



Mission 2.0

advice for arts & cultural organisations
from the social web

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Big things are happening all around us... you probably don't need me to tell you that. When I look back at our great species with my pop anthropologist hat on, I see that there have only been a few major societal changes in our collective history - foraging to agrarian to agricultural to maritime to industrial and now to informational...so the epochs go. The keener among us will see that it was the mass use of a new technology that has facilitated each of those particular changes of age, be it the hoe, the plough, the chronometer or the steam engine. And of course that which is driving our current change of age is the web.

Today's web is really radically different to that of even just three or four years ago. What we have seen is that the web's centre of gravity has shifted from merely being a source of broadcast information to a platform for dynamic conversations - this is what is known as Web 2.0 or the social web. After having enjoyed a yearlong secondment to Mission, Models, Money in 2006/7 from my then-employer Accenture, I have now recently joined NESTA Connect - a team that explores what can happen when individuals and organisations work together across boundaries in radically new ways. And since I'm looking at the web's role in enabling innovation in particular, I've been considering what this all means for the arts & cultural sector. My instinct tells me that it's a rich seam indeed.

Much more articulate individuals than me have outlined the characteristics of the new web culture, so please see [Clay Shirky](#), [Charlie Leadbeater](#) or [Don Tapscott](#) for popular romps through this subject. And for all their different emphases, all commentators highlight three principal drivers as being behind the new wave of online activity. These are the low barriers to participation, the thirst for conversation and the power of collaboration. Let's look in turn at the general lesson each of them has to share and then what specific steps arts & cultural organisations can explore to take advantage of the opportunities they present.



The Long Tail and the era of mass participation

It's just never been easier. With our increasing levels of basic digital literacy, the UK's now ubiquitous access to broadband and the growth of the mobile web - more people than ever before consider their online activity as an integral part of their normal lives, even if it's just using a web-based service to check your email. This is a magical time indeed. Clay Shirky sums it up very elegantly when he says "communications tools don't get socially interesting until they get technologically *boring*".

The Long Tail is a term coined by Chris Anderson and describes how the extremely low costs of access to the web has opened up a market for niche goods and services that in the past would not have been economically viable. If you'll excuse a crude example, stock a romantic Hungarian zombie film in your small town video store, which only a few people will ever see, and it's unlikely to be bought or rented. However allow millions of people the chance to browse the store online and suddenly you have a market. While it will always be true that the majority of customers will only be attracted to a limited, popular product range (the head of the curve of which the long tail is a part), markets and tastes that were hitherto not profitable to target now become serviceable. Welcome to the Long Tail economics of Amazon, eBay etc.

This has two broad implications for the arts & cultural sector. The first is that with the right online distribution platform for your content, there is now a much, much greater audience available to receive that content, whatever form that takes. The second is that it's not only the costs of consuming high quality digital content that are plummeting too but also those of production. This means that there is a new breed of competition and audience members or users may be happy to compromise on quality in favour of accessibility and cost, should they be barriers to the more professional work. Due to the nature of digital distribution, the music industry has been the first to fall. This should be considered a wake-up call for the arts.



For those of you who find this vision somewhat daunting, may I offer some solace? A common fear I hear, both explicitly and implicitly, is that the online experience will extinguish that of the live. I could not disagree more - for while I may be a technoptomist, I also recognise its limitations. The web is good at very many things but as things stand, we are a very long way away from replicating the simply wonderful immersive, sensory and alive experience of a play, concert or other artwork. What the web *will* do is augment the live experience by providing a varied level of content before and after the show, allowing us to have as rich an overall experience as we care to.

The growing pseudo-professional amateur culture that the web facilitates will in effect weed out the lesser quality producers, clearing the space for the truly gifted. The result therefore will be a quality of live production that we have never seen before, supported by an organic and dynamic online culture at a level that we have never seen before. *Whatever* your preferred art form, be excited.

Conversations mean communities

So now that low barriers to access have allowed large numbers of people to gather in the shared spaces of the web, our natural instinct to meet one another gets us to talking. Therefore the second main driver behind the emerging web culture is that of the appetite for conversation. So building on the foundation of mass participation, our access to simple communications tools such as blogs, social networking sites (Facebook, mySpace etc) and virtual worlds like Second Life allow us the tools to have meaningful interactions with many people at the same time in a highly networked fashion. In the past if someone wanted to share an idea, you had to somehow get access to a newspaper, radio or other traditional broadcast-type media, which was invariably expensive and closely guarded. Nowadays these simple web tools give us all access to an individual voice on a global scale and this has precipitated the web as an unprecedented platform for conversation. Welcome to the social web.



What this means for the arts & cultural sector is that, as we become more used to the web as a broker of conversations, we are likely to want to transfer this appetite for interaction from our online activity into other arenas, be that the workplace, politics or the arts. Arts & cultural organisations therefore have to learn how to engage in conversation with their audiences. And by this I mean genuine dialogue, not the managed monologues that can too often be passed off as conversation. The way this will be best achieved is if the voices are not those of organisations or productions pushing classic marketing messages but those of individuals and the tone kept personal.

As an example, in his first three weeks of being on the breakthrough online social tool called Twitter, actor and TV presenter Stephen Fry managed to attract nearly nine thousand people into following his short, personally written message updates. This was possible because that particular platform has the ability to provide a personal connection between people even if there is no direct prior relationship, without it feeling intrusive on either side.

My strong recommendation therefore is that artists and producers should look to curate their footprint on the social web so that they are accessible to their audiences in ways that support genuine dialogue. Having a marketing or communications department in the space between the artist and the audience is deeply unsatisfying when it comes to online interaction, because people want to talk to people not organisations. And the good news is that there is a growing range of tools by which to achieve this, with Twitter being currently the most widely used. And while this type of activity is still quite restricted to the more web literate amongst us, in the same way that Facebook grew from nothing into a dominant force in next to no time, the same will be true of this bite-sized style of many-to-many communication because ultimately we all have the innate instinct to share and connect.



The power of collaboration...and its myth

So now that we've got everyone talking, the third key step is to capitalise on a shared common purpose and provide the platforms and the tools so that we may work together to achieve our goals. Like MMM, revolutionary phenomena such as Wikipedia and Linux - the open source operating system, have only been possible because of loose, dynamic but highly rule-based organisational forms which empower individuals to add genuine value to a project of otherwise daunting proportion. Too long have the arts been in boxes that are no longer functional or relevant to the environment in which we now live. New conversations and new collaborations are the *sine qua non* of the disruption and innovation that this sector so deserves.

So as MMM starts its new phase of work, how can individual organisations look to bring the spirit of collaboration to their core? While working in partnership with other organisations to share resources is a natural first step, what are the collaborative opportunities with audiences?

Theatre producers like Punchdrunk are already taking a lead in highly facilitated and deeply interactive production models. I am pointing at still more, and inspired by the participatory web, organisations should look to engage funders and audiences in new ways, moving beyond conversation even, and encouraging actual joint-working by exposing previously hidden processes such as commissioning, programming and production. The spirit of open innovation is that there is just as much talent outside of your walls than within, indeed most probably more. And with open innovation processes fast becoming a popular way of gaining competitive advantage across the business world, they have yet to be fully explored in the artistic or cultural contexts and I for one, certainly look forward to the first experiments.

But let's not get carried away for democratic collaboration is not an elixir for success. We



have to be acutely aware of when to encourage free participation and when to exercise control. Make it too open and without clear rules, common purpose and informed facilitation and any such process is likely to end up as a mess. Make it too closed however and it can feel exploitative and the potential value of collaboration partners will be quickly lost. Fine-tuning this balance will have to be different for every project and for every organisation but get it right and the rewards are well worth the risk.

Therefore what *is* the elixir is getting the right decision making style for the right process. Jimmy Wales, the instigator of the Wikipedia project, when told that his creation is a triumph of democracy refutes this. Instead, he says it is one part anarchy - all sorts of odd things happen, one part democracy - everyone can participate, one part meritocracy - the good material rises to the top, one part aristocracy - lead users dominate and one part monarchy - in emergencies he exercises executive control.

So as our arts & cultural organisations wake up and rightly look to engage their audiences in ways that match the engagement levels they're becoming used to online - participating, communicating and collaborating - then taking this five-part methodology into account would not be a bad idea.

Magic bullets and closing thoughts

Increasing participation and access has of course been a key mantra of the arts for years, and with its emphasis on footfall and other volume-based metrics, has mainly been a numbers game. I'd argue that if our arts & cultural organisations *are* to take an advantage of the new culture of the web, and how it is changing our behaviour and expectations online and off, it will be a mistake to try to effect this across the board.

Participation is for everyone so yes; let's keep that as a numbers game. Access for all and



other such slogans are ones I can only support. But as we move from participation to conversation, the numbers begin to drop off simply because not everyone has the time or inclination to engage in that way. And there are fewer still who have the appetite or indeed the skill set to collaborate. So the engagement levels of conversation and collaboration can never and should never be one of volume. To put it another way, it's not about moving as many people along the engagement curve but instead, it's about ensuring that those audience members that are involved in a more engaged way get as good an experience as possible.

In an extension of the well-known 80:20 principle, this profile is called the 90:9:1 principle. According to this rule-of-thumb, only a very small number of people will be collaborators, a few more will be quite active in conversation and the vast majority will simply be participants. However everyone benefits from the value produced by the most engaged 1% and likewise the 90% really care what the 9% are talking about for even if they are not actively joining in, they are certainly listening.

So my magic bullets are these. Allow the room for your audiences and supporters to meaningfully engage in all of those three levels of activity in new ways. And once the community's form and the 90:9:1 profile asserts itself (which it will if you do your job well enough), nurture each group accordingly to their level of contribution.

With regards financing, fundraisers already work with high-net worth individuals differently to trusts & foundations and differently again with smaller-scale enthusiast donors. What I am therefore referring to is simply this same principle translated into other currencies. And this approach need not be restricted to online activity only, for as I've tried to emphasise here, the social web is changing our expectations across the board.

A recent NESTA report called *Transformers* speaks of how *innovation is sometimes*



*presented as a desirable extra, something that organisations might do when they have some spare cash... innovation is much more basic than this: it is **the** condition for survival in a changing environment.*

This quote sums up why embracing change driven by the web is so important to the arts and cultural sector, and to this country right now. I passionately believe that a thriving society has a vibrant arts & cultural sector at its heart. Now that I have rejoined MMM in its own mission of disruptive innovation as one of its co-directors, I remain convinced that the *status quo* is simply not good enough for the vision that we all share and the reality of the world around us.

Participation. Conversation. Collaboration. These same three key qualities that I've been discussing with regards to the web have also been core to MMM's work since its inception and I'm incredibly excited about what we can all do to make the vision of a truly flourishing arts & cultural sector a reality.

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