Amsterdam Agenda

This document is the first result of the conference "From Practice to Policy: Towards a European Media Culture" (P2P) held in October 1997 in Rotterdam and Amsterdam, the Netherlands. The conference was held under the auspices of the Council of Europe and with the support of the Netherlands Ministry of Education, Culture and Science (OCenW), the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Cities of Rotterdam and Amsterdam. The conference is part of the programme of the Project Group for New Technologies: Cultural Co-operation and Communication of the Culture Committee of the Council of Europe.

The P2P Conference brought together expert practitioners in media culture from 22 organi-sations in 12 European countries. Their work exemplifies what "good practice" in media culture can be, in a variety of fields: art, design, music, video, cultural theory, virtual reality and the Internet. Organisations at the conference work in a variety of innovative ways and on a variety of operational scales.

This Agenda identifies several themes which are of shared pragmatic interest to these communities. It is not a statement of high principle with which all artists - or policy makers in government and industry - are asked to agree. It is from future discussion of these themes, among all parties, that a media culture for Europe will emerge. This document is one part of that process.

1. What media cultural practice has to offer
Media cultural practice is thriving in many places all over Europe, but neither its existence nor its cultural and economic significance is well-known to policy makers dealing with the development of an information society. Yet media culture can make a tremendous contribution to this project.

The artistic and cultural practice emerging in relation to new technologies is, by its very nature, diverse, independent, interdisciplinary. It comprises both production and research. Its practitioners develop creative ways to use new information and communication technolo-gies (ICT). Media culture is fostering new ways of working and new thinking on social and political issues. Media culture develops new approaches to education and organises a wide variety of cultural programmes which reflect and celebrate cultural diversity. Media culture constantly devises new and flexible organisational structures and responds rapidly to the needs of diverse client groups and users.

Media culture is already a significant aspect of the information society in three respects:

1.1 Innovation
â¬¢ Artists are often advanced users of new technologies; their feedback can be valuable to developers of hardware and software.
â¬¢ The involvement of users in the design and creative process is a natural aspect of media culture.
â¬¢ Interdisciplinarity, which is a goal of industry and education, already exists in media culture; it routinely spans art and science. Co-operation between artists, designers, musicians, scientists, programmers, software developers and many others, is part of its everyday practice.
â¬¢ Media culture constantly fosters new ways of thinking about technology, its applications and its consequences. Artists, who are by nature critical, ask important questions. Above all, in relation to ICT, they ask "what is this stuff for?".
â¬¢ Important research related to ICT takes place outside of industrial and academic laboratories. Artists, designers and independent researchers in media culture regularly develop innovative interface designs, databases, Virtual Reality technologies, groupware and many other applications.
â¬¢ Media culture promotes and creates media access points for both experts and beginners. These

environments enable production, education and communication through various media, such as radio, video, tv, multimedia and the Internet. Face-to-face contact in public events is an important part of this dynamic.

â¬¢ Media culture contributes to the construction and transformation of new partly virtual public spaces, in which ICT is used to enhance social contact and enliven otherwise dead areas of the city.

1.2 Education

â¬¢ The problem of education in and for an information society is not one of tools or equipment; the real challenge is to develop new content, ideas and processes. Media culture contains many radical new ways of thinking about the meaning and purpose of "learning".

â¬¢ Media culture fosters new ways of learning. A lot of media culture activity takes place in informal learning environments such as museums, science centres and local communities. It will never be easy to change formal education (schools, colleges, universities) - but media culture can have a beneficial impact from the outside.

1.3 Social quality

â¬¢ Media artists do not agree among themselves on their interpretation of ethical and political issues, but they do share a strong conviction that such issues are important.

â¬¢ Media culture is, by its nature, critical of purely commercial agendas for new technology. This simple act of asking social and political questions enriches the debate about the purpose and meaning of innovation.

â¬¢ Because so much of media culture exists on the margins of society, issues such as free access to networks are an everyday priority - not just a political slogan. Most media cultural organisations regularly work with local, national and international partner organisations. This co-operation is rarely formalised; it is mostly project-oriented and functions through extensive, informal networks of friendship and trust between larger and many smaller organisations. This patchwork of cultural identities and mentalities is the reality, and very often the great benefit, of European culture - meaning the whole continent, not just the Europe of the EU.

â¬¢ Cultural diversity also means involvement with youth culture, popular culture, marginal cultures and grassroots activities; these are involved daily in the most innovative and creative fields of new technologies.

â¬¢ Media culture helps create opportunities for public and community participation by providing skills, tools and environments which enable individuals and groups from marginalised communities to make contact, publish information and make their voices heard. The actual practice and daily experience of independent media organisations are interesting expressions of Europe"s diverse political, social and economic contexts. Policy makers and funding bodies are urged to visit media cultural institutions and familiarise themselves with the work that is being done in this field.

2. Media culture and the challenges of an information society

New technologies have always had a significant impact on society - often in unexpected ways. The media cultural community fosters critical discussions about the social and political consequences of technological change. Particular concerns are:

â¬¢ The danger that the agendas for the Information Society are purely commercial.

â¬¢ The danger of homogenisation and the Disneyification of European culture.

â¬¢ The danger that culture may be understood only in terms of entertainment.

â¬¢ The need to understand the fundamental transformation of the public domain through privatisation.

â¬¢ The need to protect democratic control and cultural diversity.

â¬¢ The challenges of privacy, cryptography and copyright - which are cultural as much as legal issues.

European media culture contests the idea that the Information Society entails an ever tighter convergence of global players. A better vision, certainly in Europe, is freedom for individuals and small

groups to operate in an open media environment alongside the large, commercially oriented companies. Diversity exists, enthusiasm exists, and technical and political opportunities also exist. The potential is there, but it has to be exploited. Media culture accepts the fact of continuous technological and cultural change. It recog-nises the dangers, but also sees the opportunities that the new technologies are offering, and seeks to pursue these opportunities through a creative use of these technologies.

3. From practice to policy

The Amsterdam conference has identified a number of practical ways in which media culture is already playing an important role in the emerging information society. However, better interaction with policy makers and processes is needed.

In relation to industry and economic policy, media artists have a lot to offer in the form of new interaction paradigms, new forms of collaboration and new insights. A productive relationship in which art can maintain its autonomy, and in which art and industry can learn and mutually benefit from each other"s achievements and talents, is desirable for both parties. Many media artists believe industrial partners should not only provide technical knowledge and money, but also contribute to the content of the project. Public support can act as a catalyst for private sector involvement. Media culture is at its most productive when it can work at the intersection between art and industry, without being fully integrated into either of the two fields.

In relation to education policy, co-operation between media culture and education can have two goals: educating people to be competent and critical in their use of ICT, and develop-ment of methods to enhance formal and informal education through the use of multimedia / ICT. Beside formal education in new media that academic institutions and media art academies now offer, numerous opportunities for informal education are offered by independent organisations. Many artists and practitioners in new media combine a high degree of skill and expertise, with an awareness of the potentials and dangers of the new media. Co-operation and the exchange of knowledge and skills between the independent art and cultural sector on the one side, and the educational sector on the other, can be broadened and deepened by such means as professional exchange programmes, and multi-party projects which bring practitioners and education (and students) together.

4. ...and from policy to practical actions

There are a variety of practical ways to support and enhance the work of media cultural institutions:
â¬¢ Recognise media culture as a relevant field of cultural activity.
â¬¢ Recognise interdisciplinarity and develop funding structures that support this way of working.
â¬¢ Support the availability of non-proprietory software for publicly funded projects.
â¬¢ Make free access to public media an objective of cultural policies.
â¬¢ Support free bandwidth on the networks (comparable to the Open Channels on the TV cable networks).
â¬¢ Support networks of specialised institutions in preference to large-scale, centralised "multimedia centres".
â¬¢ Establish small and medium-size centres for interdisciplinary research.
â¬¢ Make small-scale and short-term project funding available.
â¬¢ Provide for long-term structural support.
â¬¢ Develop incentives for industry to co-operate in cultural projects.
â¬¢ Provide opportunities for open-ended creative experimentation which may have no short term market application.
â¬¢ Foster investment not only in technical infrastructure, or in traditional "content", but also in media projects that create access and participation.
â¬¢ Above all, prioritise investment in people. Machines are important, but the people who can work with them are more so - and they have to live! It is currently much easier to get funding for a newer,

faster computer, or for its building, or for the electricity and network lines on which it will run, than for the programmer, artist or system operator who is supposed to use it.

Other action points:

â¬¢ Information distribution in several European languages about and through the new media is necessary for the other objectives within this agenda to be effective. Critical on-line journals (e.g. Nettime) and mailing lists (e.g. Syndicate, V2_East) and critical magazines (e.g. Mute) are important in the overall development of new media culture, and should be an area of development.

â¬¢ The lack of clear points of entry into EU funded programmes limits the ability of many media practitioners to participate, and consequently constrains the programmes themselves. The administrative effortto meet all the requirements of such applications is a further disincentive for small organisations. The research, expert knowledge, lobbying, administration and communication necessary for participating in EU/EC programmes is beyond their financial means. Even medium-size organisations that have successfully tendered, experience the process as a major drain on their resources. Cash-flow problems, and the necessity to prefinance large parts of ambitious projects, further exacerbate the situation. Strategies to alleviate these problems should be a priority.

5. Summary and next steps

The P2P conference concluded that policy makers in government and industry can work profitably together with media culture on the basis of an exchange of benefits. This relation-ship entails a view of media policy that includes explicit provisions for independent media practice, and which reflects the dynamic field within which media culture is operating. Future policy should support interdisciplinary modes of co-operation, possibly through the creation of interdepartmental funds (between culture, education, science, economics, foreign affairs, etc.). Policy makers can also encourage informal co-operation structures among media cultural institutions for mutual support and concerted actions. The Dutch Virtual Platform is a successful example of this already in place. Above all, it is hoped that this document justifies including a cultural dimension in discussions about technological development policy. These social and cultural dimensions can be the basis of shared trust, value and quality in relations between art and industry.