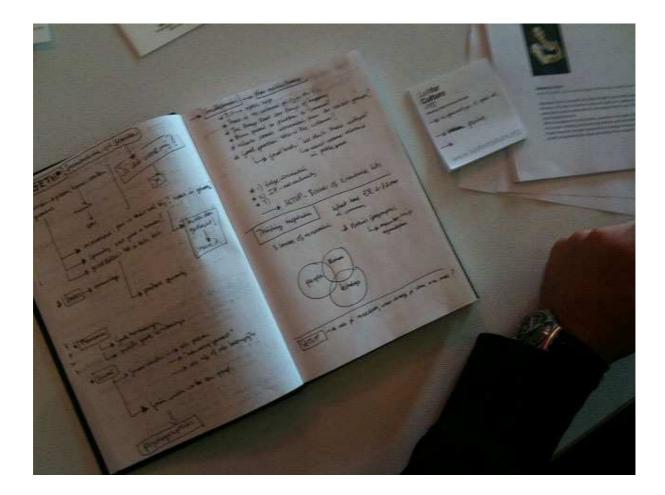
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What is Culturemondo?

Culturemondo is an open network of international digital cultural specialists who work together to facilitate strategic and relevant knowledge exchange. We are an informal group who come together to plan and host an international roundtable each year. So far, our roundtables have taken place in Japan, Croatia, Cuba, Taiwan, New Zealand and the Netherlands – each delivered with a different partner in that country.

As a group of people all involved in cultural portal development, we wanted to create a place where we could meet other like-minded people, share ideas and help each other. Despite the fact our online services range in size, scope, services and management structure, we all had one thing in common - the drive to engage and excite people with the richness and diversity of culture and the ways that it shapes our lives. An International Steering Committee coordinates the network and collaborates to plan all activities and define priorities for future action. For 2010 this group has consisted of:

Jane Finnis (Chairman) - Culture24 (United Kingdom);

Katherine Watson - Lab For Culture (The Netherlands);

Frank Thinnes Plurio.net (Luxembourg, Belgium, Germany, France)

Seb Chan - Powerhouse Museum (Australia);

Aleksandra Uzelac - Culturelink (Croatia);

Ilya Eric Lee- TELDAP / culture.tw (Taiwan).

Background

The 6th International Roundtable took an intensive, practical and user-focused approach to address the question – How can we ensure that culture and heritage policies are linked to digital policies and strategies? Many members of the Culturemondo network have been developing, building and running online cultural services around the world since the early days of portals and websites. The network offers a unique slice of cultural practice that digitally connects people with ideas, culture and heritage. As pioneers in their field they have also been at the forefront of

discussions and debates on cultural policy development on local, national, regional and international levels.

The digital shift in which we are living has affected all aspects of our society and the speed of change has been particularly challenging to policy makers, regardless of their sector. Cultural policies are only just beginning to adapt. Digital policies, agendas and strategies that are developed in a cross-sectoral way rarely link with cultural policy development. Culturemondo recognizes the need to address this challenge and sees a special role in providing the practical know-how in order to facilitate this link and effectively bring practice into policymaking.

Roundtable overview

Hosted by: Virtueel Platform and LabforCulture, coinciding with PICNIC
Location: Trouw Amsterdam, Wibautstraat 127, 1091 GL Amsterdam
Date: Saturday 25th September 2010
Who: 38 participants
What: Panels, discussion, visioning exercise
Key Question: How to effectively connect digital cultural policy and practice?

Panel discussion

Jane Finnis of Culture 24 opened the day describing Culturemondo as a network with a shared commitment to explore innovation. She highlighted how together, the group celebrates successes and learns from past failures. The strength of the network is also in mutual support to fail quickly, iterate, and move on, taking better risks overall. To set the context for the work Culturemondo has done, Jane also told the story in numbers: six international meetings, two reports and three surveys adding up to a lot of shared intelligence in the group. A panel then followed, "Connecting Policy and Practice", moderated by Katherine Watson, Director of the European Cultural Foundation and LabforCulture.

The first panellist, Cathy Brickwood of Virtueel Platform, described key aspects of the Virtueel Platform model. Virtueel Platform's success can be attributed to the deployment of several strategies over time, including an emphasis on constant mapping and analysis of the Dutch e-culture sector. Other strategies include sharing best policy (where possible), using the value of difference instead of allowing difference to create problems, employing bi-lateral exchanges, and exploiting the power of cross-overs, particularly with the heritage sector. Cathy also highlighted the difficulty of overcoming the default "please just give us money" stance of many in the culture sector towards funders.

> *"We must broaden the notion of what is digital culture – it's not just content." – Cathy Brickwood, Virtueel Platform*

Frank Thinnes of Plurio.net followed Cathy's presentation with a description of the Plurio model and assessment of what has worked and what has not. The region covered by Plurio is known as the "laboratory of Europe" and covers numerous linguistic and political zones. Plurio acts as a cultural portal showcasing commonalities within the diverse cultures of the region, overcoming search issues, since of course users can only Google what they know. With a user-generated approach of 1,700 different content providers, regional biases are uncovered (heritage focus in one area versus contemporary art focus in another, for example), which is useful information for policymakers and practitioners. Policymakers often desire clear products, but what Plurio offers is a new kind of cultural product: an infrastructure that supports not just cooperation, but solidarity in the region.

> *"People need neutral expertise, not consultants selling 1990s closed shop business models." – Frank Thinnes, Plurio.net*

Catherine Bunting, Director of Research at Arts Council England, described how political actions in England (Digital Economy Act; Digital Britain report) failed to include culture as part of the dialogue (despite ACE's warnings), which will prove a disastrous mistake as infrastructure without content is meaningless. ACE formed a coalition to lobby for greater inclusion in the Digital Britain report, which was a

modest success. Catherine raised an important point of political and policy working, which is the aspect of having to start over with each new minister, rebuilding from scratch. The Digital Opportunity is one of ACE's main priorities in its current strategic plan, responding to the fact that audience expectations are changing and yet most regularly funded organisations (RFOs) in England have a very basic online offer. There is a gap between the commercial world which is advancing rapidly and the cultural sector that suffers from a lack of expertise. The £20m Digital Innovation fund is one response to that. The public is highly capable of engaging and ACE can either push RFOs to change or redistribute funds to those who can and will provide an innovative digital offer. What will happen is something between the two.

> *"The cultural leadership debate gets stuck between old and new,*
> *meanwhile which version of the future doing we want to end up in?"*
> *– Catherine Bunting, Arts Council England*

Seamus Cassidy from the European Commission discussed the EU's Culture programme, 400m EUR over seven years. The conflation of citizenship and culture at the EU level has proved problematic and these areas are being untangled. The EU has great cultural diversity but no internal markets, which is a sustainability issue to be addressed. Cuts to culture also represent cuts to development, and the fringes are often first to go, which is counterintuitive as the fringes are where innovation happens. Ultimately the perception of culture must change from cherry on the cake to yeast in the bread, meaning operators must show what culture brings rather than what it costs. The wise investments by the Dutch in the 1600s provided cultural heritage we still enjoy today, and action we take now will also have great resonance in the future.

> *"This is a challenge, not a crisis." – Seamus Cassidy, European*
> *Commission*

The international respondents to the panel included Katelijn Verstraete from Culture360, a project of ASEF, the Asia-Europe Foundation, and Mike Edson of the Smithsonian Institution. Katelijn provided an intro to ASEF and pointed out the online

issue of English language dominance, making decisions that portal operators make culturally-sensitive ones. The question of control, versus unfettered engagement, also proves to be a perennial concern, picking up on Catherine's points regarding audience expectations. Katelijn also echoed Seamus' points on the importance of lobby work and finding ways to dialogue between government and civil society.

Mike Edson noted that cultural portals push the nature of established relationships, and he notes that the concept of a "portal" may move to "platform", and from there, to a "commons". Increased ability to share and network, and the "10,000 garages" phenomenon of maker culture means perhaps institutions are obsolete, or at the very least, old models need to be abandoned completely ("burn the ships"). Open platforms, net neutrality, edge innovation, and intellectual property have strongly emerged as not niche geek issues, but fundamental issues for the cultural sector that will need to be addressed imminently.

Crowd-Sourcing Problems

The Crowd Sourcing Problems session was led by Lydia Howland, trustee at Culture 24. She first presented the three lenses of innovation: people (desirability), technology (feasibility), business (viability) and the two tenets of innovation: prototyping and inspiration. She then led breaking the attendees into three groups to conduct a visioning activity that allowed fresh thinking on the organisations we work within.

Each group was asked to envision what it would be like if one of the following analogous institutions ran cultural policy or our cultural institutions: IKEA, National Geographic, and The Guardian newspaper. The exercise was a three step process.

Firstly, each group was asked to think about their analogous organisation (IKEA, National Geographic, or The Guardian) and their users; their business model; and their capabilities.

Next, the groups were asked to think about their own organisations (whether that be a gallery, museum, or agency) and their users, and compare them to the users of their analogous organisation; compare their own business model to that of their analogous organisation; and compare their own capabilities to those of their analogous organisation.

Lastly, groups were asked to imagine what would actually happen if each of these analogous organisations ran cultural policy or one of our particular organisations:

1. What would they start to do differently?
2. What would they keep?
3. What new services or products would they introduce as part of your offer?
4. How would they change your business model?

After intensive group activity around these questions, the findings were presented to everyone present.

If National Geographic ran a contemporary art gallery, they would:
- Start selling quality reproductions
- Exploit the gallery's back catalogue
- Start a kid's club
- Explore product placement and celebrity endorsement
- Better inform the front of house staff

If The Guardian ran a museum or gallery, they would:
- Recognise the core audience and the value of access to that audience
- Promote a strong worldview
- Communicate a strong narrative around the art
- Sell the bricks and mortar
- Create a studio or remix model for customers

If IKEA ran a museum, they would:

- Make it a hang out space
- Operate more efficiently
- Put good copywriters between artists and the audience
- Conduct mass audience research
- Take a long term approach to amortising marketing investments
- Nurture life-long customers

The exercise served to illustrate to all attendees the possibilities for innovating that lie in simply viewing things from a different perspective. After some brief remarks on Culturemondo business, the day then ended on a festive note with drinks and networking.

Key Issues

Many key issues came up several times throughout the day:

- The need to foster the "fringes" (Seamus Cassidy), "edge innovation" (Michael Edson), and digital culture beyond just content (Cathy Brickwood). These approaches require breaking away from the tried and true.

- How to package success to policymakers: they want product, intangible results and infrastructures are products but new language and understanding needs to be developed around this. Can we develop a more intelligent conversation around audience participation in particular?

- The resource question: What, other than money, would make our jobs easier?

- The importance of lobbying and persistence in relationships with policymakers/governments is clearer than ever, as Frank and Seamus observed in their presentations (you can contribute to the EU consultation on the next Culture Programme before 15 December 2010 here: http://bit.ly/b4KHjV)

- The need to catch up to audiences who are capable of more engagement than what is being offered, but also may be risk-averse. Examples of best

practice in this area need to be shared, as they are a resource for selling the idea that audiences are hungry for more.

- Intellectual property, sharing, the commons are already emerging as major challenges and cultural operators need to address them head-on. Not taking a position on these issues is not really an option.

- Ongoing sector mapping and analysis is fundamentally important, and works hand-in-hand with educating and raising awareness among policymakers.

What's next

At the end of the day the group shared relevant information on upcoming items of interest, including:

- IFACCA World Summit: http://www.artsummit.org

- Virtueel Platform's International Policy and Practice book coming out, and also their Visitors Programme: http://virtueelplatform.nl

- Several connections leading to Brazil - watch this space.

- Reminder to join the Google group: http://groups.google.com/group/culturemondo

Colophon

Report written by Michelle Kasprzak.

Photographs by Jane Finnis.

The Roundtable was hosted by Virtueel Platform and LabforCulture.

For more information on Culturemondo: http://www.culturemondo.org

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