

*It is the unexpected re-use of information which is the value added by the web.*

Tim Berners-Lee

Following the federal government's public consultations on the digital cultural strategy, and in light of the Canada Council's new program architecture and the creation of its Arts in a Digital World Fund (\$88.5 M over 4 years), the CQAM and the IMAA organized a day of discussion on the impact of digital tools and practices on our sector. Held on April 27, 2017, the event brought together media arts stakeholders from across Canada to reflect on the challenges and opportunities presented by digital media.

Numerous experts in the field, mainly from the independent arts community and deeply engaged with the digital shift, responded to the call. Together, we agreed on the key principles on which to base our practices and pondered the direction government cultural policy might take in the digital age. One recurring theme was the need to re-examine how we see and use the Internet, the better to leverage its potential for sharing and thus enable the innovative re-use of information. As prominent players in the digital community, it is up to us to act on the opportunities presented by the digital environment.

### **Defining digital literacy**

From the outset, digital literacy — defined as including but not limited to the Internet — emerged as a core principle. What emerged from our discussions was the notion of digital literacy as a multiplicity, a field encompassing numerous challenges rather than a unified whole. One such challenge is the technical aspect: the learning required to be able to use a computer and navigate the online environment. Without these basic tools, there is no access, period.

Digital literacy also presupposes an understanding of digital media, i.e. the ways in which information is produced, the better to take an informed and critical stance vis-à-vis today's proliferation of information. Digital intelligence, in turn, implies knowing how to deal with this surfeit to avoid information burnout and wasted time. If users are responsible for learning how to make the most of digital tools, designers in turn must come up with tools that promote intelligent use and prevent redundancy. Becoming digitally literate empowers the user to act on the information environment rather than passively submit to it. In our digital environment, both acquiring and transmitting the technical skills needed to intelligently process information are paramount.

In considering knowledge transfer, we came up with the notion of artistic literacy. Artists and arts organizations are responsible for making digital works more widely understood: what's at

play, what's underpinning them. The transmission of digital knowledge would enable more people to better understand digital creations and thus acquire the tools to confront, handle and make sense of the digital environment.

Furthermore, making sense of the digital environment is not just about developing technical skill or know-how; we do not operate in a strictly corporate sphere. It is also about learning to see and discern in order to make informed decisions. Here, we emphasize the cross-cutting nature of knowledge within the disciplines. Still, it must be remembered that while digital literacy can help deconstruct the dominant codes, it can also have the effect of inculcating or reproducing them. Our definition of digital literacy should therefore imply overcoming hegemonies, the ideologies of control and the bottom-line imperatives of profit-driven corporations. How can we use these media responsibly to connect with audiences directly via shared means?

### **Decentralized, open data as opposed to multiplying new proprietary platforms**

The burgeoning of online platforms today is a clear signal that the digital system has outgrown its earliest applications. Digital no longer has the same implications as when it was initially conceived some 20 years' previously. Our use of ICTs has changed vastly and along with it, the importance we give the online environment. More than ever, with content swamped in a rising sea of information, it is necessary to understand how and why Web pages are created, and for whom. Rather than allowing information to be endlessly duplicated, we must question the justification for creating new platforms and look at how we might instead decentralize data. A further consideration is this: if the Fund is to be used to develop major new infrastructures, then funding for their long-term operation must also be part of the equation.

### **Encourage, facilitate and promote the use of open-source software**

Open access to software source codes appears to us the best way to support innovation: emulation is intrinsic to progress. The digital environment affords unprecedented ways of working together and inspiring each other; why not leverage it to the full? In addition, by adopting a favourable stance toward free software, Canada would be in a position to determine how the digital environment should take shape in the coming years. Inspired by thinkers like Lawrence Lessig (Creative Commons), we might be better able to rethink creation in the era of dematerialization. Knowledge is far too precious a commodity to be entrapped in proprietary logic. Free cultures are those that remain open and use what already exists as a springboard to innovation, pooling knowledge to promote progress without distorting content.

### **Expanding digital beyond the sphere of communications**

Questions need to be addressed regarding the development of digital. It is our belief that the CCA should not limit the challenges affecting the digital realm to communications issues. While certainly central to the digital revolution, communication has already been exhaustively studied. More crucial, now, is the need to turn the focus toward good digital practices and reappropriating the surrounding technical infrastructures. The Fund should not serve solely to

develop communication channels further: it should also support initiatives that disseminate thoughtful digital practices and, overall, help change the way we see digital technology and techniques.

### **Transformation of organizations**

Interagency collaboration faces considerable obstacles, particularly when it comes to finding common ground across diverse disciplines (differences in vocabulary and/or operating modes) or economic sectors (differences in values and purposes). The lexicon needs to be reinvented across disciplinary boundaries. It would be useful, not just to produce a lexicon common to all disciplines, but also to develop tools for sharing it between fields of practice and knowledge, the better to ensure mutual understanding in all areas of culture as well as by civil servants and elected officials.

Furthermore, while industry partnerships can be beneficial, such models are often simplistic or superficial with regard to creation. Generally speaking, the Fund should benefit the artistic community rather than an army of external consultants. (One example of this is cultural infrastructure projects that benefit the construction industry more than the cultural sphere). Would it not be wiser to invest in increasing the capacity of the arts sector as opposed to its reliance on highly priced consultants?

It would also be smart to encourage constructive collaborations between existing organizations, eschewing any rationale promoting the “artist entrepreneur” — a notion that implies little need for the support of artists’ centres and other organizations. Artists must, in short, be equipped with their own robust and lasting means of production, dissemination and outreach.

The importance of developing an initiative that will anchor digital practice in an ethic of sharing must be emphasized. The dematerialization of digital information has resulted in unprecedented sharing on a global scale. This should be seen as an opportunity for working together to advance our practices and expertise.

### **Furthering the discussion on online content: getting out of the mindset of Internet dependency**

We need to break free of our Internet dependency. The lack of an online presence doesn’t mean that someone or something doesn’t exist. Indeed, in terms of “existence,” being online can be counterproductive: the current data overload all but obliterates visibility.

The fact is that direct human presence remains essential to the artistic experience, even in the case of the media arts. This underscores the need to promote the intelligent use of the Internet, a tool arguably better suited to promotion than distribution. Digital literacy should reflect this reality. Moreover, instead of multiplying “custom” or proprietary platforms, perhaps we should look into concrete ways of decentralizing content. The plethora of meaningless platforms hinders access to and the dissemination of information. For both users and content providers, the production of online content must therefore be given serious thought. Lastly, it must be reiterated that, if the Fund is to be used to develop new major infrastructures,

funding for their long-term operation must also be considered. What is the use of putting in place structures that are doomed to obsolescence?

To conclude, the challenges to 21st-century digital technologies must be tackled in depth if we are to develop the skills needed for an informed approach to artistic content. It is vital to put in place lasting solutions that will allow Canadian artists and audiences to intelligently navigate the digital shift. In this way, we can all work together to transmit the knowledge that will help artists and creators harness the full power of tomorrow's digital environment.



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