Inventing the Future of the Arts: Seven Digital Trends that Present Challenges and

Opportunities for Success in the Cultural Sector

Brian Newman

S*ub-Genre* Consulting Group

ABSTRACT:

While predicting the future is difficult, it is worth analyzing current trends for possible

clues as to what factors may help sculpt the decades to come, and how these factors

may impact the cultural sector. This chapter will analyze seven trends that have the

potential to profoundly influence the future of our arts organizations. While many are

thought of as digital trends, they equally affect even the most unplugged of cultural

institutions. Arts organizations should be directly involved in addressing these trends, as

they will greatly shape the future of not just the arts, but of all culture.

BIO:

Brian Newman (Born 6-19-1971), New York, NY

Brian Newman is a consultant focusing on business development projects in the cultural

industries as well as on helping artists and organizations to distribute content and to

connect with audiences through innovative uses of new technology. Brian was most

recently CEO of the Tribeca Film Institute (TFI), and previously served as executive

director of Renew Media and IMAGE Film & Video Center. He held positions at the IFP

and the South Carolina Arts Commission, serves on the boards of Muse Film &

Television, the International Film Festival Seminars and on the editorial advisory board

for *Art Papers* magazine. For five years Brian was an officer of the board of

Grantmakers in Film & Electronic Media (GFEM).

Digital technology has been a disruptive force for many industries. Its effects on the business of music, print, and now film have been profound, decimating entire sectors of the media arts industry and altering the landscape for its production, dissemination, and enjoyment. In the past decade, established industry players in the media arts have made many mistakes, but arguably their gravest was in thinking that digital technology was just another new development that they could adapt to fit into their existing business models. Instead, digital technology has brought fundamental changes that continue to require a complete re-envisioning of business practices. Those in the arts who think that the changes wrought by digital technology will confine themselves to the media arts are sadly mistaken, because these are likely fundamental shifts in the cultural landscape that will dramatically change not just the arts, but all of society.

Arts organizations are not adequately addressing the profound technological shifts affecting our culture. Most arts organizations are being reactive and are trying to fit digital into their existing ways of operating, which mimics precisely those mistakes that led to crises in other industries. The arts sector must look strategically at the changes brought about by digital technology, as they portend serious challenges to the future of such organizations as we know them. Addressed properly, these challenges are equally opportunities.

While predicting the future has a notoriously low success rate, there are seven key challenges brought about by digital technology that will arguably have the greatest impact on the arts sector, and its leaders would do well to think broadly about how these factors will shape the future of the field. By recognizing these trends, the arts sector can

respond with new approaches and quite possibly help lead our broader society's reaction to the paradigmatic change that will likely be brought about by digital technology.

1. Downsized and Merged

As the economy continues to bring bad news to the arts sector, the field as a whole must contend with a new notion—that digital technology fundamentally changes business practices, often downsizing once large industries and favoring lean, start-up initiatives or those organizations that can quickly change with the times. For example, when Craig Newmark invented the online, largely free, classified advertisement site Craigslist, he upended the entire business model of the newspaper industry, supporting operations through paid classified ads, effectively downsizing an entire $1 billion sector to one $100-million company.[1] What does this trend towards leaner operations mean for established business practices in the arts? Arts institutions may be forced to downsize similarly to compete with upstart businesses and new business models.

It is likely that the combination of these new business models and the resultant decline in tax revenues from these shrinking sectors will greatly limit the ability of government to maintain minimum service levels, much less support the arts. Already, state governments in search of increased revenues are contemplating vast changes to the benefits of nonprofit status, and many foundations have had to curb support for such supposedly "non-essential" activities as arts and culture.

As government and foundation revenue shrinks, arts institutions will increasingly look to earned income, but fundamental shifts in consumer behavior make this a

challenging arena as well. Consumers have less overall spending power, but also have many more options for their cultural and entertainment experiences. These competing options are no longer just the theater across town, but also the many downloadable performances from across the world. As consumers increasingly find their content online, they expect to find yours there as well, watching your performance online instead of attending it live. While this itself can be a revenue stream, it is also one where consumers expectations are for free and/or cheaper access, meaning online profit margins will likely be lower than any reduction in overhead costs. As these stresses combine, the nonprofit arts sector will likely have to rethink business practices, and contend with radically different economics.

Unfortunately, it's not a stretch to say the nonprofit arts sector looks like a field of zombies—undead, potentially harmful shells of their former selves, haunting the landscape, unable to live or to die. Quite simply, funders, board members, and leaders in the arts need to take a hard look at reality and make some painful decisions. More organizations need to merge to save costs, end duplicative services, and achieve greater impact. Many more organizations need to be shut down entirely, having either served their mission well or having long ago abandoned any real hope of having a meaningful impact. These conversations aren't easy, but they need to be had on a field-wide level. Even those organizations that are healthy enough to survive will need to consider downsizing their costs and refocusing their energies as the dwindling support for the cultural sector is likely a permanent shift away from robust public, foundation, and individual financing of the arts.

A thinned-out and downsized nonprofit arts sector is probably inevitable and may actually bring greater good. Planned for properly, such downsizing can allow organizations to react more nimbly to change, reduce service duplication, and possibly have greater impact through targeted programs. Strategically downsized organizations will more readily make this transition and might create more sustainable arts businesses.

Mergers are often thought of as drastic measures to cut expenses or end duplicative services, but they can also be planned for to better prepare organizations to face new economic and cultural realities, fill strategic gaps, and lead to new programming and greater services. In fact, a downsized arts sector does not necessarily equal less artistic programming. As many arts administrators know, budget tightening can often help one to focus on mission and expand services and programming through new, creative solutions. Streamlining one's organization can also lead to entirely new paradigms that increase artistic production, taking advantage of the economics now afforded by digital technology, such as access to ever-cheaper modes of production.

Of course, downsized organizations will only become stronger, remain competitive, and possibly lead change through rigorous planning. Potential strategies for successful change might include: analysis of emerging audience trends and adjustment of programs to these new realities; elimination of outdated programs; assessment of organizational technology skills; identifying internal talent assets; harnessing the power of digital natives and shifting resources to staff development in these areas; leadership development; identifying points for strategic innovation; and a commitment of resources to developing new business models.

2. The Rise of For-Profit and *With*-Profit Endeavors

Today's combined economic and business practice turmoil also creates a perfect environment for strategic outside players to unseat established organizations. It's not that the established players in the music industry, for example, didn't see that change was coming due to digital technology. The changes brought about by digital technology are so disruptive precisely because in order to embrace the new paradigm, one must undercut an existing, often very profitable business model.[2]

For a company like Warner Brothers (or any other record company) to embrace digital downloads they had to abandon the then-cash-cow CD market. But the profit margins on CDs remained too strong for Warner Brothers to abandon them for the smaller profit margins of digital downloads—and so, smaller, upstart players entered the market that bigger companies couldn't embrace. Then a very large, but very strategic outside player, Apple, entered the sector and changed the entire business model for buying and selling music.

Likewise, it is difficult for established arts organizations to embrace change that might undercut their business models, but this leaves much room for others to enter the sector. One could argue that such a shift is already occurring today. For example, the amount of promotion, fundraising, sharing, career-building, and market-creation of such new online arts discovery services such as YouTube (sharing video), Flickr (sharing photos), Spotify (sharing music), Pandora (finding music), KickStarter (micro-donations from fans to artists) and Etsy (an online marketplace connecting craftspeople to consumers) alone, all of which started very small and outside the nonprofit arts, have

likely had more impact on the arts than any six nonprofit cultural organizations can claim in the last five years.

It isn't impossible to imagine such services being created, much differently, in the nonprofit arts sector. For example, if a film festival had thought broadly about the combination of cheap access to the means of production and distribution and the growing forces of participation and disintermediation, it could have created YouTube. The site might look somewhat different, offer more curatorial sidebars and probably have a less catchy name (nonprofit arts organizations can't seem to ever coin a cool name), but it arguably should have been possible. While YouTube has provided a great service for many filmmakers and media artists (along with many less exalted artists, such as cat videographers) one can imagine that a nonprofit arts organization might have also shaped such an online media site into a more rewarding platform for artists— and it's not too late to build on such for-profit innovations to better serve the arts.

There was a time in the arts world when small arts organizations contributed to this sense of innovation. Organizations such as Nexus Press in Atlanta served as incubators for cutting edge book artists regionally, and the Off-Off-Broadway theater scene acted much the same way, pushing the field forward, taking chances and launching many careers. Today, however, that sense of excitement and innovation is sorely lacking from the arts sector. This is a sad irony, because at one point the nonprofit arts world was more grass-roots, nimble, and entrepreneurial (Steppenwolf Theater started out as a small collective of artists, for example), but developed its current rigidity at least partly by imitating corporate models. Innovation, risk-taking, and flexibility have migrated back to the for-profit sector, and cool new ideas aren't brought

to fruition as nonprofits, but as Internet start-ups that capitalize on the access to funding and the risk-taking, free-for-all atmosphere of the new digital economy.

Similar innovations could be developed in the nonprofit arts sector today, but due to the risk averse, highly structured funding environment that has evolved in the nonprofit arts sector, it is more likely that several organizations will get funding from a Foundation to think about and strategically plan for the future of their field. While they workshop their ideas for the future, two people in a garage will probably out-think them in two weeks and launch the next big thing that further disrupts the ecology of the arts.

Building a culture of entrepreneurship in the sector will require fresh thinking and innovative approaches to funding and support that aren't readily apparent. Few nonprofits have unrestricted income with which to explore new, especially risky, programs and fewer still have enough general operating support to hire and pay the usually higher salary expectations of the skilled workers to build such new ideas. Most foundations won't fund a new nonprofit until it has been around for three years. They require grant proposals that take longer to write than most entrepreneurial business plans and they often discourage any risk-taking, preferring "tried and true" programs. In contrast, a sense of experimentation often, and importantly, without true strategic planning but rather a sense of "let's just try it because it's cool" is what works for most innovative companies and is what's missing (and actively discouraged) from within the nonprofit arts. Ironically, this is what many arts organizations expect from their artists—experimentation and risk—and artists seem to flourish given this freedom. Unless this sense of exploration is recaptured, most innovation will likely be led by the for-profit sector.

If neither non- nor for-profit models seem to work perfectly, perhaps the arts

sector should explore new ventures at the junction of the two, combining the assets of

the for-profit and nonprofit sectors to realize both financial and social profits. This new

space, perhaps called *with*-profit, as in social goals "with profit potential," promises a

rich field for the arts sector to explore. Such experiments could be undertaken by

existing or new nonprofits on their own, in partnerships with existing for-profit

organizations, or by creating new for-profit subsidiaries and/or affiliates of nonprofit arts

companies. With-profit endeavors could use nonprofit funding to accomplish that which

the market won't support, while for-profits would step in to capitalize on those items that

have commercial appeal. For example, perhaps nonprofit arts funding could be used to

seed the development of 12 new plays, with a commercial arm (or separate entity)

ready to step in and take the one project with the most promise to market. Of course,

this would need to include some remuneration to the nonprofit and would require some

clever legal thinking, but it could be applied to any number of art forms.

A with-profit partnership would allow a nonprofit to continue to serve its

underlying mission, and maintain its tax status, while providing a vehicle for exploration

of profit-making activities. For-profit partners (or divisions) could bring in investments,

explore more robust marketing and program development with other for-profit

companies and maintain an eye on the "double bottom line" of profits and mission. Such

alliances are not uncommon in the health and science sectors and should be

considered by arts organizations as well.[3]

With-profit collaborations have been explored by some arts institutions. The most

famous example might be the Public Theater in New York City, where daring nonprofit

productions became a laboratory for Broadway, at times with much success. I have personal experience with such alliances from my time as president and CEO of the Tribeca Film Institute. The Tribeca Film Festival was produced and organized by the for-profit company Tribeca Enterprises. The Institute, while founded simultaneously with the Film Festival, was established as an independent nonprofit with a separate governing board of directors and a similar, albeit nonprofit, mission. While the nonprofit benefitted from the exposure of the Tribeca Film Festival and even coincided many of its activities with the Festival, it ran other year-round programs that were wholly separate from the Festival and in some ways, surpassed it in scope.

3. Disintermediation—The Audience as Curator

Also known as the rise of the crowd, digital technology has disintermediated culture, and this profoundly changes the top-down systems of the arts. For quite some time, arts institutions have talked about making art accessible to the masses. What was often meant, however, was that art resided here in this museum, with a special aura and we, the experts, will educate you, the masses, about its importance so you can come here and experience more of it.

Today, this talk continues, and true, a certain populism can be found in the blockbuster shows of Impressionism or Tim Burton, but disintermediation isn't just about pleasing large crowds; it also means that audiences can gather around the long-tail of content. If audiences like obscure, niche works, they no longer have to wait for someone to bring it to them, but rather can pool themselves together online and form an audience for that art, often by connecting directly to the artist. If one isn't sure whether

their tastes are shared by others, they can now find out by starting a blog, advertising it on social networks, and building an audience for, say, European free-jazz pretty quickly. If no local institution is bringing this work to a particular town, the digitally networked townsfolk can build their own tour, bypassing traditional booking agents, performing arts networks, and other middle-men to bring the artist directly to them. The fans no longer need to wait for a review in *Artforum*, receive a blurb via newsletter from their local orchestra, or wait longingly for their regional theater to stage a certain production. They can speak directly to one another, follow the opinions of those they trust, sample video and audio of performances or exhibits (often taken by amateurs), and coalesce around the art that they like.

Utilizing digital technology, audiences can now connect globally and discover new art forms and artists they would never before have found. They can also seek out more racial, ethnic, political, and religious diversity when they don't see it reflected in their local arts organizations' programming (or staffing). Having gotten used to the idea of digital content being available on demand, anywhere on any device—immediately, consumers will begin to demand this disintermediation and immediacy from other art forms and live arts experiences as well.

Arts institutions need to embrace this disintermediation. This doesn't mean tearing down the walls and firing all the curators, but rather arts organizations should utilize the better aspects of this trend. Perhaps your theater company should maintain a wiki where audiences might suggest works they'd like to see. Museums might allow patrons to vote, rate, and tag online copies of exhibition pieces creating an alternate curation where as a user, one could trust the museum notes in the exhibition or those of

the 15 year-old kid from Omaha who just visited for the day and posted her own ratings and notes on her iPhone for others to see. True, many arts organizations have been experimenting with disintermediation and participation for some time (perhaps this is an ongoing experimentation for most), and many are having some success. That said, the field as a whole must contend with this phenomenon more directly and develop best practices because digital technology has compounded this expectation.[4]

Today's consumer expects that their content will be available on every platform simultaneously, watching their favorite film through Netflix, XBox, Amazon, iTunes on their cellphone, TV, or any other device. They don't care about the established systems for discovery and access, and this too means that arts organizations must adapt and will need to collaborate and share more readily.

An audience member often follows the artist, so perhaps the Brooklyn Academy of Music (BAM) should notify me when Grupo Corpo plays next in New York, even at a rival venue, not just when they next play BAM—and perhaps that venue would push their patrons back for another show. Perhaps subscriptions should be offered that allow me access not just to MoMA, but to multiple institutions, perhaps in multiple cities. Ticket selling systems of the future should likewise push content to me not just at my current location, but also to where I might be next. These systems should be "smart" enough to notify me of my favorite playwright's next show, or my favorite actor's new film. This sense of collaboration will be difficult because it challenges existing notions of competition and loyalty, but discovery of the arts is now disintermediated, and arts organizations that embrace these changes will thrive.

During my tenure at the Tribeca Film Institute, we attempted one such experiment within the web platform of *Reframe* (www.reframecollection.org). The project website was structured to help scholars and students find films for educational use. While we hired curators who created lists of the "best" films on certain subject matter, we also allowed any user to become a curator him- or herself. If a curator wanted to recommend a film that wasn't participating in the *Reframe* project, we would use an electronic interface to pull this content into the system, allowing juxtapositions that we as the organizers would never expect. While users appreciated this feature, many distributors were often perplexed at this crowd-sourced curation, as it went against established notions of audience consumption of media (namely, that there were different audiences for each sector, which seems anecdotally untrue). While this was one small experiment, it illustrates that audiences may help arts presenters establish new notions of value should they be given the opportunity.

4. "Talkin' *With* My Generation": The Rise of Participatory Culture

This sense of disintermediation has expanded into what is called participatory culture. Audiences can now easily participate actively in the art they consume, and expect to be able to do so. This is an historic return to the way art used to be practiced —by and for all. Ancient cultures valued communal art making and practice, with the arts integrated into community activity. Recent research by Lynn Connor has shown that in classical Athens, for example, most actors in plays were amateurs and audiences participated vigorously before, during, and after performances. Even prior to that, she notes, the idea of an artist didn't even exist, with craft workers who were citizen-artists

being prevalent in the Middle Ages.[5] For too long, however, art has been placed on a kind of altar—to become a painter, a musician, a dancer or a filmmaker one had to learn "the rules" and follow the canon. Sure, punk rock existed, but to make "fine art" music, such as classical music, one had to learn an almost secret language. One had to take dance lessons, learn ballet, and compete. One had to go to film school and spend a lot of money on equipment. Art was no longer something to be produced by everyone, but something that one had to aspire to learn perfectly. And because it was hard, art became something that was largely consumed.

From today's perspective one can see that the one-way street of art consumption was an historic aberration, and one society's good to toss. Audiences no longer want to just consume their art—they want to be involved, to engage in the conversation around art and creativity and perhaps participate in its production. People connect through social networking sites such as Meetup.com online to meet offline and discuss shared interests, talk about a book or a film, listen to music or to sit together and crochet. There are now "tweet-ups" where people use the short message service Twitter to tweet their friends for shared events; flash-mobs where people connect online to perform group events like gathering in New York City's Union Square Park and dancing collectively (and silently) to whatever is on their iPods; or one can use Foursquare (a location based check-in service) to connect with friends in cafes or galleries or discover a nearby "hot" venue from a geo-location. Others upload their films on the website Open Source Cinema so that audiences can download their content, remix the it, and upload their own new creations (remix culture in itself being an important trend to follow).

Technology facilitates the human need to connect, share, and participate—and this is great news for the arts.

In a 2005-2006 Knight Foundation study of its funding for symphony orchestras over the previous decade, the foundation learned that all of their initiatives to increase attendance at the symphony—things like subsidized tickets and better marketing—had been a failure.[6] They learned, however, that the single greatest predictor of attendance at orchestral performances was having previously played an instrument. People who'd had piano or other musical lessons, or dabbled in music at some point, felt a more visceral connection than those who hadn't, and they would therefore seek out a greater variety of musical experiences. Through digital technology and sharing culture, legions of kids now have access to entire recording studios for free, cheap cameras, and programs to teach them any instrument imaginable. These young digital consumers don't think of themselves as amateurs, but as creative beings, contributing to culture. If the Knight study is correct, then each of these individuals will feel a greater connection to the arts and likely explore more within their interests. In film, the YouTube mash-up creator may begin to seek out classic cinema, or avant-garde works because they now understand it better and feel a connection. They are participating with the arts, searching for a dialogue, and it is incumbent upon existing cultural institutions to tap into this energy and change how it operates to allow for a more participatory arts experience.

Organizations must address this shift in their programming and outreach and even in how they create and curate their shows. They will need to let the audience become more than just spectators. This doesn't mean that all arts experiences must be

participatory, as not all audiences desire the same levels of interaction, but rather that greater levels of interaction should be possible for those who increasingly expect such participation. While some arts organizations are beginning to experiment with programming that involves the audience, or that at least makes the experience more participatory, such as bringing the audience into rehearsals or having them add to a musical performance with their cellphones, the field as a whole should make every effort to make their experiences more participatory. The value in some of the most successful web businesses today, companies like Amazon, Craigslist, Google, and Wikipedia, derives from the participatory contributions of their users. Users of Amazon gain insight into prospective purchases from the reviews left by other consumers. This value accrues to Amazon, it becomes a more trust-worthy site, but comes from the participation of its users. Facebook, one of the fastest growing companies online today, builds almost all of its value from the participatory activities of its users. This new level of interactivity, sometimes referred to as web 2.0 culture, is growing and becoming more prevalent in the interactions of most people online.[7] Arts organizations would do well to follow the lead of such companies and incorporate more participation into their organizations, perhaps gaining more value by encouraging dialogue and audience contribution than they can offer on their own.

5. Communal Conversation Trumps Marketing

When people join a social network, they do so for a variety of reasons including connecting with colleagues, sharing information, or possibly to find friendship, romance, or work. If you glance at most arts organizations' websites, however, it appears that the

administrators think social networking is just about marketing. Themselves. Constantly. If an organization is event-based, one usually finds a flurry of postings just before and during the events it offers, but rarely afterwards—unless it's a tweet saying "hey, thanks for attending, see you next year." This couldn't be further from what audiences want, which is an ongoing dialogue and real sense of connection.

Arts organizations must participate in the building of online communities in a natural way or they will become, as many already have, just so much more noise in the Internet social sphere. This isn't easy for arts organizations, or for most artists and other people, because real dialogue is hard. In fact, this is precisely the area where one often learns that one's real queasiness around social media isn't technical—almost anyone of any age group can learn how to use social networks. What's hard is conversation, whether that's in the lobby or online. The entire architecture of most museums, theaters, and arts organizations seems intended to minimize the chance that a staff member could engage in even brief conversation with the public. The architecture of the Internet, however, requires true, engaged conversation.

The advent of computers has changed what consumers and audiences expect. People seem to no longer respond to one-way communication that doesn't value their input. No one expects to have a dialogue with their television because it is a one-way, static device. A computer connected to the Internet, however, is a two-way (or more) communication machine. Marketers are learning that they can't just broadcast a message and relentlessly market themselves. Rather, they must truly engage people online—being willing to listen as well as talk—or they will be ignored entirely.

Until arts organizations realize they must actually participate in a dialogue with their community, they can't create a proper presence online. While that dialogue will necessarily be different from one institution to another, reflecting different ideas of what constitutes dialogue, it must be genuine, ongoing, and it must have some compelling voice—be it from everyone on staff/commission or just the artistic director or performers. Arts organizations should also begin thinking about how this will evolve over time—likely becoming more participatory, more enriching, and more argumentative at the same time, and likely leading to entirely new art forms which could be co-created by those organizations who take the lead.

6. In a world of Free, the Future Lies in *Find*

In a digital world, a copy is just zeros and ones and thus—copies are free. Copies then become superabundant, easy to make and share and harder to track. This makes piracy of content much easier, but it also allows for the legal dissemination of content. Chris Anderson, an editor of *Wired*, has noted that digital technology has led to a culture where many items and experiences are increasingly available for free.[8] Many companies are finding that they can use free as one aspect of their business model, often through advertising and sponsorship support or through the use of free content to attract people to pay for an upgraded "freemium" version.

It is important to note that this does not mean that free itself is a business model—that wouldn't be sustainable, but rather that free access can be one part of a multi-tiered business strategy. Raise enough sponsorship and it could be mutually beneficial

to you, your audience, and Target to make museum entrance free one night a week (which is not a novel concept).

What would freemiums look like for nonprofit arts offerings? Perhaps a free membership that gets one access to early-bird discounts (that aren't as great as those from a paid membership), newsletters, blog postings, and other free content which encourage one to become more active and pay for a membership. Or perhaps it just means extending concepts such as free entrance but paid admission to special exhibitions. Free content might be viral video of last night's performance with a digital coupon at the end for discounted admission to an upcoming event, or maybe it's one free show a week. Regardless of what one thinks about the concept of free, it is clearly a trend, and as consumers get used to paying less and less for quality content it will undoubtedly impact what they are willing to pay as audience members and patrons of the arts.

Of course, at the end of the day, there truly is nothing for free. Someone pays to produce the content, or to host the video of the performance and deliver it over the Internet. Every arts administrator knows the costs of artistic production well, and a quick criticism of the free model is to point out that artists need to be paid. While this is true, perhaps there might be new models to be explored that take advantage of the economics of free. In fact, many artists have begun experimenting already, and some are finding success.

Zoe Keating, an avant-garde cellist, was able to join the top ranks of Twitter with more than 1.3 million followers, and can now ask her fans to donate money directly to her so she can make and record her music. Many give just to support her work, some

"pre-buy" a download, ensuring quick, often advanced access to her music.[9] Keating is now able to sustain a career, even though one can listen to all of her songs for free on her website and find all of them on pirate networks. Musicians like Jill Sobule and Josh Freese are building their careers not just by offering advanced downloads, but by giving additional gifts for larger donations. If a fan donated $10,000 to Jill Sobule's campaign for *Jill's Next Record* they could even join her in the studio and sing on her album. Similarly, drummer and songwriter Josh Freese offered anyone who gave him $500 to produce his work the option to visit him at home and share a steak dinner at the local Sizzler restaurant.

These artists aren't alone; thousands of others use online tools such as Kickstarter to go directly to their fans and raise money to make their work. Others have found that free music access increases their fan base, allowing them to make more money from live shows and appearances than from album sales. Or they make money from merchandise. The filmmakers behind the movie *The Cosmonaut* are on track to raise their €400,000 indie film, mainly by selling t-shirts, stickers, and novelty items from their website. Does everyone want a €3 pencil originally used by Russian cosmonauts? No, but many fans will donate €3 and keep the gift as a souvenir, and then tell their friends when the movie is released. Artists are moving (back again?) to a patronage model—but this time, one where their fans and audiences help fund their work. Not just through purchases, but through donations and other support to help create works of art. Arts organizations such as The Hyde Park Art Center in Chicago are experimenting with member commissioning of new work and the national service organization Meet the

Composer has established their entire organization on the idea that audiences can likewise commission new compositions.

Arts organizations would do well to participate in the free movement soon. Luckily, the answers to the dilemmas of free content seem to be very much in the favor of arts organizations. Digital has changed the nature of value. In the past, value came from scarcity—it was expensive to make a film, or to buy a Matisse—but in a world of ubiquitous copies, the audience is overwhelmed with choice. Attention becomes the scarce resource, and as the amount of content online multiplies daily, audiences increasingly need, and will pay for, someone or something to help them wade through the digital mountains of garbage to find what they actually want.

If the history of the Internet thus far has been defined by search, its future resides in find. Online, as in the offline world, audiences turn to a trusted source to help them find what they want. This means that guides, librarians, and curators are more important than ever before. Organizations must add value to this connection, so they aren't viewed as just another middle-man. This nicely dovetails with most arts organization's positions as a nexus of the art and the audience and as a curator helping audiences find the best work. This is an area where traditional arts organizations have historically excelled. Contemporary arts organizations who focus their energies on being curatorial in a more participatory, communally-minded way should likewise be poised to excel in the digital (even free) economy.

7. The New, New Media Literacy: Electracy

Digital technology has changed many things, but it has done more than give society nifty new gadgets and new ways to connect. Noted theorist Greg Ulmer has proposed that through digital technology civilization has shifted from orality to literacy to electracy—where all thought, processes, writing, storytelling, and business practices are based on or mediated by electronic, visual, motion media communication.[10] This is not media literacy, but rather a paradigmatic shift which the cultural sector should not just be aware of but should be leading, as the changes electracy will bring about may profoundly alter the world.

Linguist Walter Ong described the change from orality to literacy and how this altered society's perception of the world.[11] This paradigm shift changed the nature not just of communication, but of religion, art, politics, and other processes. Culture could now be written down and passed along, instead of repeated through folk-tales. People could worship their God directly, not just through the clergy. News could spread via print, altering the shape of nations. Detailed instructions could be put in a book and learned not through lengthy apprenticeship but through study. All the world's knowledge could be archived and stored in physical libraries. The very notion of who and what human beings are transformed as cultures became literate.

Likewise, humanness will change as populations shift from literate to electrate societies. Knowledge, religion, culture, and power will be altered in ways that can't yet be comprehended. The tensions this shift will bring are already visible, for example, in the debates among parents and teachers over the impact of gaming on children's literacy or when critics bemoan what is lost in the transition from print to e-book readers such as the Nook and the Kindle. The shift to electracy also threatens existing

structures and challenges ideas of ownership through copyright, the nature of much work, the value of many goods, and will likely influence widely accepted notions of currency. Electracy gives new powers both to rebellion and to state control. It alters the notion of communication and the nature of privacy. Of course moving towards electracy also affects what people create and how they interact with their culture. The full scope of these permutations are only now becoming apparent but will likely continue to manifest as society develops and responds to the next iteration of the evolution of digital technology.

Where this leads next is uncertain. While literacy shaped laws, education, religion, culture, and politics it was also shaped by these same forces. So too will electracy be altered by society's current beliefs, fears, and very often, by who is in power.

When decisions are being made about digital technology, decisions are also being made about the future of how society will think, conduct business, interact, make and enjoy art, and how individuals will behave as social beings. There is much danger that many of the possibilities of digital will be thwarted by incumbents who are threatened by the changes digital might bring. One sees this most clearly, thus far, in the battles over network neutrality, copyright, security, and privacy. These issues are important to arts leaders—because the decisions that take place today will likely affect the possible future(s) the cultural sector may experience tomorrow, as well as the legacy it will leave behind.

Conclusion—Imagination Necessary

Perhaps the greatest threat to the digital future is society's lack of imagination. What is needed most now is an ability to imagine what might come next, instead of trying to bend digital change to fit preconceived notions of the world. Herein lies the heart of why the arts sector must take the lead in these debates by experimenting with what's next in technology.

The arts enable us to imagine what's possible, connect with our core human traits, and express them creatively. They enable us to understand change and address fears. Yet the arts are largely absent from the conversation about the future at this time, standing on the sidelines adapting these changes to their current practices instead of leading the transformation. This is for the worse, because instead of a new era of possibilities we are in danger of a new era of sameness. If all we get from digital technology is a fancy new TV that can show 3-D movies, pull down an endless library of content and let us chat with our neighbor about which products to buy from the show we're watching, we have failed. We fail if we settle for just accessing every book ever made on the screen of our phone. Or for being able to navigate the Louvre with an iPhone application. These ideas are precisely what pass for visionary by those controlling the future of culture now.

The arts sector is well positioned to put forth innovations that harness the demand for participatory culture, for relationship and community building, and for connecting audiences more directly with artists. Such innovations can help people find the art and culture they desire and curate experiences that lead to discovery. They can help insure that democratic critical discourse remains an important facet of our cultural

experience. Unless the arts sector takes an active role in creating the future, a new era of digital sameness may be the best we get, and our society will be the poorer for it.

The changes brought by digital technology can be looked at as something scary —possibly endangering a way of life we know today. To run from these changes, or resist them, is pointless and will leave the future in the hands of others who will not likely share the cultural sector's vision for the importance of the arts to the civic sphere. Alternately, these changes can be viewed as liberating, full of promise, and possibly capable of improving our society. Computer theorist Alan Kay has said that the best way to predict the future is to invent it. The best way to shape that future is to be one of the inventors, and that's what's needed from the arts now. Arts leaders, of all generations, should embrace this spirit of innovation, take advantage of this opportunity to radically reinvent our sector and, quite possibly, improve society while we're at it.

NOTES:

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