Diversity of Cultural Expressions in the Digital Age

9 June 2015
UNESCO Headquarters, Paris, Room II

The digital revolution has fundamentally altered the way in which cultural goods and services are produced, distributed and accessed. Indeed, the accelerated expansion of social networks and user generated content (UGC), the explosion of data created by cloud computing and the proliferation of connected multimedia devices – smartphones, tablets, phablets, e-readers – in the hands of the users have had a huge impact on the cultural scene, in both the global North and South. Technological changes have led to the emergence of new players and new logics.

However, it is important to note that most of these transformations have come about in the past 10 years, that is to say, following the adoption of the UNESCO Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions. It was in this context that, in 2013, the Conference of Parties acknowledged the importance of studying the specific impact of digital on the diversity of cultural expressions.

There are numerous phenomena involved and a great many sources available on the topic. However, the periodic reports submitted by the Parties between 2012 and 2014 can provide an excellent starting point for assessing the opportunities and challenges of digital, as well as examples of concrete measures taken by the countries.

In the reports, the references to the issue of digital – whether direct or indirect – are grouped in different thematic areas covered by the Convention, in particular:

1. Access to cultural expressions;
2. Creativity;
3. The cultural industries;
4. Civil society participation;
5. The collection of cultural statistics.

Based on these five core themes, the material provided by the Parties' reports, coupled with a study of recent facts and trends, offers a good overview of the impact of digital technologies on the diversity of cultural expressions.

Opportunities

In the first place, the digital age represents a remarkable opportunity in terms of access. Indeed, thanks to new technologies, the public can enjoy cultural offerings more easily, quickly and cheaply. Such changes are 'democratizing' in that they allow more people to access these cultural goods and services. Digital innovations can especially help to integrate persons belonging to minorities and reduce the digital divide between urban and rural populations. Whatever the case, it is evident that the current supply of cultural offerings far surpasses that of any previous period.

The new technological possibilities have resulted not only in a growth in the consumption of digital content but also in a creative explosion and new forms of cultural production. Digital technologies certainly tend – at least in theory – to eliminate geographical and social barriers to creation.

Similarly, the digital era may represent an extraordinary opportunity for the cultural industries. The advantages are offered mainly in terms of greater competitiveness, the opening up of new markets, more efficient distribution, direct communication with consumers thanks to social networks and the emergence of new business models.

New technologies also constitute a step forward in terms of public awareness and civil society participation. Indeed, thanks to social networks, the public sector can provide mass dissemination of different cultural activities. Civil society, for its part, finds in these networks a powerful instrument for active and instantaneous participation.

Lastly, but no less importantly, new technologies can contribute to the compilation of statistics and information. An analysis based on Big Data, for example, can open the door to a new understanding of the diversity of cultural expressions.

Barriers

Nevertheless, there are numerous obstacles that prevent the abovementioned possibilities from being fully exploited. First of all, many regions of the world suffer from inadequate infrastructure (in terms of both devices as well as connectivity) and insufficient digital literacy among users/consumers. Without these requirements, the benefits of digital cannot be taken advantage of.

Despite the increasing user-friendliness of these tools, it is important to note that creators today are sometimes not equipped with the necessary technical expertise. In addition, the legal implications of remixing and other related methods are not always sufficiently clear to new artists.

A lack of know-how to produce high-quality digital content also affects companies. In addition, the migration of entire sectors – such as TV or cinema – to the new standards can prove highly complex or burdensome. Moreover, analogue industries tend to have little contact with the world of the Web, which makes the exploration of new models difficult.

With regard to civil society participation, the fact that older generations use social networks less often is no doubt a barrier to the full integration of these sectors.

In terms of statistics, many public sector units and institutions in general point to the lack of information available on digital culture. In addition, training technical teams tends to be complex and the links between the different units that collect cultural data are not always firmly established.

Threats

The digital age not only brings with it obstacles but also generates new dangers. Firstly, the big online platforms usually originate from a small number of countries, which may mean a disproportionate advantage for content in English, for example, to the detriment of content in local languages. At the same time, these platforms sometimes make use of proprietary and closed formats, which jeopardizes interoperability. Furthermore, the algorithms employed by these platforms are not always transparent and may lead to a "filter bubble" around the user – quite the reverse of a shared cultural world.

Also within the realm of access, it should be noted that despite their potential to bridge the gap between urban and rural populations, and to integrate persons belonging to minorities, new technologies can produce the opposite effect: sometimes they merely increase the disparity between wealthy sectors – endowed with better devices and Internet connections – and the poorer classes. Indeed, many technology transfer initiatives based solely on the provision of devices may reinforce pre-existing inequalities.

In the area of creativity, we can mention the risk that artists today might no longer be sufficiently well paid. There is also another threat, linked to the lack of strategies for preserving modern-day cultural creations: few countries have an electronic legal deposit system in place, and in such a context there is a danger that the diversity of cultural expressions might literally have no backup.

Increasing digitization can also lead to the disappearance of many traditional cultural circuits for distribution and dissemination (such as physical bookstores). In addition, the new Internet-based distributors also wield much greater legal and fiscal power than do SMEs, which represents an excessive competitive advantage. On top of this, digital piracy undermines the economic sustainability of all the formal actors.

With regard to statistics, in contrast to the difficulties experienced by countries when compiling cultural information, the large private platforms have such mastery of Big Data that they are better placed to know the local cultural trends than the public sector itself.

Measures

Numerous measures have been carried out with the aim of seizing opportunities, overcoming obstacles and mitigating the threats associated with digital.

In the area of access, in the South as well as the North, investments in telecommunications infrastructure are multiplying, particularly in rural areas. As is evident from the periodic reports, dozens of countries are incorporating digital tools into public media or providing devices for schools, museums, libraries and cultural centres. This broad spectrum of initiatives is usually grouped together in national ICT programmes.

In the realm of creativity, countries are opting to award prizes for digital creation, offering technical training, sponsoring artistic experimentation residences and setting up digital creation centres.

With regard to the cultural industries, the range of support policies is also extremely wide, mainly in terms of assistance for digitization and modernization projects in publishing, music and cinema.

When it comes to encouraging civil society participation, the Parties utilize new technologies in a variety of ways. This can involve social networks, mobile applications and text messages used to

disseminate and discuss cultural topics, platforms or online discussion forums, informative newsletters and active collaboration with various social organizations working on digital art-related issues.

Finally, in the field of cultural statistics, although the Parties' reports include few data on digital consumption, it is important to recognize that several countries are already working on mapping local digital culture.

The diversity of cultural expressions in the digital age

The impact of digital on the diversity of cultural expressions constitutes an extraordinarily rich phenomenon, characterized by opportunities as well as obstacles and threats.

In this context, it would appear that digital causes no positive or negative impact *per se* on the diversity of cultural expressions, but instead may act as an amplifier of trends. In fact, it is the specific actions and plans of States, companies, civil society organisations and individuals that, thanks to new technologies, can have either a positive or negative effect within a concrete cultural ecosystem.

To truth is that the digital age is neither a hypothetical scenario nor a future that needs to be made present. It is instead something that has already occurred: indeed, in both the North and the South – with some differences, of course – new technologies have been introduced into the heart of cultural life and, as is observed in the periodic reports and other sources, countries are already implementing countless measures.

It is not, then, a matter of asking how the Convention should be adapted to the changing digital phenomena – because that would be like trying to catch a moving target – but rather the reverse: how can the existing digital policies be adapted to the Convention? What projects contribute or might contribute to shaping a long-term scenario characterized by the diversity of content, actors and audiences? When faced with an initiative on tax legislation, infrastructure or digital literacy, we must ask ourselves this: are the principles and objectives of the Convention being taken into account?