Connected Communities

Harnessing Creative Clusters to Civil Society and the Digital Economy

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Background

Executive Summary

This project worked closely with a number of creative clusters formed around social, environmental and/or political issues. It sought to understand the creative and activist practices of issue-based clusters, and to explore the ways in which these practices might be helped or hindered by digital technologies. A website was established to enable issue-based creative clusters to share knowledge and good practices, and to continue the dialogue on the advantages and disadvantages of harnessing their work to civil society and the digital economy.

Researchers and Project Partners

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Bradford Muslim Women's Council

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Key words

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Issue-based creative clusters
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Digital inclusion
Citizenship
Community
Wellbeing.

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Introduction:

The growth of the UK creative sector in recent years has demonstrated the potential of creativity as a tool of economic development. Policy makers have sought to promote clustering of creative industries, firms or professionals in order to support local and regional development. Similarly, harnessing creativity in civil society has been made central to the delivery of a range of government strategies (Cameron 2010). Creative clusters are conventionally defined geographically as places where there is a concentration of a creative industry (craft, film, music, publishing, interactive software and design) (NESTA) or creative professionals (Florida's 'creative class'). We suggest that this definition requires broadening in order to capture and analyse the creativity of groups who come together to deliver a range of social benefits, particularly those outlined in the 'Big Society' agenda. While some such clusters of creative citizens (Hartley 2010) are essentially local, others form wider networks that may have the resources to form digital communities, though they are still led and staffed by individuals who are largely unpaid. We propose the term "issue-based creative clusters" (IBCCs) to describe these networks.

IBCCs utilise a range of complimentary creative skills in order to address social issues and problems. These often include activities that could be classified as advertising, art, design, film, music, performing arts, publishing or research. With the work of charities and other civil society increasing recognised as worth billions to the UK economy, volunteer-led IBCCs constitute a virtually invisible, but valuable part of this. With the government's new Office for Civil Society depending on the skills present in the 250,000 charities in the UK to address a range of issues using creative thinking in an era of financial austerity, research into the current and potential role of these IBCCs as agents of the creative economy is an urgent need.

While we argue that the work of these creative clusters is significant in terms of its socio-economic value, little research has been undertaken into this area of cultural production. Because these groups work on community and issue-based scales, near, or even below, the digital divide, and in relative isolation from each other, they can be too easily dismissed by analysts as assemblages of random individuals and insignificant elements of the creative economy. The factors that promote and limit the societal benefits delivered by IBCCs have not yet been determined. There is therefore an urgent need for knowledge exchange between the members of a range of IBCCs, researchers and policy-makers, to allow their full potential for social and environmental enhancement to be realised.

The activities of the project centred around several IBCCs whose work across a range of social issues was documented and analysed in terms of (1) the social impact of the creative activity of the IBCCs, and (2) the use of internet and digital media, leading to conclusions about the future opportunities for, barriers to, and potential disadvantages of, the use of such tools. Researchers and IBCC co-researchers participated in an online knowledge-sharing event in Birmingham. Finally, the project created a knowledge exchange network through which IBCCs can interact with each other, researchers and policy-makers.

Activities:

Each researcher (KS, ST, TW) worked with one to two IBCC case studies over a 6-month period with a series of research questions guiding the inquiry:

1. What roles have the IBCCs played in bringing about social change at the scale at which they operate?

2. Are there barriers to IBCCs being included in digital communities? If so, how can these barriers be removed?

3. What could be done –practically or policy-wise – to increase the effectiveness of current IBCCs and catalyse new clusters?

Progress was updated regularly and emerging research themes were discussed on a wordpress project blog open to the co-researchers and IBCCs participant/co-researchers. This then led into the construction of a public website (see below).

Joseph Rowntree Foundation and Bradford Muslim Women's Council

JRF already had links with the CC Programme through previous meetings in York and Bana Gora's participation in the Creative Economy CC Workshop in Birmingham in December 2010. TW and our project partners from CultureLab, Ko-Le Chen and Rachel Clarke, ran a 1 day workshop for the Bradford Muslim Women's Council at the JRF's offices in Bradford. Discussion centred on barriers to Muslim women in Bradford becoming active on the web. The CultureLab team helped them develop a website that they could continue to develop autonomously of their current web-design supplier.

MED Theatre

A registered charity, MED Theatre produces community-based and educational theatre drawing on the history, ecology and folklore of their Dartmoor location. Based in rural communities and with an educational theatre arm, MED have been exploring the use of web-based technologies to extend engagement and participation in their work. MED Theatre has a dedicated company website *www.medtheatre.co.uk* and led a mixed team of volunteers and professionals to develop the Dartmoor Resource website *www.dartmoorresource.co.uk*. The IBCC project (KS and CultureLab's Ko-Le Chen) worked with MED to explore the Dartmoor Resource website, with a view to its further development as a site of engagement, interaction and participation. Discussion examined issues concerning ownership and control of web identities and the resources required to establish interactivity and participation via the website.

Banner Theatre

As one of the UK's longest surviving political theatre collectives Banner is an important case study not least because of the diverse range of creative places and partnerships the company has established (in schools, pubs and clubs, on picket lines, at union conferences, political rallies and so on) over the years. At the same time, Banner Theatre was chosen as an IBCC case study because the company has a long history of seamlessly integrating analogue and digital technologies in their social issue-based performances. These performances are called 'video-ballads' after the manner in which live music performance is mixed with 'actuality' or edited digital video recordings of real people.

Middleborough Mela and Jack Drum Arts

ST's action research with Middlesborough Mela and with Jack Drum Arts' Drama in the Dales project revealed how digital technologies might augment creative processes or extend the sense of 'communitas' achieved by cultural festivals such as the Mela. ST worked with Jack Drum arts to establish the theatre company 's website and the Drama in the Dale project website which was used by arts professionals, project partners and community participants throughout the process. It remains as a digital archive of a creative community education process.

IBCC knowledge sharing event

On 8 February 2012 an invitation-only event was held in Birmingham at the home of Banner Theatre. The day-long event brought together people involved in the IBCC case studies – researchers and IBCC participant/co-researchers –in order to present research findings to date and to share knowledge. The researchers presented preliminary conclusions from the project to gain feedback on their results from participants, while the gathering space promoted opportunities for participants to share their experiences and challenges with others. The meeting was invitation-only and held under Chatham House rules in order to provide a safe space for the exchange of ideas, issues and concerns.

Website Launch

The beta testing version of our website AgeOfWe.org, was launched on 31 March 2012. Having discussed the option of a further face-to-face meeting with our collaborators at the conclusion of the knowledge-sharing event in Birmingham, it was decided that the networking element of AgeOfWe would be a more effective way of promoting contact and discussion online in a way that would allow the groups involved to benefit, even after the project itself had been completed. The website also allows the project to broaden and deepen connections with researchers and community participant/co-researchers aligned with other projects supported by, or closely aligned to, the RCUK Connected Communities programme including Participant's United (PI Egglestone), Remaking Society (PI Wakeford), and Schaefer's AHRC Fellowship 'Enacting Community'.

Outcomes and potential benefits of the research for communities and other stakeholders:

The IBCCs benefited from interest taken in their work by academic researchers. The participatory action research (PAR) method adopted by the researchers allowed the creative agents to reflect on the social impacts of their collective creative processes and to explore the advantages (and disadvantages) of digital technologies in enhancing their work. In most cases, applied (creative and social) outcomes were achieved via PAR processes. In the Bradford case study the outcomes include the films Ko-Le Chen made with a faith-based women's organisation, leading to on-going collaboration (e.g. *http://bit.ly/NrlelL*), and the website *http://daughtersofeve2011.wordpress.com/*. In the Jack Drum case study outcomes include the construction of a website that facilitated Jack Drum's Drama in the Dales community play making and community education processes. Equally, the PAR process opened the work of IBCCs to critical analysis (see Schaefer's article on MED Theatre, Wakeford and Clarke's blog on Bradford

(*http://ageofwe.org/2012/08/08/techie-man/*) and Thompson's conference paper on Jack Drum), which has the effect of making the work of IBCCs better known to both academic and public audiences, whether these be funding bodies, community participants or other IBCC organisations.

The IBCCs benefited from discussions with and knowledge sharing between researchers, CultureLab's IT specialists, and other IBCCs. The various engagements between different co-researchers led to the development of a guide for IBCCs, published on the ageofwe.org website. The guide stresses the importance of maintaining ownership and control of IBCCs web identities and suggests ways in which to achieve this. The guide covers topics including understanding/making informed decisions about web software, acquiring skills to manipulate, design and configure software; and time management.

Finally the ageofwe.org website is a key outcome with great potential to benefit IBCCs, whether they are involved in the project or not (e.g. *http://ageofwe. org/2012/03/30/taking-yourselves-online/*). The development of the website was a response to a request by the group members for a non-commercial tool for community activists and artists who wish to use of the web for networking and capacity-building.

Learning from experience in engaging with communities:

Culture-Lab's IT specialist Ko-Le reported learning from her experience engaging with various IBCCs. Most notably, through engagement with IBCCs she was able to recognise the potential creative and social applications of IT skills developed in Culture Lab. She is now looking to work in contexts that allow her to combine technological knowledge and social applications. Additionally, Chen's engagement with IBCCs has led to further critical reflection on the use of video as a medium for documentation.

ST found that his community media skills were highly valued by Jack Drum. He reported that a SWAT analysis conducted by the Dramadale steering panel highlighted the website he designed as a major strength of the project. It was both outward facing – seen by the public to promote the project – and inward facing in so far as it was a tool for project artists and participants to upload and download scripts and files, to blog the creative process, to create digital maps of place and story, and as a place to store and display creative products of the process such as video/animated footage. While recognizing the value of digital technologies ST also remarked on the equal value of the analogue elements of the collective creative process. He notes that lasting friendships and connections between community artsworkers and participants had been made which were likely to be taken forward into future community play making and education projects. Finally, ST noted the archival potential of the website in recording, documenting and researching the work of IBCCs.

Emerging issues for further research:

The key points to emerge from this project as issues for further research are:

1. Managing expectations about the www's capacity, for instance, to promote public/ civic participation, engagement or interaction,

2. Building capacities of IBCCs to actually use digital tools,

3. Providing accessible and non-commercial platforms for networking and knowledge sharing by IBCCs.

4. Creative facilitation – the process of mediating the interface between grassroots civil society organisations and creativity, particularly the digital realm.

As this was a PAR project investigating a hitherto un-researched problem, it points not only to emerging issues for further research but offers outcomes that may themselves be subject to further research, most notably the website and whether it achieves the co-researchers aims to serve as a platform for IBCC networking and knowledge sharing.

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The Connected Communities

Connected Communities is a cross-Council Programme being led by the AHRC in partnership with the EPSRC, ESRC, MRC and NERC and a range of external partners. The current vision for the Programme is:

"to mobilise the potential for increasingly inter-connected, culturally diverse, communities to enhance participation, prosperity, sustainability, health & well-being by better connecting research, stakeholders and communities."

Further details about the Programme can be found on the AHRC's Connected Communities web pages at:

www.ahrc.ac.uk/FundingOpportunities/Pages/connectedcommunities.aspx