

Digital Media, New Media and Culture. Notes.

Digital Media

Culture is inherent in the way we do everything, the way we say 'aye', the way we say 'braw'. What we are and what we do is our culture – culture is as long as it is broad and the main feature in culture is communication. Digital media changes the nature of our communication only in the medium in which it is conveyed. It may be faster, more accessible, more 'here, there and everywhere' but ICT is, after all, only technology. If we have nothing to say and no ideas to share then the medium is redundant (cut to digital tumbleweed rolling over a virtual desert). If I could redefine the acronym I would go for CIT – that is the order of importance. Communication has to be first, information second and technology following. Digital technology is bringing huge changes to the way we do things but how much of a change does it bring to the things we do?

Digital networks carry digital data. That data is referred to as content and can be virtually any form of communication or information. For the purposes of this exercise I will use Scottish Screens remit and restrict myself to referring to content within a narrative or moving image context.

If we look at premium digital content as a starting point - what shall we call it? A film - a movie? Let's stick with film, after all the public body responsible for the industry in the UK is called 'The Film Council' and they are the key players in transforming film production and distribution to digital formats.

Across the board, digital distribution will lower the barrier to entry for a lot of film product – whether it is shot on High Definition digital formats or 35mm film – but with more product coming to market, we in Scotland are going to have to have a firmer idea of what our Unique Selling Point is (Perhaps our Culture - the balance between the parochial and the heterogeneous). That applies to the individual producer as well as to our industry as a whole.

Cinema is at the top of a Value Chain - if your film has had cinema exposure it is more likely to make sales to broadcasters and will boost sales of any DVD or video release. Once cinemas have high resolution digital projection facilities the opportunities for exhibitors to use that for alternative content is vast – hugely increasing the viability of their business and opening up cinemas to whole new range of uses, as well as advertising – for live event loops, corporate events, interactive gaming and importantly increased access for the communities in which they operate. I will expand on this in the 'Strategy' section.

It can offer opportunities for audiences to act as programmers but more importantly for creatives in Scotland it can create an opening for producers to become distributors. This is a key element for a small country like ours, we have to look to promoting our own product, not rely on the Soho Distribution cabal.

If we are to develop a true knowledge economy, where an idea, or intellectual property, is a commodity, we have to look where interest is spread widely and perhaps thinly – off radar for the big players (Hollywood, Sky etc). This is where Scotland's digital entrepreneurs can reach a market for modestly priced content consumed in high volumes. Go Niche – think global – prosper

Multi-platform and mobile content in peer-to-peer networks will blur the difference between professional and amateur content. Small production companies and user-generated content (community groups, individuals, activists etc) will be well placed to take advantage of 'long tail' economic models. ('Forget squeezing millions from a few megahits at the top of the charts. The future of entertainment is in the millions of niche markets at the shallow end of the bit stream.')

With new routes to market imminent it's time for Venture Capital in Scotland to reconsider film as a viable investment. If Business know how in Scotland can work with filmmakers I'm sure we can get more successful work out there and we can avoid selling cheap in other countries simply to get access to the market. Public money, mostly under the auspices of the Arts Council of England is being used as capital investment in digital kit for cinemas. In Scotland we are supporting Docspace as the UK partner of Cinemanet Europe, a prime example of using digital media to share stories in a culturally relevant context.

Perhaps we could have a co-ordinated approach to creating a public private partnership in digital distribution. Across Enterprise, Arts Council and Screen we would not fall foul of State Aid regulations if the focus was on cultural outcomes rather than economic. A private partner would look to completely takeover at the public exit point. OR somewhat more radical, Nationalise aspects of the film industry. James Lee, an ex director of the UK Film Council, recently called for a National Film Studio. He put forward three arguments for it.

"First, it is the only solution that might give us a chance to regaining control of the national film agenda from Hollywood. Second, it would provide a home where our best creative minds could collaborate and have the opportunity to excel. Third, after twenty-five years, I no longer believe that indirect incentives will ever succeed in inducing the British film industry to change. The time has come to consider more interventionist approaches."

The studio would be owned by the nation and working directly with the independent production sector, would develop new work and organise international distribution. This is radical in a business sense but not on a cultural level – after all, it sounds very much like the Scottish National Theatre model.

There is a saying about Einstein's Theory of Relativity — that what makes it difficult for some people to comprehend is its simplicity. That you don't need to acquire more information to understand it, but that you must instead discard preconceived notions to understand it.

I have touched on the Internet above and believe that it will imminently transform all aspects of our content consumption. It was initially a threat to the music industry but after a few teething troubles is now used very effectively. We can already get Video on Demand services with 4Mb home broadband. Internet based content has often been referred to as 'New Media'.

New Media

The following I have lifted directly from Lev Manovich. His description of '**New Media**' I found enlightening and excites possibilities in the mind.

The **Interpersonal Medium** allows each participant equal control over the content. (a conversation)

The **Mass Medium** allows control over the content by one person. (a radio broadcast)

The hallmark characteristics of the **New Medium** are:

That individualized messages can simultaneously be delivered to an infinite number of people.

And that each of the people involved shares reciprocal control over that content.

In other words, the New Medium has the advantages of *both* the Interpersonal and the Mass media, but *without* their complementary disadvantages.

- No longer must anyone who wants to individually communicate a unique message to each recipient have to be restricted to communicating with only one person at a time.
- No longer will anyone who wants to communicate a message to a mass of people be unable to individualise totally the content of that message for each recipient.

Just consider the converged technologies that make this New Medium possible. The millions of computers interconnected through the Internet can acquire, sort, package, and transmit information in as many ways as there are individual people. They can establish those communications simultaneously. And they allow each participant (senders and receivers) to share equal simultaneous control. This can result in unprecedented forms of communications.

Imagine that when a person visits a newspaper Web site, he sees not just the bulletins and major stories that he wouldn't have known to request information about but sees the rest of that edition customized to his own unique needs and interests. Rather than every reader seeing the same edition, each reader sees an edition that has simultaneously been individualized to his interest and generalized to his needs. Or, imagine that each viewer who is simultaneously watching a broadcast can stop, rewind, or fast forward the program at will, or even change the denouement of the program's plot.

Realise that these New Medium forms of content inherently are forms of mass customization, something impossible with either the Interpersonal Medium or the Mass Medium.

The existence of this New Medium will catalyze, economise, and popularise entirely new vehicles for production and distribution, just as the invention of the medium of air (where for millennia, land and sea were the only viable mediums) did for transportation. It will also create entirely new concepts and forms of content.

A Strategy

We need to ensure everyone in Scotland feels comfortable in an increasingly digital world. This means training and funding support for our creative industries, support and training in schools and libraries, community centres and media access projects, building confidence not only to access services but to create and communicate digitally. Essentially, any coordinated strategy will have to work through local authorities.

I mentioned above that film is 'premium digital content' and Cinemas are the deliverer of that content. Obviously there is the huge revenue stream beyond that but let's focus on Cultural phenomena. Cinemas, and predominantly our publicly funded cultural cinemas are hugely important in the fabric of society. They represent an opportunity to experience the creativity of painting with light, shutting out an "always on" world and sharing a collective journey. In this environment it is important to 'inform, educate and entertain' through universal storytelling but it is essential that elements of ourselves are reflected back at us. We need to ensure that our 'culture' is represented here and obviously we would like some of that to travel abroad.

So, Digital technology will offer increased opportunity to see ourselves 'up there' not only in well produced feature films but also in work created by students, communities and the disenfranchised. Cultural cinemas are often seen as 'art house' offering work by obscure European directors and not really inclusive. Education and Outreach work is done very well by our exhibition sector but we can do more to open this out. The Film Councils Digital Screen Network is strongly linked to the Arts Councils 'Additionality' criteria. This is really about funding work that is beyond what is already done – for example if there is an access strategy, what more can you do to be more accessible.

In Scotland we could move towards holistic digital cultural centres showing community work as well as top movies. The Watershed in Bristol and to a lesser degree FACT in Liverpool are examples of trying to step in the right direction. Dundee Contemporary Arts is ripe for capitalising on a coherent vision and is already making organic changes. The relationships in Aberdeen (Peacock and Belmont), Glasgow (Glasgow Film Theatre and CCA) Edinburgh (Filmhouse, Cameo and Mediabase) and in many areas around the country, need to be more effectively linked. Often, organisations feel protective about sharing what they do because funding is so precious that they want to be able to clearly demonstrate their effectiveness to justify their existence. We need to look at ways of changing to a more inclusive and collective culture.

So, creativity for culture and commerce is a high level activity but Access and Education are the key elements of a digital media strategy that is inclusive and forward thinking. There are many ways of getting moving image content to an audience beyond "cultural hubs". The truly broadband Internet will really push the boundaries for moving image content and good broadband content will drive uptake. Broadband has become much more accessible and affordable and whether work is created for a big screen a small one or a mobile one we need to be sure it is accessible whether our citizens are consumers, participants or creators.

Community Centres Media Access Projects and Arts Centres should be working as cultural hubs that replicate the digital infrastructure in Scotland but work within a real local environment.

Throughout the UK there has been a drive to 'Network Britain'. The UK Digital strategy and the Scottish Executives e-government and Open Scotland agendas are focussed on infrastructure, service delivery, cutting costs and GDP but ICT as a communication and social cultural tool has been given scant regard. With reference to the liberating and empowering aspects of New Media, perhaps digital media could be used like a cultural glue. A fine example of this is BBC Scotland's' Island Blogging project. The Digital

Storytelling projects that happen around the world are also something we should take note of. They combine access, education, training, creativity and communication in a purposeful and socially useful manner. Take the Capture Wales project as an example <http://www.bbc.co.uk/wales/capturewales/>

Digital media will become an accepted backdrop to social and cultural life and government initiatives to drive awareness, although not holistic and economically focussed, have been reasonably successful. However, we need to be aware of the limitations of a nanny state. Creativity, the Internet and peer-to-peer networking are inextricably linked with individuality and freedom. There is too much focus, from government and business on the threats from the internet - don't molly coddle – we know what state firewalls can do – we know that software suppliers and content aggregators want to filter internet use via managed Portals that promote safety for the machine, your details and your self or your children. If we were all more informed though, we could view the Internet as exciting new territory rather than Bandit country. The biggest barrier to accessing ICT is interest and motivation followed by a lack of perceived need. Confidence, Cost, Complexity, Content concerns and Security concerns follow up as reasons for not 'switching on'.

OSS

Computers are modelling devices not tools – almost anything can be a tool. Software tools act as an interface – the way they are designed, work and are laid out ultimately has an impact on all the work created with them.

Open Source Software is a contemporary cultural phenomenon and one that we should explore and embrace.

"The Times Education Supplement has published the results of a BECTA (British Educational Communications and Technology Association, the Government's ICT agency) study, to be published next week, into the TCO of using Microsoft products compared to using Free Open Source products. The report shows an average saving of 24% per computer in schools using Open Source over those using Microsoft systems."

Obviously it's not just schools that can save money in this way, art organisations, galleries and colleges could all benefit from a similar approach

The U.K. government is backing a new initiative aimed at promoting the use of open-source software in the public sector, providing a forum for those working in the public sector to test and use such software. Dundee was the first local authority in the UK to implement open source software in its network.

The Open Source Academy initiative is an umbrella for a number of projects designed to foster the use of open-source software by local authorities in the U.K., and also to facilitate the growth of a national community of software developers who can collaborate on centralized software projects.

The Open Source Academy will be funded by the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister (ODPM) under its e-Innovations investment program. According to sources close to the project, the final details of the program are currently being finalized with vendors and the ODPM will formally launch the Open Source Academy by the end of the month April.

I would suggest we get involved in this on a National level and also raise awareness of the imminent UK 'Digital Challenge' for local authorities put forward in the UK digital Strategy in March.

Broadcasting

Scotland will be going digital in broadcasting terms before England - Borders being first to switch off the analogue signal in 2008 and then Scottish and Grampian in 2009. The aim UK wide is to say goodbye to analogue in 2012. Rather than see this as being used as guinea pigs lets grasp the opportunity to turn this to our advantage. We are a small country but that means we should be able to adapt to change quickly. The opportunities to work with the broadcasters with increased quotas for independent production companies and a refocusing on home grown content will create sustenance for filmmakers to develop ideas and productions. If we are trailblazing or being the 'out of town' test bed for digital broadcasting we should ask the DCMS to support this transition financially. £600,000 can buy a channel from Sky and I would welcome recent DCMS rumblings that they may give around £250,000 towards a dedicated digital Gaelic channel. This being on top of a potential core funding reappraisal linked to the Retail Price Index.

Key Partners

ITI Techmedia has a great deal to offer but should be pushed to engage more in the communication media elements of their remit.

LTS are forward thinking and could integrate broad support for Life Long Learning

Scottish Enterprise

Scottish Arts Council

Local Authorities

Scottish Executive Site

Digital Media Strategy (DMS): a national TCS Digital Media Programme is proposed to improve the delivery of public services in tourism, culture and sport. The vision for the Strategy is to position Scotland by 2010 as a world leader in this area. A feasibility study will form the basis of a report on the proposed DMS in March 2005, and implementation of the DMS will require social and economic research to map the baseline in digital media resources and benchmark Scotland against other world countries.

Cultural Commission Review: The Cultural Commission is due to report its findings on its review of the cultural sector in Scotland, in summer 2005. Research may be required to inform decisions on some of the Commission's recommendations, including, possibly, issues around cultural standards and the feasibility of their implementation.

Suggestions

I reiterate here my support for Scottish Screens proposal to the Cultural Commission that Scotland needs a dedicated Culture Minister and further suggest:

- Following on from investment in infrastructure and the Executives Open Scotland initiative we should formalise a Cultural Network mapped over digital

- infrastructure with creative hubs manifested in Cultural Cinemas, Arts Centres, Media Access Projects and Community Centres.
- A digital story telling festival should be initiated similar to the 6 Cities Design Festival. Based around inclusivity and the fact that Everyone can tell a story this would be local activity based but accessible to all online.
 - Create a national film studio and distribution network focused on cultural content similar to the Scottish National Theatre model.
 - With respect to PACT and Ofcom recommendations and the ever closer 'digital switchover' in Scotland, we should lobby DCMS for 'transition funding' to properly exploit Public Service Broadcasting potential in a fully digital environment. (DCMS have recently hinted at £250,000 support to GMS for transition to a digital Gaelic channel)
 - Expand capital investment in a Digital Screen Network beyond the minimal Film Council Initiatives activity in Scotland.
 - Engage with UK initiatives eg: 'Open Source Academy' and the 'Digital Challenge' to more fully exploit potential for the future.
 - Ensure that Moving Image Education and Digital Media are expressly articulated within the second stage of the curriculum review.
 - A Digital Media Strategy within a Cultural Policy Framework
 - Place Culture at the heart of the Tourism, Culture and Sport Department of the Scottish Executive – perhaps change the name to CTS.

As stated these are my own notes and views and do not constitute the views of Scottish Screen. Words have been lifted directly from text sources, being Lev Manovich, the UK Digital Strategy, The Scottish Executive web site, Breakthru, Simon Yuill and my own Edinburgh Lecture.