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A digital world of opportunities

Forum d'Avignon - Les rencontres internationales de la culture, de l'économie et des médias

Avignon, 5th November 2010

If there is one thing that defines and elevates Europe, it is culture. Or rather, a rainbow of cultures.

Culture is the peak of human creativity and a source of collective strength. In my mind it is essential that our cultural diversity must be defended tooth and claw (bec et ongles). If I am not mistaken that is indeed the translation of Avignon's Latin motto, Unguibus et rostro.

Culture is the fabric of life, and therefore it cannot be separated from the society where it is born and, most importantly, its people. There is no culture without people, and people change. It has always been that way.

Culture is like the philosopher said of the river: "you are immersed into it, but you never bathe twice in the same water".

Taking a long-term perspective we can see three major technological revolutions since the development of the written word that have affected the dissemination of culture. First, the printing press. Second, the industrial revolution. And now third, the information and communications technologies revolution.

Though the scale and pace of change may differ, each revolution follows a well-worn path.

Borders are now crossed more easily than ever before in history. It is a great opportunity for artists and creators of all

kinds, as art has no limits but those of our minds. Art enriches itself by eliminating artificial barriers between people such as borders between countries.

Just as artists have always travelled, to join sponsors, avoid wars or learn from masters far from home, now digital technology helps them to cross borders and break down barriers. Their work can be available to all. In a sense, the internet is the realisation of the Renaissance dream of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola: all knowledge in one place.

Yet, it does not mean there are no more obstacles to sharing cultural and artistic works on the net. All revolutions reveal, in a new and less favourable light, the privileges of the gatekeepers of the "Ancien Régime". It is no different in the case of the internet revolution, which is unveiling the unsustainable position of certain content gatekeepers and intermediaries. No historically entrenched position guarantees the survival of any cultural intermediary. Like it or not, content gatekeepers risk being sidelined if they do not adapt to the needs of both creators and consumers of cultural goods.

So who will win the heart of the creators and of the public?

It is still too soon to say. Of course, some of the new giants of internet come from another continent. I would wish that more of them were European, but when I see the wealth of creativity gathered in this room, I am optimistic for the future.

I believe that those who will prosper in the digital age are those who understand that convergence is one of the keys. The convergence of media provides an incredible opportunity for the artists and creators of our times, and also for their public – you and me.

Just like cinema did not kill theatre, nor did television kill radio. The internet won't kill any other media either.

Quite on the contrary. Look at the statistics: people who spend more time on the internet tend to read more, and to go to

cinema and to concerts more often than the population as a whole. Studies show that nowadays, people increasingly watch TV and browse the Internet at the same time – simply to get more information about something that intrigued them. And they can share their thoughts instantaneously with their friends. This is just the beginning. Because convergence means creative freedom and more inspirational content ready to meet the expectations of a public that evolves with art and content.

My goal, in promoting cultural diversity and content adapted to the digital age, is for European creativity to be even stronger. Europe has boundless cultural wealth to offer its citizens, and indeed to the world. Europe is and must remain a global cultural force.

I think that is a realistic vision. But for that, we need to have the right building blocks.

Take for instance copyright. For 200 years, it has proved a powerful way to remunerate our artists and to build our creative industries. But copyright is not an end in itself. Copyright exists to ensure that artists will continue to create. Yet we see more and more often that it is not respected. In some sectors, the levels of piracy demand that we ask ourselves what are we doing wrong. We must ensure that copyright serves as a building block, not a stumbling block.

Look at the situation of those trying to digitise cultural works. Europeana, the online portal of libraries, museums and archives in Europe, is one key example. What a digital wonder this is: a single access point for cultural treasures that would otherwise be difficult to access, hidden or even forgotten.

Will this 12 million-strong collection of books, pictures, maps, music pieces and videos stall because copyright gets in the way? I hope not. But when it comes to 20th century materials, even to digitise and publish orphan works and out-of-distribution works, we have a large problem indeed. Europeana could be condemned to be a niche player rather than a world leader if it cannot be granted licenses and share the full

catalogue of written and audio-visual material held in our cultural institutions. And it will be frustrated in that ambition if it cannot team up with commercial partners on terms that are consistent with public policy and with the interests of right-holders. And all sorts of other possible initiatives, public and private, will also be frustrated.

On the suggestion of Frédéric Mitterrand, the European Commission set up a Comité des Sages to help us find solutions to some of these issues. I am very pleased that Maurice Levy chairs this Comité, which will report in the New Year.

But I am not content to let the debate rest. Time alone will not solve the problems that have emerged.

Today our fragmented copyright system is ill-adapted to the real essence of art, which has no frontiers. Instead, that system has ended up giving a more prominent role to intermediaries than to artists. It irritates the public who often cannot access what artists want to offer and leaves a vacuum which is served by illegal content, depriving the artists of their well deserved remuneration. And copyright enforcement is often entangled in sensitive questions about privacy, data protection or even net neutrality.

It may suit some vested interests to avoid a debate, or to frame the debate on copyright in moralistic terms that merely demonise millions of citizens. But that is not a sustainable approach. We need this debate because we need action to promote a legal digital Single Market in Europe.

My position is that we must look beyond national and corporatist self-interest to establish a new approach to copyright. We want "une Europe des cultures" and for this we need a debate at European level.

The Commission will soon make legislative proposals on orphan works and on the transparency and governance of the collective management societies. We will examine again the problem of

divergent national private copy levies. We will also look into multi-territorial and pan-European licensing. And we will not stop exploring ideas for as long as the system is not working. Instead of a dysfunctional system based on a series of cultural Berlin walls, I want a return to sense. A system where there is scope to create new opportunities for artists and creators, and new business models that better fit the digital age. We want to help you seize the opportunities of this age.

In conclusion, let the debate continue. It will be fierce, there are indeed hurdles. But our job is to look past them in order to clear them.

Speaking for myself, I will remember artists and citizens with each step forward. My sight will remain firmly on 'une Europe des cultures'.

Artists cast light on our world; our job is to let the light shine in.