



Wealth from creativity: Insights and strategies for the future of international cultural relations

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Abstract

Regardless of frontier, the creative community has begun to benefit financially from the democratisation of creative production and distribution opened up via the Internet, a place where planetary plurality and diversity is implicit. Artists are major ambassadors for their cultures operating in a collaborative environment that recognises the distinctive differences between cultures without threat to indigenous expression.

The cultural ecology may have changed but the response of government has been obstructive. Until the second Iraq war cultural diplomacy seemed to have replaced gunboat diplomacy and there was a growing movement to foster cultural relations in an environment being characterised as mutual. In parallel, at national level, governments were seeking to recognise the strong economic value of the cultural industries sector in the new globalised technology. This has now all been thrown into reverse gear by the practice of public diplomacy, a policy of unreformed imperialist hubris that seeks to influence policy in other nations by using domestic producers of intellectual, scientific, creative or economic content to promote selected values and so dominate the international relations agenda.

What if one were to integrate into the activities of international cultural relations the dynamic ways of working and thinking of the creative industries? A more beneficial model emerges if creators are given centre-stage and the values of the creative community applied to the management of international cultural relations. A series of insights borne of many years work in the creative industries could lead to a new set of strategies that would call the bluff of those currently seeking to promote the advantages of liberal democracy. For these strategies demonstrably uphold the rights of individuals to creative expression and to enrich their local economies. This does require the managers of international cultural relations to live more dangerously than at present and it is to them that this paper is addressed.

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1. Introduction

The following ideas have their origins in the day-to-day working environment of a busy international cultural relations office in London, UK. My time spent working for Québec, one of the most enlightened Western and First World governments in the cultural field, has been a process of assimilation, transformation and transmogrification of other people's good ideas.

On a visit to London in January 2004, the then Québec Minister of Culture, Mme Line Beauchamp, announced that we were now in the business of culture. The future of Québec's international cultural relations would no longer be primarily about seeking to spread its influence but the creation of wealth for creators and national economy alike. A healthy cultural economy would ensure all the necessary profile.

This new departure in the ministerial discourse on culture, which for the past 45 years had mainly been concerned with the reconstruction of Québécois identity both at home and abroad, signalled a shift from cultural diplomacy, which is about influence, to cultural commerce, which is about revenue and profit. Significantly this new vision jumped right over the emerging consensus of culture as a tool of public diplomacy, much championed by the UK Government and more recently implemented by Canada and, soon, Australia.

Artists want to earn a living from their art so that they may continue to produce new content and new expression. Much of this is a collaborative process, often involving international partners. What better way to pursue relations with other cultures than to harness this creativity and assist the creators to benefit themselves, their economy and the internationalisation of their culture in the process? What follows posits the outline of a changing methodology for international cultural relations in a fuzzy world. The futures described are actual strategies that have been set in motion by the happily disintegrating nature of cultural diplomacy, for the ecology of international cultural relations has undoubtedly changed and so too must the tools of the trade.

My observations are neither born of theory nor of academic research, but of the ideological analysis of praxis. Theories that are still half-formed, yet useful to my thesis, seem to have occurred spontaneously out of the daily work regime. Where I am aware of the source I have indicated this. Many may yet seem eerily familiar, as I doubt there is now an original idea left in this Wiki world. Such a non-academic approach has not been devoid however of either intellectual rigour or honesty.

2. Changes in the cultural ecology

In the twenty-first century, the digital revolution has democratised cultural production, distribution and consumption. Contrary to the bad press that globalisation often receives when used as a euphemism for rampant Americanisation of the planet, the phenomenon is actually helping to maintain a diverse set of culturally distinct identities in a globalised and technologically fast-moving world by producing an explosion of local expression and content. Culture is being defined by a wider set of characteristics and values as an essential quality of life, as the construction of global meaning through localised experience and as a tool of the national economy. National creativity is being harnessed and wealth creation has become a real possibility for a whole generation of creators, particularly in the newer economies.

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