



# From Control to Collaboration: the importance of the cultural sector in a changing world

Position statement from the Culture North East Board  
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Whilst new creative contexts provide new public platforms for cultural content, new technologies are enabling audiences to cherry-pick the content they wish to consume. These new developments are changing cultural production and giving audiences access to an unprecedented range of content. The public is, in turn, becoming more accustomed to being part of the creative process and is demanding more individualised and personalised services.<sup>i</sup>

Changes of this nature may begin to cause an uneasiness amongst the publicly funded cultural sector about its role in a world where methods of cultural production and consumption transform more quickly than policy can react. With increased public access to dissemination methods, there is less control over quality of content and, though there is more access to more quality items, this exists alongside content of questionable quality. Considering the editorial role the publicly funded cultural sector has played in relation to quality and content in the past, how will this role be changing in the future?

Debates rage about the decline of the traditional “gate-keeping” role of experts<sup>ii</sup>. The delineation between the “people who know” and “people who must be told” and people who produce and people who consume<sup>iii</sup> is being problematised. Cultural products created in someone’s bedroom can have a global audience with limited or no professional editorial input. New markets are springing up in both virtual and real worlds, competing for people’s attention, money and leisure time. This results in a panoply of choice that people need to negotiate.

Though it is generally agreed that having choice is better than not having choice, it does not seem to follow that more choice is better. Barry Schwartz suggests that a point can be reached where, with more choice, people are worse off.<sup>iv</sup> His recommendation is to restrict options to facilitate choice. This causes a fundamental problem for a sector to which variety is inherent. Museums and galleries, for example, house collections consisting of hundreds or thousands of objects, theatres and music venues host an array of performances ranging across tastes and interests, and historic landscapes are palimpsests of human activity with architecture and archaeology from different eras.

Traditionally it has been the role of the cultural professional (curators, publishers etc) to help the public navigate this conundrum of choice. However, pressures of accountability and accessibility are demanding the sector offers both an increasingly personalised and populist offer<sup>v</sup>, compounding the conundrum. As choice becomes more pervasive, navigation tools that utilise data on trends and previous activity have a tendency to create a closed circuit of cultural consumption, with the risk of narrowing people’s experience and leaving them open to manipulation. In this world the role of the cultural professional is becoming more, not less, important. It is imperative however that this role is appropriate and responsive to this new climate of cultural consumption.

Pat Kane suggests that “by producing or consuming culture, individuals face the information age with renewed vitality and imagination”<sup>vi</sup>. With this in mind the cultural sector has an important role to play in helping people to develop navigation skills and

look beyond automatically generated recommendations and explore new possibilities. Jones and Wright suggest that “by helping the public to engage with cultural and creative production we can help them develop the capacities with which they can identify value, meaning of the cultural and creative forms they encounter”<sup>vii</sup>.

On one hand professionals have to learn to develop a new value system that takes into account the interests of the public. On the other hand the sector will guide the public to develop new skills to navigate the “conundrum of choice”. Collaborative projects like <http://www.steve.museum/> use the knowledge and expertise of professionals with the aesthetic preferences and lexicon of the public to explore new ways of presenting and consuming art-works.

Professionals need to be working with the public to develop new sets of values and new methods of appreciation in their practice. The knowledge and understanding of cultural professionals shouldn't be negated by populist fashion, but rather, can be elaborated and developed in collaboration with the public.

The cultural sector is ideally placed to help people to develop the skills to explore challenging as well as simple pleasures – as Tessa Jowell put it – cultural engagement as well as entertainment<sup>viii</sup>. Professional expertise is valued by the public and professional approval gives credence and weight to public opinion. There is an appetite for cultural product and, as Philip Larkin wrote, there will always be someone surprising a hunger in themselves to be more serious<sup>ix</sup>. This is more than an exercise in audience development via populist appeal, such collaboration is a common journey to explore a wealth of cultural expression and its enduring relevance to a population.

As John Craig suggests “New professional legitimacy and culture will not be generated by setting professionals free to do as they please or by enslaving them to government targets and consumer demand. New rationales for professional action will grow from practical collaboration between professionals and members of the public themselves.”<sup>x</sup>

***In North East England, a challenging socio-economic climate, combined with low rates of cultural participation and technological take-up, make the need to respond to these changes even more urgent. In using scenario planning to identify the challenges of a new cultural age, the CNE Board has made a commitment to work with its partners towards a sustainable and valuable role for the publicly funded cultural sector in the region.***

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<sup>i</sup> Jones, Samuel and Shelagh Wright, [Making Good Work: Realising the values of young people's creative production](#), (London, Demos, 2007) p. 30

<sup>ii</sup> Holden, J [Logging On: Culture, participation and the web](#) (London, Demos, 2006)

<sup>iii</sup> Jones, Samuel and Shelagh Wright, [Making Good Work: Realising the values of young people's creative production](#), (London, Demos, 2007)

<sup>iv</sup> Schwarts, Barry, *The Paradox of Choice*, 2005

<sup>v</sup> Fresh Minds, [Culture On Demand: Ways to engage a broader audience](#), DCMS 2007

<sup>vi</sup> P Kane, [The Play Ethic: A manifesto for a different way of living](#) (London: Macmillan, 2005)

<sup>vii</sup> Jones, Samuel and Shelagh Wright, [Making Good Work: Realising the values of young people's creative production](#), (London, Demos, 2007) p. 37

<sup>viii</sup> Jowell, Tessa, [Government and the Value of Culture](#) (London, DCMS, 2004)

<sup>ix</sup> Larkin, Philip 'Church Going' in P Larkin *The Less Deceived* (Hessle, Marvell Press, 1955)

<sup>x</sup> Craig, J. 'Production values: building shared autonomy' in J Craig (ed) [Production Values: Futures for Professionalism](#) (London, DEMOS, 2006)