Access to new media neglected by European policy

Cathy Brickwood European politicians in the field of new media tend to concentrate on technological innovation, opportunities for employment and electronic commerce. In the cultural sector, the emphasis has so far been on exploiting Europe's cultural heritage for commercial gain. Citizenship requires policies that go beyond the borders of multimedia industry.

Evolution in the cultural sector
Digitalisation is changing the arts but also 'culture' in its broadest sense of 'the way in which people live'. In terms of the arts these changes encompass production, distribution and exhibition of content, affecting the relationship of the maker and the viewer/audience in the light of the more interactive nature of new technologies and the relatively open and low cost channels they offer for sampling, assembling one's own selection of media input and so on. Digital cinemas, for example, can open up new audiences for independent films, and making your own CD is cheaper than ever. New media affect the way in which architects work, offer new possibilities to live performers and artists.

Also to be considered are the changing roles of the artist or cultural producer, the end-user of culture, the role of museums and public spaces, definitions of what constitutes art, new

means of distribution, the hybridity of multimedia and the interdisciplinarity of these new developments. Access to the tools of cultural production becomes easier and cheaper, blurring distinctions between professional and amateur arts practitioners. New 'sampling' techniques question the uniqueness of individual artistic works, but are an inevitable outcome of the reproducibility of digital data. The integration of all messages in a common cognitive pattern (Castells 1996, 371) will result in the end of the distinction between audio-visual media, print media, as well as between high art and popular culture. In terms of the broader definition of culture as 'the way in which people live', the cultural effects of new media are huge and as yet largely unchartered. Culture is mediated and enacted through communication and therefore cultures become fundamentally transformed by and in turn transform the new technologies. Beyond the

cultural sector video-conferencing and improved access to databases improve communications and inexpensive and rapid access to information, largely through the Internet. The potential for education in terms of distance learning, for example, is huge. Real-time audio technology allows radio stations to broadcast globally, bypassing national political constraints on press freedom, for example the Belgrade-based radio station B92.

In theory, new media offer choice. Before I analyse the obstacles to this freedom of choice I will first look at the policy of the European Union regarding the new media and culture.

The European information society
The European Union (EU) takes pride in the fact that it is aiming to create an 'information society', as opposed to its American big brother, the 'Global Information Infrastructure'. The information society is not only about technology, the argument goes, but is committed to fostering social cohesion and protecting cultural pluralism. As Luc Soete, chairman of the High Level Group of Experts on the Information Society[1] explains, 'People do not have to adjust to the technologies, rather the technologies have to adjust to the people' (*Bulletin* 1996, 1). In July 1996 the European Commission published a Green Paper, *Living and Working in the Information Society: People First*.[2] Two groups were set up by the EU to examine the social aspects of the Information Society: the aforementioned High Level Group of Experts on Social and Societal Aspects of the Information Society and the Information Society Forum.[3]

The debate about the information society has tended to focus on technological developments and the perceived need to ensure Europe does not lag behind its international competitors, both in producing the infrastructure and services of information and communications

technologies (ICTS), and in the capability to exploit them. The European Commission has focused its policy on the regulatory implications of the convergence of the telecommunications, media and Information Technology sectors, the deregulation of the communications infrastructure, and encouraging industrial and commercial take up of ICTS, establishing international protocols for copyright and encryption to safeguard the future of electronic commerce, and planning for employment in the so-called 'post-industrialist' age, all with the aim of maintaining Europe's competitive position in the global economy.[4]

European history as content provider
The 'cultural dimension' of the information society is safeguarded at European Union institutional level by the Directorate General for Information, Communication and Culture (DGX). Since the 1980s cultural policy has focused on legal and economic areas such as the movement of cultural goods and copyright, the preservation of the cultural heritage, the translation of literary works and the instigation of European cities of culture, international festivals and exchange programmes for artists. Aside from these projects, cultural policy has concentrated on the audio-visual sector. In the new media age DGX continues to relate applications of new technologies to its existing priorities, such as new software for literary translation, new techniques for sound and lighting in theatres and new techniques for the conservation of the cultural heritage.[5]

Cultural heritage is the kingpin of the European Union's offensive on culture and new technology. The 'heritage industry' is the first operation to be identified by the European Commission because it meets a need for product on the part of the content providers.[6] There are profits to be made from selling CD-ROMS of

collections of famous museums, as well as from the cultural tourism industry.

Within the field of cultural heritage it is museums which play the leading role in the economic offensive. EUclid, a research project set up by DGX to examine the relationship between culture and new technologies, is surveying the extent to which culture is represented in current policies for the development of new technologies and the information society.[7] The chief focus is the use of multimedia in museums. At an international seminar on new technologies and culture organised by the province of Gelderland (21 November 1997), three of the four presentations of projects involved museums and heritage, including the CHAIN project, a cultural heritage and arts information network on the Internet in Norway and the use of Intelligent Guide Systems at cultural heritage sites run by the National Trust in the UK.

CHAIN was set up following a report by DGXXIII (Enterprise Policy, Distributive Trades, Tourism and Social Economy) on the potential of using new technologies in the cultural tourism sector. The aim was to set up a network for cultural workers to exchange information and develop new projects, so that for example, someone organising a theatre festival knows when he or she will competing for an audience with another festival on the same dates. The site is also used by private consumers to find out about cultural sites and events across Europe. CHAIN incorporates commercial services such as teleshopping, interactive cultural magazines and video on demand. Culture is becoming just one of a range of services provided by the European ICT industry. The motto is 'quantity first, quality later'.

The human face and job opportunities
The European Commission recognises that Europe is potentially stronger in content than

in infrastructure: of the eighty Info2000[8] projects funded, approximately half originated in the 'cultural sector', all in the field of cultural heritage. 'The introduction of advanced technologies to the cultural sector is vital for future development in the dissemination and application of information and communication technologies' (*First Report* 1996, 1). In the field of creating multimedia products based on the cultural heritage, research has been done by the EU into visual arts systems for archiving and the retrieval of images (VASARI[9]) and the methodology for arts reproduction in colour (MARC[10]). The aim in all these projects is to put Europe at the forefront of multimedia production by pooling resources and knowledge at a European level. Some of the cultural products funded by the IMPACT programme include a series of CD-ROMS and CD-IS with such titles as a 'Journey through 19th-century London', and 'The Gothic Cathedrals of Europe'. It would appear, then, that European culture is the sum of its mythical monocultural past, packaged for resale in multimedia form.

What of the people-centred information society? The Forum believes that the Information Society could spark a 'second Renaissance' in Europe, based on a 'fuller and more enriching exploitation of the continent's cultural and linguistic diversity' (*Bulletin*, 13) and that 'new technologies will afford everyone freer access to their own and other cultures' (*Bulletin*, 13). The aim of Info2000 is to stimulate demand for and use of multimedia content, and create favourable conditions for the development of the European multimedia content industry in the emerging European Information Society.[12] As well as contributing to the European 'content industry', then, 'culture' has another role to play in Europe, namely as a means of activating a sense of European citizenship (*First Report*, 1).

'Culture' is given the task of creating 'the human face' of society, to the extent that the terms 'culture' and 'society' appear to have become synonymous. This tendency is found in a number of recent policy documents at both European and global levels, and is the theme of UNESCO's ambitious report, *Our Creative Diversity* (UNESCO 1996). Protecting the 'cultural rights' of the world's citizens includes examining the effects of new media developments in a 'media-rich world', according to this report. *Our Creative Diversity* posits cultural development - as opposed to economic or environmental development - as the basis of future societies. The role played by new media in protecting cultural rights once again revolves around cultural heritage and the idea that access to information about and communication with myriad other cultures will automatically improve intercultural understanding.

Similarly, the Council of Europe's recent report, *In From the Margins*, calls for culture to be placed at the centre of European policy making and for culture to be recognised as a powerful force in social cohesion and European identity formation. And as the Commission's *First Report on the Consideration of Cultural Aspects in European Community Action* says: 'Culture must contribute to European citizenship, to personal and human development, to economic and social cohesion, to employment prospects, to eliminating exclusion and to enriching the quality of life in Europe' (*First Report* 1996, 1).

As well as providing the European Union's human face, then, 'culture' has the added task of improving social cohesion and economic prosperity in the information society. According to a recent Commission document on cultural aspects of European integration, cultural activities are an important source of employment opportunities that must be

exploited. The 'social aspects of culture', according to this report, are the creation of job opportunities in the cultural heritage sector, and the application of 'culture' as a means of self-expression for marginal social groups.

Obstacles to access
As I pointed out above, in theory, new media offer choice. The obstacles to this freedom of choice, however, are the lack of access and training, and media concentration. The European Commission leaves the project of building the information society largely to the private sector, consisting of large media groups. In terms of media ownership, new technology and the European Single Market have created a situation in which economies of scale and scope have encouraged vertical integration and media concentration (Schlesinger and Doyle 1995). The interests of the European media industry, it is argued, are best served by the deregulation of national media ownership and the bolstering of the European industry in relation to competition from outside Europe. But is the chief goal of protectionism the preservation of marginal cultures or the preservation of European industry? Cultural imperatives have been defended by the European Union most notably during the 1993 negotiations for the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade. The basis of this cultural protectionism is a perceived need to defend Europe's cultural diversity. Whilst heritage is bankable, diversity is an obstacle to market penetration.[13] Cultural diversity is a potential goldmine for the content industry but forms a stumbling block for cultural integration.

The convergence of media operations means that telecommunications conglomerates will be the leading content providers as well as producers of hardware. To what extent will linguistic minorities be catered for by expensive dubbing or subtitling and will the re-hashing of

existing formats not just offer the user/viewer more of the same? Much will depend on the future of the public service broadcasting model whose remit did include catering to a broad audience as well as specialised interests, and on the issue of subsidiarity of Member States on cultural matters.

There is increasing evidence that the globalisation that is seen to characterise the 'Information Age' brings about more uneven development at regional level. According to research carried out for the STAR (Special Telecommunication Action for Regions) programme of the European Commission, advanced communications technologies display a bias for core regions both in the concentration of infrastructure within them and in the uptake and utilisation of available networks and services.[14]

A regulatory framework would help ensure against the domination of the content industry by large conglomerates such as Microsoft. If Europe's linguistic diversity is to be safeguarded, more should be invested in projects such as a multilingual web browser. If we take a definition of cultural diversity based on differences of gender, religious belief, age and so on, much more research needs to be carried out into the 'users' of new technologies and applications which could benefit the widest possible range of the population. So far, most research in the field of applications has focused on fields such as health care and transport. The new media business is focusing on entertainment, whereas people may be more interested in information services or distance learning, remote care for the older population and cheap forms of one-to-one or one-to-many communication' (Schlesinger and Doyle 1995, 39).

Does the arrival of new media mean the death knell of mass media due to the lack of a system

of common codes and beliefs? Is the aim then to produce 'culture-neutral' information interfaces for a new global generation to which cultural difference (in its broadest sense including age, gender and race) is irrelevant? The result could be the new media variant of the cinematic 'Europudding' - the bland European co-production that tries to please any audience with a costume drama set in an age when European nations still liked to consider themselves at the centre of the universe.

Rather than searching for a common European past, we should be supporting makers and critics of new media art and other innovators in the new media industry to provide new ways of looking at this past as well as visions for the future. 'One of the strengths of digital data is precisely its aptitude for integration into an infinite variety of works, conveying multiple interpretations and visions' (Norman 1998, 15). New media technologies provide minority cultures with a voice to communicate across geographical barriers, sidestepping the information and communication filters that exist in traditional media. The provision of access to these channels, as well as bandwidth and training in the use of new media technologies for all sectors of society should therefore be a priority of information society policy.

Bottom-up approach
The European Commission apparently does not see the wider implications of new media technologies for culture. The Council of Europe, which has traditionally focused on culture and education rather than economic and industrial development, has a more progressive view. It has established a Project Group on New Technologies: Cultural Co-operation and Communication within its Cultural Policy and Action Division. The aim of the Group is to analyse the impact of the new technologies on

culture in the areas of democratic access to culture, democratisation and decentralisation, cultural identity and language questions. The Group looks for ways of 'replacing a passive approach in which new technologies have an impact on culture by a positive, active approach in which culture has an impact on the new technologies'.[15] A conference organised by the group in Prague in 1996 called for European Charter of Cultural Rights, including the right to access to new media. The Council of Europe adopts a bottom-up approach, consulting grassroots organisations working in the field of 'new media culture'.

One such organisation is the Virtueel Platform, a conglomerate of new media culture organisations in the Netherlands including the Netherlands Design Institute, the Society for Old and New Media and V2 (see Virtueel Platform 1996) all of which played a role in drawing up the Amsterdam Agenda (see *Agenda* 1996). Some of the key points of the Amsterdam Agenda include proposals for financial incentives be given for industry and scientific research institutes to co-operate with cultural organisations; research into good practice and funding of those individuals and organisations seen to be following and developing good practice, and a call for investment in people and content as well as machines and infrastructure - the human face at last?

The Amsterdam Agenda calls for a partnership between media culture practitioners, industry and government and suggests that policy makers base their decisions on existing good practice. The idea is that the benefits of such competence will not only be felt by society as a whole in terms of cultural innovation, but also by industry, who will gain from the knowledge of artists who can come up with new forms of interface. There is a call for the provision of both structural funding as well as short-term project based funding to

suit the nature of the projects that are currently proving successful. It also displays a preference for specialisation and centres of excellence connected by networks, as opposed to large-scale, centralised, 'multimedia centres'.

The message of the Amsterdam Agenda is that 'culture has to be put back in the Information Society: Culture should be upgraded for the 'new media age'. This means not only acknowledging the role of artists - or 'new media practitioners' - in innovation but also recognising the changing nature of the participants in 'new media culture' who are themselves practitioners in a medium characterised by interactivity.

Citizenship and new media
Regulation is needed not only at the level of infrastructure but also of applications and content of information and communications. At European level as well as national level the conflicting interests of industrial and cultural policy could be addressed by inter-departmental bodies. The global tendency, however, appears to be in the opposite direction. This is one of the reasons that the ICT sector is being shaped by industrial and economic policy and therefore it is these interests that determine the development of new electronic culture.

Culture is not merely an application sector of the European multimedia industry. However, if decisions are to be made by media and telecommunications conglomerates acting on a global scale, is there still a place for policy and control at all? Is regulation viable for a medium with a history of self-regulation such as the Internet? One could argue that the advent of new media technologies renders protectionism obsolete and undesirable. One of the key issues in this debate is that of access and education. It may be only those with access to the Internet

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and other media of reception and production, and those who have been trained to use them, who have time to use them, and who speak the language of new media that will benefit from the advantages offered by ICTS.

I would argue that policy should concentrate on ensuring cultural pluralism, access to information, education in the use of new technologies for end-users, alongside investment in research and development, to ensure that the widest possible range of Europe's citizens not only have access to new means of communication, but also to the means of shaping it.

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Notes

1. The High Level Group of Experts on Social and Societal Aspects of the Information Society was set up in May 1995 to look into the impact of the Information Society on employment, work organisation, regional cohesion, education and training, health care and the labour market. It later added the fields of 'social cohesion and quality of life', culture, media and democracy.
2. There is a wealth of reports and directives in this field, including a *White Paper* in 1993 and the 1994 *Bangemann Report*.
3. The Information Society Forum, set up in July 1995 by DGXiii, examines the impact of the Information Society on the economy and employment, social and democratic values in the virtual community, public services, the 'cultural dimension' and the future of the media infrastructure.
4. For details of the actions of DGXIII (Telecommunications, Information Industry and Innovation) (http://www2.echo.lu/dg13eti.html).
5. These existing programmes include Ariane, Raphael and Kaleidoscope.
6. Some of the projects established by the EU in the field of new technologies and cultural heritage include the EMN (European Museums Network) and RAMA (Remote Access to Museum Archives), both part of the RACE programme; AQUARELLE and MAGNETS (Museums and Galleries New Technologies Study), part of the TAPS programme (Telematics Applications).
7. EUclid. Culture and New Technologies. Research for DGX, European Commission. Email: euclid_liverpool@compuserve.com.
8. 'The central theme of Info2000 is the development of a European information content industry capable of competing on a global scale and able to satisfy the needs of Europe's enterprises and citizens for information content leading, on the one hand to economic growth, competitiveness and employment, and on the other hand, to individual professional, social and cultural development'. For further information: (http://www2.echo.lu/info2000/en/history.html).
9. VASARI is the Visual Arts for Archiving and the Retrieval of Images project
10. MARC is the Methodology for Arts Reproduction in Colour project.
11. Action plan for the creation of a market for information services and the strengthening of the competitiveness of the European information services industry – precursor of the Info2000 programme.
12. INFO2000, *4-Year Work Programme*, 1996-1999, p. 17.
13. *INFO2000*, *Council Decision*, p. 9, (http://www2.echo.lu/info2000/en/info_cns.html).
14. Gillespie, A.E. et al. (1984) 'The Effects of New Information Technology on the Less Favoured Regions of the Community'. In: *Studies Collection*, *Regional Policy Series*, No. 23. Brussels: Commission of the European Communities.
15. CC-Cult 96-28, 'Guidelines'.