The Potential of the Global Cultural Industries

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David James, Subject Leader, Digital Arts, University of Worcester, UK

The intention of this paper is to evaluate the potential of the world media environment in which we operate. If we are to exploit this potential effectively, we need to consider, first, the problems that corporate control might present to cultural development and a global shared prosperity, secondly, how we might tap into the reserves of the immense investment in the cultural industries, thirdly, the importance of the individual in this corporate world as a generator of creative ideas and as a world communicator and, finally, the importance of higher education in shaping graduates who will contribute to this developmental process.

Writing in the 7th century BC, the Chinese philosopher, Lao Tsu, defined the concept of what he called soft power. Whether Lao Tsu existed as an individual, or as a group of scholars, his teaching instigated the Tao philosophy, one aspect of which evaluates personal character, inner strength, or moral integrity.[1] At the recent International Conference on Soft Power and Public Diplomacy held at the prestigious Tsinghua University of China, the Ambassador of Pakistan, Masood Khan, said, "What is soft power? We know that hard power is represented by the military and economic might of a nation; soft power stems from values, cultures, and institutions."

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[1] de Bary, W.T., Chan, W.T., Watson, B. (1964) *Sources of Chinese Tradition*. New York: Columbia University Press.

We hardly need reminding that, as new media practitioners and teachers, we have access to methods of communication that empower us beyond the scope of our individual imaginations. The proximity and intimacy of the computer screen act as a partition that separates us from the millions of potential recipients of our message: the unseen audience behind the curtain. Whether our messages are intended for benefit or for harm, the potency of their effect is potentially profound through the power of the new media technologies. If we are to promote human endeavour, international harmony, cultural enrichment and economic prosperity that is equally divided among the nations and citizens of the world, then we need to observe the principles of soft power and preserve the democracy of expression that the cultural industries represent.

Before we examine the immense possibilities for cultural enrichment, international communication and economic growth that the cultural industries can serve, we need to review the risks, financial inequalities and cultural imbalance that powerful and wide-ranging mass communication carries. With such awareness of the corporate and political world in which we operate, we can find opportunities for the communication of creative expression, the exploration of business opportunities and societal enrichment within the cultural industries. Manipulated by large, profit-driven corporations or by governments, such a tool can be a dangerous weapon. In his article, *The Hidden Power of the Media*, the commentator John Pilger states that technology seems to have given us everything except truth.[2] He makes the distinction between an information society – which is what we prefer to believe – and a media society, in which there may appear to be saturation information but, in reality, it is information that is repetitive, controlled and, above all, safe. Unaccountable power, says Pilger, is

[2] Pilger, J. (September 1996) *The Hidden Power of the Media*, Issue 200 of Socialist Review

the enemy of truth. In the corporate arena, as new media practitioners, we must be continuously mindful of acting as the conduits of this power.

Corporate and political wealth might be generated with the aid of developing technology but the destination of this wealth, where it resides, and the use to which it is put, is a matter of deep concern to those of us, as citizens of a volatile world, in the new media. In 2006, Anthony Shorrocks, director of the Research Institute at the United Nations University, in New York, led a study of world wealth distribution. An analysis of the statistics revealed that the richest 1% of adults in the world own 40% of the planet's wealth, or that 10% of the world's population own 85% of its economic assets.[3] An earlier United Nations Development Programme released a landmark report in 1996, in which it noted that the wealth of the world's 358 billionaires now exceeds the annual incomes of nearly 2.3 billion people: half the population on earth.[4] So, where were the conduits of mass information on the release of this disturbing fact? Just one example: in the United Kingdom, on the day this report was published, the Independent Television new programme, *News at Te*n, the principal source of information for millions of people in Britain, uttered not a word about it. The main news item concerned Princess Diana suffering from depression.

This example of sifting of information might represent a trivial fact but it is significant of the power of the mass media. World communication, if it is to survive as a viable means of sustaining cultural wealth, must be synonymous with debate. This word 'debate' is favoured as a justification for channels of mass communication in corporate ownership, but we must consider the

[3] Shorrocks, A. (2006) Development Report for the United Nations, United Nations University, New York
[4] United Nations: World Development Report for 1996

potential narrowness of debate political and economic term. As consumers of information, when we turn on the television or the radio, or pick up a newspaper, do we consider all the news we do not see and do not read? This is news that, by its very nature, does not conform to the corporate or political message and, therefore, is excluded. Indeed, as Pilger again asserts, the most powerful form of censorship is, as ever, not by repression but simply by omission.

However, this apparently intransigent corporate control is part of a changing landscape of power and cultural manipulation in the new media, and the mere fact of its mutability on a very large scale offers opportunity to those who can see the potential of change in a rapidly shifting share of activity in the media arenas. It is a constantly changing structure that is replicated across the technologically developed world of mass communication, as corporations merge, and then divide. If we are to assess the potential for cultural enhancement, profitability and ethical responsibility in this changing landscape of world new media, we need to understand the negative factors of control and profit-driven ethical standards in order to identify the advantages to those who practice within it, and the harnessing of the new media industries – television, film, radio, the internet, animation, photography, journalism and design – for the benefit of nations and societies in the continuing process of media globalization.

If we look to a United Nations report, that of 1999,[5] we see a reference the observation that globalization is not new, but that the era of globalization, driven by competitive global markets, was in danger of outpacing the governance of markets and the repercussions on people. That was the developing picture ten years ago. Characterized by what the report terms shrinking space,

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[5] United Nations (1999) Human Development Report 1999: *Globalization with a Human Face*

shrinking time and disappearing borders, globalization now, however, has swung open the door to opportunities, the potential of new media cooperation from Europe and the United States across the world to the emerging major players in the new media industries in China and India, and breakthroughs in communications technologies and biotechnology, if directed for the needs of people, can bring advances for all of humankind. But, without control, and either self-regulation or responsible governmental legislation, markets can fall victim to the profit motive over that of cultural and economic benefit and squeeze the non-market activities so vital for human development. Commentators in the new media report on the issues continually: monetary constraints constrain the provision of social services. Deadline constraints reduce the supply and quality of caring labour, and incentive constraints harm the environment. Globalization, and the increasing flow of digital information, is also increasing human insecurity as the spread of global crime, disease and financial volatility appear to outpace actions to tackle them.

Despite the apparent control of the media by giant corporations, there are many opportunities for profitable production. Stable publisher-contractors, such as BSkyB and ITV in Britain, ensure a source of revenue for smaller operators to produce programming on a commissioned basis. The most successful producers include All3Media, that has an annual turnover of £241.6m (2,653m China yuan). The winner of *Televisual*'s survey last year, IMG Media - that owns *Robin Hood* producer, Tiger Aspect, and *The Diary of Anne Frank* producer, Darlow Smithson – has a UK turnover of £221.7m (2,435m China yuan).[6] As the total turnover of UK independent production companies taking part in the broadcast journal, Televisual, survey was £1.9bn (2,0845 China yuan) in 2009, up from

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[6] Conlan, T. (22.08.09), *All3Media named top UK independent producer*, London, *The Guardian.*

£1.5bn last year, this is hardly a scenario of production impoverishment in the UK: it represents an industry that is thriving, successful and able to participate in international export markets and serves as a model for developing economies for investment in production houses. Again, we can replicate this scenario in other technologically developed countries.

Even within the state-owned broadcasting networks in Britain and the developed world, smaller, independent companies can find lucrative contracts, even though the state-owned corporations have extremely competent in-house production centres. The BBC produces award-winning series such as the cult crime investigation series, *Waking the Dead*, as part of an export enterprise, though its in-house Drama Division. However, it also is required, as a condition of its charter, to commission 25% of its broadcasting quota from independent producers, who might not necessarily be based in the UK. In accordance with the Television Without Frontiers Directive, the BBC is also required to ensure that the majority of its output is European and that at least 10% is produced by European independents. This cross-frontier production arena enlarges still further the opportunities for producers in different countries to find commissions and has the added benefit of a cross-cultural exchange of ideas, production methods, financing and distribution. It is not only the production companies that find opportunities in the changing broadcast landscape, but also the facility houses that serve them. These supplementary operations to the main production, such as 4:2:2 in Bristol and Manchester, and The Moving Picture Company, in London, provide expertise in editing, motion graphics and special effects, with substantial monetary rewards for those

successful in their pitch. For example, the budget for the motion graphics for the present *BBC News* title sequence was £550,000.[7]

As a result of this international production pattern, as broadcasters, designers and academics, we can more easily identify issues that are common to cultural development across the world, issues that, first, enhance the cross-fertilisation of ideas and, secondly, preserve that which is unique to each sector of cultural definition. The Internet, obviously now the most common means of communication, is only 20 years old, the outcome of a project based on the concept of hypertext, to facilitate sharing and updating information among researchers, by the British scientist, Sir Timothy Berners-Lee. In that time to the present, the worldwide web has grown at an astonishing rate. In his speech at the annual conference of the National Advertisers Association, Eric Schmidt, Chief Executive Officer of Google, said that, from the data recorded by the search engine, at that specific moment, the Internet was made up of five million terabytes.[8] 5,120,000,000 gigabytes: we can hardly imagine how many pen drives that would represent.

We have, therefore, a method of communication that is equal in historical and cultural significance to an event in China, some 1,500 years before the present: although Gutenberg's movable type printing press, of about 1450 AD, is often cited as the single greatest invention for world civilization, it was the Chinese, in the Tang (618-906 AD) dynasty who invented printing. Not only were ideas disseminated rapidly, and in great quantity, but also the discussion, analysis and reaction to those ideas formed turbulent debate that brought about the foundations of the European Renaissance, and investigation of human experience through science, learning and

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[7] BBC Report (15.04.2008), *Rebrand for BBC's news programmes*

[8] Plesu, A. (Ed.) (October 2008), *How Big is the Internet?* in *Internet Life*, SoftNews Inc.

logic. A similar picture, although a more gradual process, emerged in China from the Han period and progressed some 400 years before the use of movable printing type in the West.

In this precedent, as originators and as users, we have the benefit of hindsight in the use, and effect, of tools of mass communication. The Internet is obviously the most accessible. In January of this year, the China Internet Network Information Center reported that the number of Internet users in China rose by nearly 42 percent on the previous year, to 298 million by the end of 2008. The Internet penetration rate in China has risen to 22.6 percent, slightly higher than the world's average of 21.9 percent, thus establishing the country's position as the world's largest Internet population. As a related benefit, the commercial value of the Internet has doubled, with .cn name registrations rising by 50.8% from 2007.[9] Compare this with Britain, a smaller country, in which Internet users in 2009 stand at 48,755,000, representing 79.8% of the population, a rise in only nine years from 15,400,000, or 26.2% of the population.[10]

These are the means of communication at our disposal, and the economic foundations that enable them to function. But this raises the question of how we use our glittering new toys. It is a truism to state that it is through digital media that most concepts are now communicated in a rapidly developing world. When he received the coveted *Family of Man* Award in 1964, the pioneering American journalist, Edward J. Murrow observed, "The newest computer can merely compound, at speed, the oldest problem in the relations between human beings, and in the end the communicator will be confronted with the old problem, of what to say and how to say it."[11] Murrow also foresaw the importance of our creative intelligence to

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[9] CNNIC (11.06.09) *23rd Statistical Report on the Internet Development in China*

[10] Nielsen Online and http://www.internetworldstats.com/eu/uk.htm, accessed 02.10.09

[11] Kendrick, A. (1969) *Prime Time*, Little, Brown; 1st edition.

drive the technology that communicates it, and his words might serve as our keynote today: "Just once in a while let us exalt the importance of ideas and information."[12] This world is a global society that is increasingly demanding originality over technology. In the 21st century, the primary currency in both the commercial and the creative arenas is ideas, not the technology that communicates them. The main dynamics are now creative thought, cultural exchange, stable economies and professional knowledge, served by ever more sophisticated means of digital realization.

In an article that interrogates our relationship with the technological environment, the essayist and scholar, Paul Saffo, asserts that, as it has always been with technological revolutions, the present danger is that we will be extinguished by the success of our electronic inventions. The process of technological dominance might create more subtle and insidious forms of servitude than that perceived by the workers who destroyed the machines that would replace their livelihoods in the 18th and 19th centuries in Europe.[13] Saffo discusses the shift from the mind as information storage to the mind as information processor as we no longer rely on memory alone for the preservation of information. In assigning the responsibility of information preservation to digital storage, we might empty our minds of the very material that is the seed of originality. If we are aware of this, however, we can utilize the freedom from the drudgery of mere recall that the digital environment bestows upon us. The word "original" means a derivation from a single event or entity and this concept was reinforced in the mechanical age of informational reproduction, the evolution of the printing press. The digital environment, however, with the insight of postmodernist definitions,

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[12] Murrow, E.R., (15.10.1958) Speech to the Radio and Television News Directors Association (RTNDA) convention in Chicago.

[13] Saffo, P. (1994), *The Place of Originality in the Information Age*, American Institute of Graphic Arts, Journal of Graphic Design, 1994 Vol. 12, No. 1

denies an original and transforms ideas. Saffo suggests that we will rediscover a fact from the preindustrial world: origin is not a point but a continuum, and the process of originality is much more linked than we imagine. Within the digital systems of infinite recall is a network of immense unity, of deeply interconnected relationships. In this new world, originality is going to be recognized as an additive and transformative process, with multiple paths and forks along the way, as new and old divide and recombine in infinite intriguing complexity. And this new understanding will lead us to realize that creativity and originality in the cultural industries are much stranger and scarcer than we ever assumed, and much more precious than ever before.[14]

This interrelationship is a vertical one, delving wells in the ancestry of ideas, but, with the advantage of instant digital transfer across world sites, we can now reap the benefits of an addtional lateral communication network, instantly assimilating cultural elements, transforming cultural concepts but, at the same time, storing the origins for future reference and preservation. Such a process requires management but is it accumulative and disregards geographical and linguistic boundaries. It signifies the definition of the postmodern condition, in terms of its contextual submergence, its multi-authorial method of realisation in electronic code, its predatory importation of fragmented alien texts, and its function as currency – the currency of ideas, not money – in the post-industrial market. One consequence of these characteristics for us, as digital practitioners, is a denial of the heroic presence of the single work, in traditional materials: the work's concrete existence is limited to a formulation of magnetised particles on tape or disk, which can be realigned instantly. Add to this the imprint of the author being overlaid with technological processes, the absence of an 'original'

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[14] Ibid.

work, and the access route back to the original idea modified by the collective input of several minds. All of these lie in the postmodernist domain of identity and offer the potential for contribution to the process from practitioners on a global scale.

Digital practice within the cultural industries depends upon this cooperative interdependency in a continuous state of flux. Early truly digital work, such as my *Wales at Six* opening sequence for ITV Wales, 1985, highlighted for the first time the implications for the media practitioner of the emerging postmodernist nature: where was the author? As art director, my storyboard concept was interpreted by Chris Fynes, the 3D animation programmer at Crown Videographics in London[15] who relied on contributory ideas from the software designers at Primagraphics in the USA, to prepare the finished sequence which, in turn, could be reproduced endlessly from the original computer file: a discourse of possibilities that was, in turn, interpreted by Amanda Alexandra, the music composer. This small example is a fragment of history, the beginning of the multi-authorial digital process, and the interrelationships were within the narrow confines of close geographical and cultural proximity. Over 20 years later, we now must recognize, more than ever, the potential of international cooperation in the production process, of which the Director-General of UNESCO, Koïchiro Matsuura, stated: "Film and video production are shining examples of how cultural industries – as vehicles of identity, values and meanings – can open the door (not only) to dialogue and understanding between peoples, but also to economic growth and development. This conviction underpins the UNESCO Convention on Cultural Diversity."[16] Such a process is becoming increasingly worldwide, not simply owned, either economically or culturally, by the traditional production centres in

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[15] Merritt, D. (1987) *Television Graphics*, Trefoil Publications
16 Matsuura, K. (05.10.09) Report: *Nollywood rivals Bollywood in film/video production*. UNESCO Institute for Statistics, Montreal, Canada.

one geographical sector of the world. In 2006, the United States had been overtaken by India, who produced 1,091 feature-length films, to America's 485. Nigeria made 872 major films, and China was, by then, already in fifth place, with 330 productions.[17]

Finally, we must consider the implications of education in the life-blood of our cultural industries, the graduates who enter the arena from our universities and colleges. As teachers and practitioners, we shape their aspirations, their cultural positioning, and their ability to manipulate the new technologies. In so doing, we transfer to them the responsibilities that accompany this process. Ten years ago, the media and informational commentators, Junnarkar and Brown (1997), assessed the multi-skilled use of technology that graduates from the world media courses must confront and utilise. These were, first, terms of mechanisms to facilitate knowledge creation, secondly, the information sources that organizational decision-makers use and, thirdly, sense-making activities to support innovation.[18] The key words here are knowledge creation, information and innovation. A vital addition to this list could be creative thinking. These are the areas in which our graduates need to operate and which must be integral with the specialist strands of our courses. Critical literacy and the ability to adjust thinking skills to a malleable market situation are essential transferrable skills that must underpin all of the specialist disciplines in university media courses. It is the intellectual, critical, investigative and adaptive attributes of the degree, not the name of the award, that should form the basis on which courses are designed. These transferrable skills will produce successful graduates who will be defined by an ability to transfer essential skills in creative thinking, clear articulation of role, and a flexible approach to problem solving. They will have the confidence

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[17] UIS/Quebec Government survey (2007): International Feature Film Production, 2006.
[18] Junnarkar B.; Brown C.V. (1997), *Re-assessing the Enabling Role of Information Technology*, pp.142-148, Emerald Group Publishing Limited

of their own ability to define their value and potential and to apply that to a redefined contribution to the market potential. These intellectual and personal skills will be underpinned by the acquisition of skills outside – though allied with – their specialist subject. They will have the capability to see a process beyond the demands of the job or brief and to manipulate that process to their advantage. In addition, they will be able to communicate verbally, visually and formally and with articulacy in order to exercise powers of persuasion. The formation of these elements are already in place, in courses in the technologically developed world that extend experimental thinking, professional practice and, above all, creative processing. But these are simply the foundation of a development within the curriculum. The interface with the post-industrial world is complex and fluid and it is only by a continuous, and responsive, alliance with this market that we can continue to build courses of relevance to industry but, simultaneously, preserve pedagogic integrity.

The conclusions can be identified simply. As broadcasters, designers and academics, we must identify the potential control that large corporations might exert on our creative expression. In doing so, we need to exploit methods whereby we are to tap into the huge reserves of investment in these media and cultural industries. We need to find ways by which we can communicate ideas rapidly and in collaboration, not only to enrich our cultures but also to preserve what is precious and characteristic in the history of individual nations. We need to guard against ideas that are driven by technology and develop, in their place, innovative thinking strategies that utilize the digital domain for rapid realization. And, finally, we must nurture transferrable skills in our undergraduates, who are increasingly citizens of a digital world of mass communication. As designers, film makers, animators, photographers, multimedia

authors, illustrators and academics, we are not only carriers of cultural texts and their meaning but also participants in the shaping of a world-enlightening environment that, in turn, shapes us. It is by no accident that the motto of the National Museum of Afghanistan – one of the most conflict-torn regions of the world – states, "A nation stays alive when its culture stays alive". The eminent British zoologist, Sir David Attenborough, said that homo sapiens is the compulsive communicator[19] and history has taught us repeatedly how communication has enriched ideas, enhanced cultural diversity, brought about understanding between peoples and brought economic stability. As broadcasters, designers and academic commentators, we are those communicators. An essential aspect of global governance, and the manipulation of its systems of communication, is responsibility to people, not to faceless corporations — to equity, to justice, to understanding, to prosperity, to world cooperation and to enlarging the choices of all, for the cultural enrichment of all.

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[19] Attenborough, D. (1983) *Life on Earth, A Natural History,* Little Brown & Co.