

# **The creative use of online social media to increase public engagement and participation in the professional arts through collaborative involvement in creative practice.**

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## **Introduction**

The success of online social media has been unprecedented, allowing millions of users to upload photos, share links and videos as well as personal information about themselves and their lifestyle preferences. Since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, online social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube and Flickr have become integral to our daily lives. In June 2009 the final 'Digital Britain' report was published by the UK Government, highlighting the importance of understanding, appreciating and planning for the new Digital World in which such technologies are prevalent<sup>i</sup>. In our creative content industries the report contests, the transition to digital technologies is overturning old business models<sup>ii</sup> and, I would suggest, creative models also. These new technologies have resulted in new social behaviours, which are being reflected in artistic practice. The important question is no longer whether the use of these tools will spread and reshape arts practice, but how they will do so.

Online social networking has revolutionised the way we interact and participate in society<sup>iii</sup>. Communications technology has developed from a one-to one model (one sender to one receiver, for example the communications media such as the telephone), to a one-to-many model (one sender to many receivers, for example broadcast media such as the television) and now to a many-to-many model enabled by the new communications technologies such as the Internet and mobile telephones.<sup>iv</sup> Working together, and then sharing that work has become easier, enabled by these new technologies. Social media has shifted old models of computer-based interaction and the social tools of Web 2.0 offer to be 'powerful platforms for cooperation, collaboration and creativity'<sup>v</sup>. This developing technological infrastructure not only allows people to access digital content relatively cheaply and simply, but also makes it simpler to distribute and share that work. As Clay Shirky comments in *Here Comes Everybody*, communications tools become socially interesting once they have become technologically boring<sup>vi</sup>. Whilst the invention of online social media tools themselves might not have had a direct impact on the nature of collaborative artistic practice, changes may happen when the social tools are no longer novel but are an integral part of people's daily lives.

Web 2.0 technologies have led to an explosion in the amount of User Generated Content, which Lev Manovich describes as having unleashed a new media environment<sup>vii</sup>, replacing the mass consumption of commercial culture with mass production of cultural objects<sup>viii</sup>. In *Grown Up Digital* Don Tapscott states that in the UK, 90% of the Net Generation (the first generation to grow up in the digital world) add or change things online on a regular basis<sup>ix</sup>. The technologies of Web 2.0 have enabled millions of people to move from being passive consumers of online digital

content, to being creators of digital content. Many of the traditional barriers to creative activity (for example time, training and equipment) are breaking down, making the experience of being creative available to more people. New tools of production and distribution are making the distinctions between producer and consumer, professional and amateur, less clear. In Alison Oddey and Christine White's *Modes of Spectating*, Gregory Sporton reflects how, as these distinctions break down, we are presented with new challenges for creative practice<sup>x</sup>.

In *Throwing Sheep in the Boardroom*, Matthew Fraser and Soumitra Dutta describe how in the new century, power has shifted from "top down vertical forms of coercion to horizontal systems of cooperation and collaboration"<sup>xi</sup>. Similarly, Tapscott refers to the Net Generation as "the collaboration and relationship generation"<sup>xii</sup>, bringing collaboration to the workplace, marketplace and social spaces<sup>xiii</sup>. For the Net Generation, the Internet is no longer another information repository but is somewhere for sharing and collaboration<sup>xiv</sup>. The Arts Council England's publication 'Digital opportunities research programme: findings from phase 1' states that 65% of adults in the UK now have home access to the Internet<sup>xv</sup>. As large-scale coordination is now achievable at a low cost (both in terms of time and money), the barriers to cooperation and collective action have also fallen, making it easier for people to take part in group activities online. Through online social media, artists can harness this public desire to cooperate and collaborate to engage the public in projects and events both through raising awareness of specific artists or projects and through enabling and encouraging creative participation in these projects.

This paper aims to explore questions about how the use of social online tools may impact on creative practice both in terms of the artist and/or arts organisations and their potential audience, the general public, by exploring three main points; how online social media can be used to increase public engagement and participation in professional arts projects, how online social media can be used to create and develop collaborative creative content and the potential of collaborative involvement in creative practice.

### **Online social media as a tool to increase public engagement in professional arts projects**

The vast majority of English adults have little or no encounters with professional arts practice. The 2008 Arts Council England report "From indifference to enthusiasm: patterns of arts attendance in England" established that 84% of the English population fall into the 'Little if anything' or the 'Now and then' types of arts attendees<sup>xvi</sup>. These types of leisure activity, the report states, are regarded as irrelevant and inaccessible to the majority of the population<sup>xvii</sup> and the report goes on to state that engagement with arts activities will only develop with a two-fold approach; reducing both the practical and psychological barriers to attendance<sup>xviii</sup> to bringing arts into people's everyday lives and finding new ways to develop a sense of public ownership of the arts<sup>xix</sup>.

The research report 'Consuming digital arts' focused on exploring the understanding of and engagement with arts in the digital arena amongst the general public in the UK<sup>xx</sup>. Published in April 2009, it ascertained that nearly everyone is engaged with art in the digital space in some way (for example watching film or listening to music online). Whilst the public are engaging with online arts content their type of usage differs depending of their existing levels of enthusiasm for the arts, including those who are limited to accessing information about offline events, those who access information but may also use online resources to learn more about specific work and those who do both of the above, but are also receptive to experiencing artworks and performances online<sup>xxi</sup>. The Arts Council report 'The digital world: a review of the evidence', published in 2009, stated that 35% of Internet users had viewed a venue website, 18% of Internet users had visited a museum or gallery website but only 1% had viewed or downloaded a performance online.<sup>xxii</sup>

In the 2008 review 'Supporting Excellence in the Arts' by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the author Sir Brian McMaster reflected that digital technologies offer 'extraordinary opportunities' to communicate with audiences and by doing so to increase their engagement in the arts<sup>xxiii</sup>. Harnessing the potential of Web 2.0 technologies (including social networking sites, Wikis and collaborative tagging) he continues, is central to enabling risk and innovation that should enable 'unprecedented interaction with audience... and provide radical new opportunities to deepen their cultural experiences'<sup>xxiv</sup>. Similarly, the Arts Council England report 'The Digital World: a review of the evidence', states that digital technologies enable arts organisations to connect with audiences in new ways, increasing and developing both participation and engagement<sup>xxv</sup>.

Tapscott identifies that 70% of the Net Generation like to feel part of a knowledgeable and exclusive group and want to work with companies to improve goods and services. Reflecting this, arts companies and individual artists are using online social media as another mechanism through which to communicate with their public. The 2009 report 'Arts Council England – Digital Content Snapshot' provided a detailed mapping of online presences maintained by Arts Council England's Regularly Funded Organisations (RFOs)<sup>xxvi</sup>. The report established that RFOs are actively using social networks as a marketing tool, using predominantly Facebook, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr. 56% of RFOs have a profile on a social network and 25% have profiles on more than one social network. The report states that Theatre, Dance and Music are most likely to have profiles on more than one social media network, at 68%, 66% and 65% respectively.

The report describes how different arts organisations use different social media tools depending on the relevance of the medium for their particular need and focus. MySpace and Facebook are utilized as general communication tools, providing basic information about the organisation and related events (through postings on Recent News, The Wall and Discussion Board) and sometimes displaying photographs. Further usage is dependent on the specific type of organisation – a theatre company for example may post videos of work. Some organisations (examples given in the

report include the Britten Sinfonia and South East Dance) use applications to send messages to members, whilst others use applications that allow them to add discographies, audio players and slide shows.

The report establishes that 15% of RFOs have an official YouTube channel, with many who don't still using the tool to embed video into their Facebook profile. YouTube is used mostly by performance-based organisations, with 28% of Dance RFOs and 20% of Music RFOs having a channel. However, non performance-based arts organisations also use YouTube to engage with their audience – the report cites Derby Quad, a visual arts organisation that utilizes YouTube to distribute artwork and The New Writing Partnership that utilizes YouTube to share videos of workshops and talks given by writers. 7% of RFOs use Flickr, used mostly by Dance and Visual Arts organisations and only 29 of the 869 RFOs maintain a Twitter profile. Music, Theatre and Dance organisations, the report ascertains, have the most active profiles in terms of dialogue with audiences.

### **Online social media as a tool to increase public participation in (professional) arts projects**

In *The Art of Participation*, Robert Atkins suggests that online participation in mass media is now no more complicated than having access to a 'modern-equipped computer'<sup>xxvii</sup>, Manovich commenting that the professional art world no longer has 'exclusive license to creativity and innovation'<sup>xxviii</sup>. The report 'The digital world: a review of the evidence', reported on people's participatory activity in online creativity, stating that in 2007/8 10% of English adults had created art on a computer and 2% had made films or videos. Downloading music was the most popular audiovisual activity carried out on the Internet in 2008. 25% of people uploaded content that they had created themselves, including text, images and videos<sup>xxix</sup>. The research report "Consuming digital arts" however, reported that the creation of and participation in digital arts is considered by the general public as a specialist activity, commenting that there was little desire amongst the general public to take part in such activities, 'On the whole, people prefer to experience the arts as spectators rather than creators'<sup>xxx</sup>. The report though, did pick out a number of benefits of online engagement with the arts that are particularly relevant to participation issues – the accessible nature of online content for those with transport and finance limitations as well as those with mobility issues, the opportunity to trial specific arts projects or events before committing and the enjoyable nature of the experience which can be had in the relaxed environment of the home at a time convenient to the audience<sup>xxxi</sup>.

There are some successful examples of arts organisations encouraging audiences to participate online using social media. The report 'Digital Content Snapshot' reflected that the best content deemed valuable to society provided by the RFOs is an indication of the potential of the Internet for engaging audiences in participative ways. Resonance FM for example, hosts a discussion forum where listeners respond to the radio content and as part of the education pages on the Philharmonia website, users are able to sequence and mix music.

The report also highlights a number of examples from non-RFO organisations. As part of the photography exhibition 'Street and Studio', the Tate gallery used social media as a creative tool, inviting the public to contribute their own photos on a related theme to Flickr, of which some were selected to be shown at the exhibition, and later published. The 'Learning to Love You More' collaborative arts project harnessed the power of the Internet to enable people to both engage with and participate arts practice – over 8000 people participated in the project, prior to its ending in May 2009. As part of the project participants were set creative tasks via simple instructions (for example 'Make and encouraging banner' and 'Photograph a scar and write about it') and then asked to submit documentation of their creative product online, either as photographs, audio or video. These were then published on the project site, exhibited at 'live' exhibitions as well as in screenings, broadcasts and books.

The publication 'Digital opportunities research programme – findings from phase 1' found that the best art websites are those that exploit the potential of the web for engaging the public with art in participative ways, though it also acknowledged that more research is required to fully understand the resources and support necessary for such online participation to happen:

'... while they may not define it as 'arts', many people are exploring their own creativity and appreciating the creativity of others online, whether downloading music or watching videos on YouTube. In the future it may be possible to tap into this appetite, finding ways to make audiences wider as well as deeper.'<sup>xxxii</sup>

There seems to be some discrepancy between people participating in creative Web 2.0 activities and those who consider themselves as participating in the digital arts. The report "Consuming digital arts" states that participation in the digital arts is considered by the general public as a specialist activity. Although people upload and share photos, this is not necessarily regarded by them as art and the initial drive to do so was not artistic<sup>xxxiii</sup>. In *Born Digital*, John Palfrey and Urs Gasser make an important distinction between the 'creation' of digital content and the process of 'creativity', which they reflect as having more qualitative connotations. Making a Facebook page, they write, is an act of creation, but the content is not necessarily creative<sup>xxxiv</sup>. Similarly, art can be found on YouTube, but not all YouTube videos could be considered artistic. The Arts Council publication 'Digital opportunities research programme: findings from phase 1', suggested that the general public prefer their arts content to have been selected by an 'expert', especially to help them navigate art content online.

The 'Consuming digital arts' report concludes that there are few signs that active participation in artistic creation will increase in the future and the report found no evidence that digital opportunities will get more young people involved in art creation:

'Creating art is seen as a calling... artists will be artists no matter what their means, and those who don't consider themselves artistic are unlikely to be swayed by new media or methods'<sup>xxxv</sup>.

However, Gregory Sporton, in *Modes of Spectating* calls for a redefinition of how to be creative and what creativity looks like in the new context of the Internet<sup>xxxvi</sup>. The technology, Sporton comments, '...can offer new forms of creative practice and in particular those forms will depend on the collaboration of the web community to produce them'<sup>xxxvii</sup>. An understanding of these new types of creative activity, he reflects, require new ways of thinking about cultural production<sup>xxxviii</sup>.

The distinction between what is considered artistic and what is not is also evident in Arts Council England's list of what constitutes arts participation. In the Taking Part survey for example (a large-scale national survey of cultural participation), a list of what is and what is not considered as arts participation is provided, but it raises interesting questions relating to what constitutes an arts activity. The list includes dance not for fitness (but excludes dance for fitness), includes playing an instrument for pleasure (but excludes reading for pleasure), includes photography as an artistic activity (but excludes holiday photographs). Watching a play in a theatre qualifies as an arts attendance, but watching a film in a cinema doesn't<sup>xxxix</sup>. Is it any wonder the public are confused about what constitutes a creative or artistic activity and whether or not they are 'arty' enough to qualify? However, in 'From indifference to enthusiasm' the Arts Council acknowledges that they need to increase their understanding of how the arts sit in relation to people's everyday lives, for example to what extent those not engaging with formal activities are 'experiencing challenging, enriching arts in alternative forms, for instance through participatory activity?'<sup>xl</sup>.

### **Online social media as a tool to create and develop collaborative creative content.**

For Sporton, the use of Web 2.0 technologies shifts creative practice from the individual to the 'dynamic interplay' between communities of users<sup>xli</sup>. In his book *We-Think*, Charles Leadbeater reflects how whilst creativity has often been an essentially collaborative activity, the web provides new ways to organise and develop this creative work, on a previously unimaginable scale<sup>xlii</sup>.

Online social media can support this process by facilitating collaboration between artists, and perhaps, other contributors or collaborators. Facebook for example, enables collaborative teams to create an online studio where collaborators can meet to share and develop ideas without having to physically meet. Not only does Facebook allow collaborators to meet independent of space, but also independent of time. Collaborators are able contribute whenever they can from wherever they are, providing they have Internet access. A search of collaborative creative groups utilizing Facebook reflects this use of the social tool. 'Muse It - Creative Collaboration' is a Facebook group set up to explore creative collaboration, whose description comments:

'Join us if you're looking for new ways to share your work with other artists, get differing points of view, or even if you just want a little affirmation. Please feel free to post and comment...'<sup>xliii</sup>

Facebook can offer an online studio space open 24 hours a day where members can drop in and see work, share ideas with each other, leave video clips and pictures, play music, ask questions and chat. In its ability to 'host' and share a variety of media types, Facebook can support collaboration between artists in different disciplines. Not only does it support discussion between artists, it also allows artists to share their work in a range of ways; on the Wall (for example sharing of potential project ideas, hyperlinks to films, artist's blogs and websites and commission information), in specific Discussion Topics (for example poems, lyrics and links to music and film clips posted by creators and commented on by other group members), through Links (for example to MySpace pages and artist websites in order to promote work and events), Photos (for example sharing visual art work) and Video (for example sharing film work, showreels and advice and tutorials). Group members can add content in whatever format they feel is most suitable to share their work and are able to discuss it in the same forum. This enhances and supports communication between artists working in different disciplines as it offers an independent, non discipline-specific environment to share a range of work in a range of different ways so each artists can choose the most appropriate method.

Online social media tools have the potential to be used as an effective environment to create and develop collaborative creative content as well as a platform where work can be shared, commented on and subsequently developed. Facebook, for example, is used by many artists as a place to share and develop work. Falling into different types of use, some of these groups are more informal, created to link artists (for example the Facebook Group Creative Collaboration that describes itself as '... a group for easy access to a bunch of people that share the same interests and that might be helpful to get in contact with sometime in the future.'<sup>xliv</sup> and the Facebook Group Creative Artists, formed 'to link visual artists, graphic designers, illustrators, photographers, fine artists, etc. For collaboration, industry help, insights, and work related stuff.'<sup>xlv</sup> These groups have a number of purposes – self-promotion, search for collaborators or the provision of critical feedback. Other groups, whilst informal, are set up with the main purpose of sharing work, for example the Facebook Group MUSE it – Creative Collaboration, who ask, 'Please feel free to post and comment on lyrics, musical compositions, dance choreography, graphic arts, short stories or any other complete or incomplete creative works.' Most of the work shared in the group is lyrics or poetry, though film and music are also shared. Other Facebook Groups, for example Collaboration Project Los Angeles, differ. This group is a real physical group who meet on a monthly basis to, 'bring people together to exchange thoughts, bounce ideas around, organise projects and network with others'<sup>xlvi</sup>, but who use Facebook as an online dimension to their physical meetings.

Some groups are using Facebook as a place to create collaborative artistic work, for example the Facebook Group Art Collaboration whose description outlines the collaborative nature of the group:

'The general idea \*member 1\* creates a file with an unfinished drawing, then posts a small gif up. \*member 2\* decides they want to work on modifying version 1 comp, so they get the original file from \*member 1\* , makes modifications, and posts revisions. And so on...'<sup>xlvi</sup>

### **The potential of collaborative involvement in creative practice**

To date, the creative uses of online social media to encourage engagement and participation in creative practice have been split mostly down amateur/professional lines. Whilst informal amateur groups form online groups to share and develop work or to meet other collaborators, the majority of professional artists and organisations use online social media in a more formal manner, to share information about their work online. However, online social tools offer more than merely providing alternative ways for artists and arts organisations to promote their work with a larger audience. The collaborative tools provided by online social networking sites, as used by the more informal or amateur groups included in this paper, could offer a model for a new ways for artists and organisations to build creative relationships with the public, enabling access to, engagement with and participation in professional arts practice through their active involvement in the creative process.

In the Arts Council England Taking Part survey briefing paper No. 3, 'Exploring audience overlap', the link between arts participation and arts attendance is made, showing a strong connection between participation in an activity and a desire to engage with a similar activity performed by someone else<sup>xlvi</sup>. For example, 60% of those who wrote music also attended a 'other' live music event in the past 12 months as compared with 24% of all adults who took part in the survey, 70% of those who took part in drama activities attended a drama performance in the past 12 months as compared with 23% of all adults who took part in the survey and 53% of those who participated in photographic activities also visited an art or photography exhibition in the last 12 months as compared with 22% of all adults who took part in the survey. It may be that through enabling participation in arts activities and projects through social media tools, we could re-engage the public with the arts. Palfrey and Gasser describe how a participatory cyberspace enables participants not only to create but also to enjoy expressive work, reshape their cultural understanding through their own digital creativity<sup>xli</sup>. In the publication 'Cultural Institutions and Web 2.0', authors Michael Middleton and Julie Lee reflect how organisations that focus on the display of physical objects have found that the relationship between object and observer changes when the observer is able to contribute information about the object, encouraging and developing conversation around the object!. Atkins asserts, "If art is to continue to matter, artists must not only provide alternative ways of participating, but also of cultivating critical perspectives that ensure the possibility of individual and collective engagement..."<sup>li</sup>.

Whilst arts organisations and artists have allowed the audience to interact with some creative content this has, in the most part, been restricted to interacting with content provided by the artist or organisation themselves. Enabling participants to contribute in the production of cultural goods on their own terms is something altogether different. I would like to propose the development of a working model where artists and arts organisations take the characteristics and idiosyncrasies of Web 2.0 as used on a daily basis by the general public and use them to create new forms and processes that harness the webs participative features in order to increase engagement and participation in their creative practice.

Over the next year I will be undertaking a number of small research projects exploring the potential of online social media to create and develop collaborative artistic content and developing new methodologies in relation to how online social media could be used to increase public engagement and participation in professional arts projects and events through collaborative creation. Through this research I hope to establish a working model for creative collaboration utilising existing online social tools where participants, both professional and amateur, can develop creative work together that is both informal and structured. The research will not involve the creation of new technologies, but rather a new application of existing Web 2.0 technologies. Through existing online social media sites, participants will be able to input ideas and creative 'products' to a collaborative project, where these ideas will be drawn together to create a piece of collaborative creative work produced using the contributions and suggestions from online participants. This use of existing technologies is central to the potential success of the research, as it is important that participants are presented with familiar technology to be used in a new way rather than having to learn new technologies before they can participate, lowering the barriers to participation. The report 'Consuming digital arts', found that the internet-based digital art was problematic for the general public as the traditional indicators of an artistic experience (for example picture frame, display cabinet, theatre) do not apply:

'The internet in particular is not an established platform for the arts, so people have to assess themselves whether they think the content they view/listen to is intended as art. This is a cause of anxiety for many people, because the intention of online content is often unclear, and they worry about looking at 'the wrong things' or interpreting them in 'the wrong way'<sup>lii</sup>.

When using social media as a creative platform away from official arts organisations or events, there seems to be little reticence to creative participation on behalf of the general public, as is evident from the huge upsurge in User Generated Content. As Leadbeater ascertains in *We-Think*, the key to encouraging participation is harnessing the participants' self-interest for 'mutually beneficial ends'<sup>liii</sup>. Nicholas Carr, in *The Big Switch* mirrors this belief, commenting that in the same way as undertaking hobbies, people contribute to social media sites - because they enjoy it, they like creating things, expressing their opinions, sharing their work with others and being part of a group project<sup>liv</sup>.

I would suggest that the general public may be more likely to become engaged in professional arts activities if instead of being asked to 'come and see what we've been doing', they are invited to 'come and see what we can do together', increasing ownership and relevance for the audience or participants. One example of this is The YouTube Symphony Orchestra<sup>iv</sup>, a partnership project between YouTube and the London Symphony Orchestra to create the world's first collaborative orchestra. Professional and amateur musicians were invited to submit video performances of parts of a new composition by composer Tan Dun, which were chosen both by a specialist panel and members of the YouTube community.

There is still a role for the professional artist in this approach, however. In order to increase engagement through online participation, artists and public must find a way to work creatively together online, where individual contributions are organised so that, as Leadbeater suggests, they 'connect and grow' through mechanism that permits collaboration. He concludes that the trick '...will be to find the right ways to combine professional and amateur, open and collaborative ways of working with more traditional and closed approaches'<sup>vi</sup>.

As I reflected at the beginning of this paper, the important question is no longer *whether* the use of online social media tools will spread and reshape arts practice, but *how* they will do so.

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