The Delhi Declaration of A New Context for New Media

The Open Networks Agenda for International Collaboration in Media and Communication Arts January-June 2005.

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Preface

The discussions that gave rise to this document took place at a meeting of an 'International Working Group on New Media Culture' hosted by the Open Cultures Network - a network created by the Waag Society, Amsterdam, Sarai-CSDS Delhi and Public Netbase, Vienna. The meeting, which featured contributions by artists, theorists, critics, curators, arts administrators, researchers, social scientiests and software programmers from India, the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, France, Finland, Italy, Australia, New Zealand and Canada took place at Sarai-CSDS, Delhi in January 2005.

This text is a draft of a declaration ('The Delhi Declaration') that emerged from this meeing. This draft of the Delhi Declaration is written by Shuddhabrata Sengupta from Sarai CSDS & Raqs Media Collective, Delhi and Tapio Makela, m-Cult, Helsinki based on the inputs and contributions made by the members of the working group during the course of their deliberations.

Situating New Media in the Space of a Global Urban Contemporaneity
The Streets of our cities are crowded with signals. Cinemas, desk top publishing, satellite television and fm radio, increasingly pervasive and ubiquitous computing, mobile telephony, telecommunications and the internet sourroung us in a matrix that also continues to feature analog and offline communication practices as diverse as theater, live performance, print culture and books and the production of visual and tactile objects. Old and new forms of communication create a new context for culture by their continous interaction with each other. We live and practice, as artists, critics, curators and audiences - within this context. We also realize that this context extends deep into the substructure of local histories and situations, just as much as it extends far into a global space of communications that spans the entire planet. Our neighbourhoods and streets contain the world, and the world is a patchwork made up of all our local histories.

Background to the Meeting of the Working Group : From Helsinki to Delhi
This document was produced in Delhi subsequent to the discussions of the International Working Group on New Media Culture at Sarai-CSDS in January 2005 and emerged from a dialogue between practitioners, artists, curators, theorists, critics and activists in the field of new media and digital culture that sought to reflect on this reality. The dialogue took place during an International working group meeting under the aegis of 'Towards a Culture of Open Networks' - a collaborative programme developed by Sarai CSDS (Delhi), The Waag Society (Amsterdam) and Public Netbase (Vienna) with the support of the EU India Economic and Cross Cultural Programme.

The meeting took place immediately following from 'Contested Commons, Trespassing Publics' an international conference on culture, conflict and intellectual property organized by Sarai CSDS and the Alternative Law Forum (Bangalore) from the 6th - 8th of January in Delhi. The meeting also comes half a year after the drafting of the Helsinki Agenda, a document produced by a group of experts in the

new media field in a meeting hosted by m-cult in Helsinki in the wake of ISEA2004. The Helsinki Agenda took forward the ideas that emerged in the Amsterdam Agenda and it particularly emphasized the need to shift new media arts and culture policy to better support international, translocal, non-nation based cultural practices. The Open Networks Agenda builds on both of these sets of ideas to propose a framework for thinking substantively on what it means to create contexts for collaboration in digital and electronic media practices.

The diverse discussions on culture, conflict and intellectual property that marked the 'Contested Commons/Trespassing Publics' conference and the broad vision for a renewal of international new media and electronic culture outlined in the Helsinki Agenda provide a set of conceptual foundations for the propositions put forward in this document.

Collaboration, Dialogue, Conversation

We acknowledge that there is a growing incidence of collaboration, dialogue and conversation between practitioners of networked culture in different parts of the world. At the moment we are paying special attention to construct collaboration and networks between Europe and Asia. These transactions emerge from a growing level of formal and informal contact, through residencies, greater mutual visibility in international platforms - such as biennials, festivals and conferences, and actual instances of cross cultural collaboration. There is a strong desire amongst communities of practitioners and theorists in several parts of the world for the laying of stable foundations so as to ensure that this surge of collaborative processes has an enduring and equitable future for all those who are involved. While we endorse the energies that are key to this moment, we are aware that unreflective continuity may actually deepen existing inequalities. This requires us to inaugurate a process of substantive thinking about the plurality of processes that can fall under the umbrella of the term 'collaboration', to develop a set of conceptual tools that can help articulate different ethics and protocols of collaboration, and set pragmatic goals that can be realized through instances of actual practice in a very heterogeneous world. This means we take account of the fact that differences in cultural and societal infrastructure and political conditions (within and between countries and societies) are as real as are the increasing instances of similarity.

This document hopes to initiate precisely such an exercise. It does not claim to provide all or even most of the answers, and it invites the networked culture practitioners to extend, elaborate and deepen the questions and issues we hope to raise. We are addressing practitioners who collaborate or desire collaboration across cultural and disciplinary boundaries, curators, critics and theorists who act as interlocutors in this process, and administrators who influence or shape the concrete conditions that enable cultural dialogue and transactions.

Heterogeneity of Forms and Practices : Communcative Practices in South Asia

The Open Networks Agenda recognizes that the culture of communicative practices in contemporary South Asia is characterized by a rich heterogeneity of forms and protocols and express a healthy diversity in the face of the tendency of the formal operations of intellectual property to flatten the protocols of cultural production on to a single plane. Rather than have every cultural good available as a commodity designed for one time sale, the prevalance of a vigourous cluster of practices of ongoing cultural transaction within and outside formal commodity relations guarantees the diversities of contemporary south asian cultural expression. This does not imply an antagonism or indifference to market imperatives, rather, it places such imperatives within a larger matrix of practices which also include sharing, gift giving and formal as well as informal protocols of reciprocity.

Beyond 'Access'

These impulses to improvise, re-mix and re-purpose that characterizes the daily life of electronic culture in South Asian urban contexts is something that the agenda urges serious consideration of, especially in order to move beyond the 'developmentalist' rhetoric of 'granting access' when speaking of

the place of new media in the global south, and in underserved zones in the global north.

Similarly, a more grounded view of the place of digital media would require us to go beyond the naiive celebratory rhetoric that sees the mere placement of computers and digital tools in the hands of under priviledged and underserved actors as sufficient conditions for the cultivation of a sensibility of digital creativity within society The important question to ask is not whether the majorities of societies are deprived of digital tools, or are on the 'wanting' side of the 'digital divide' but to question what people can do, and what they actualize when they gain access. Here we are clearly emphasizing content and process more than simply presence of and access to ICT.

In going 'beyond' the discourse of access alone, the Open Networks Agenda recognizes the necessity of resilient thinking that takes difference and conflict as well as collaboration and solidarity into account.

The Collaborative Nature of Cultural Practice
We (the authors of the Open Networks Agenda) recognize that all cultural work is necessarily collaborative, and that collaborators may either be part of generations either contemporaneous or previous to our own. Taking this further, everything that we produce today is also potential material for collaboration with partners in all our tomorrows. We also recognize that the collaborative nature of cultural work requires not only freedom of speech, but also increased mobility of our words, images and ideas. A key challenge is to develop methodologies that enable open sharing while developing a plurality of models and approaches towards sustainable, mixed and re-mixed modes of usage of intellectual and cultural resources, some of which may be expressed as different kinds of intellectual property (in some instances) and others as a varied cultural commons (in other instances).

Formal and Informal Media Landscapes
Taken together, these elements constitute a landscape of intermedia constellations and media processes nested within different interlocking and co existent contexts, some of which may be formal, institutionally anchored, located within recognized forms and disciplines, while others may be informal, located between and across forms and disciplines, and on occasion, expressed in a tangential relationship to the requirements of legality. The formal and informal aspects of this landscape are not a neat binary, but expressed as two poles of a continuous spectrum.

From 'New Media' to 'New Context Media'
Our recognition that all new media objects and processes are located in specific contexts suggests that we see new media as what Nancy Adajania has described as 'new context media' - as instances of what happens when a plethora of communicative practices, ranging from work on and with the web, to video, to radio, to telecommunication based practices, to installations, to sound work, to print and graphic design, and emerging forms of pervasive computing enter new semantic material spaces, and take on different recombinant possibilities that spring from their mutual interactions throughout the world.

We use Adajania's concept of 'New Context Media' with some deliberation, insisting that it is not a drive to strain to keep abreast with the latest technology that concerns us here as much as it is the continous renewal of the conceptual field of contexts that enable communication. Also, it is to indicate our impatience with the inadequacy of the portmanteau term 'New Media' because in a sense all media practices were once, 'New'. To say that the internet is later in time than the cinema is not to be in anyway insightful about anything other than chronology. In instances such as that of South Asian media culture, this gets further complicated by the co-existence and synergy between what is today's 'New Media' and what might have been yesterday's 'New Media'. To priviledge one of these over the other is to be unmindful of the ecology of the media landscape as well as to the vitality of the relationships between actually existing practices.

The Question of 'Translatability'

The climate of mutuality that characterizes this landscape is founded on the many acts of making, sharing, viewing, listening, reading, researching, curation and criticism that draw their strenghts from existing networks of everyday collaborations between different nodes spanning the universe of practice in new context media. Practitioners bring to this intersection of creative. intellectual and discursive energies the markers and histories of different culltural-historical-spatial specificities and the received as well as emerging traditions of different practices. Through processes of sustained interactions practitioners are able to evolve a neighbourhood of affinities in practice, a commons of expression.

However, it needs to be clearly understood that this coming together is not contingent on an easy translatability, or the evolution of some kind of 'Esperanto' form of cultural practice. Rather, we need to work with the understanding that there are and will be necessary difficulties of translation, that invite us to be at least legible to each other, before we make the claim to comprehensively understand each other. We need to share with each other what we do not know about each other before we can make the claim to mutual understanding.

Designs for Commoning
These encounters when allowed to play out to their fullest extent, can give rise to various designs for commoning, different protocols of working together, of sharing materials of having access to each other's work and materials, some of which may be expressed in quasi legal languages - as licenses and charters, while some others may be expressed simply as invitations and invocations.

A Plurality of Commons
We emphatically endorse a plurality of ways in which the commons of cultural and social media use can be and are being constituted through different modes of practice. Some of these may be more discursive than others, some may be more invested with aesthetic pursuits, while others may find themselves more committed to social and political questions, and still others may be recursive in the sense that they may involve practices of consistent but critical self reflexivity. The one thing that we do insist on is that the commons constituted by such collaborations grow immanently (admitting that there is no master plan or overall design) and that they make room for an ethic of collegial criticism across the boundaries of cultures, histories, tastes, forms and disciplines. In other words we want to insist that there are and will be many kinds of commons, and that we all must retain the right to be critical of different modes of commoning as they emerge, evolve and dissolve, even as we agree on the value of the commons itself.

Clearly, what this entails is a refined practice of trust. Where people allow for the fact that they need to nurture practices that foreground trust and respect precisely because they may not be transparent to each other. We recognize that the groundwork needed for such trust and for the conditions of collaboration to grow are directly proportional to cultural distance. And here by cultural distance we mean both the distance between practitioners based in different parts of the world, as well as the distances between different kinds of practitioners, regardless of the co ordinates of their physical location or historical inheritances.

Expanding Conceptual Horizons
Collaboration requires an expansion of conceptual horizons. Practitioners, critics, curators and audiences based in the metropolitan centres of global culture (often in the global North) will often have to work harder to learn about the spaces, histories and cultures of other parts of the world. This makes it possible to adequately respond to and reciprocate the informed understanding that people in the global south have of the global north as a result of the histories of colonial encounters. It will also mean that practitioners, critics, curators and audiences in the global south will have to reconsider the articulative privileges that arise from the default and often ahistorical assumption of an automatic 'victim' position by artists and cultural practitioners simply because they happen to be from the south.

Location and Extension
The practice of a networked culture will necessarily involve a rethinking of what we mean by locatedness and extension. This may on an occasion mean a withdrawal or curtailment of the privileges of an excess of locatedness and particularity, and at the same time it will also involve an attenuation of any attempts to construct a heroic hyper-globalist universalism that is not attentive to specific histories and especially to global as well as local inequalities of power and articulative capacity.

Social/Cultural Contexts for FLOSS
"Collaboration" in general, and more specifically free, libre and open source software (FLOSS) co-development, have been romanticized in the past and continue to be romanticized in the present as benevolent, essentially "good" practices. We insist that attention must be paid instead to the cultural and social contexts of use and effect of these practices in order to evaluate them. Special attention needs to be paid within the FLOSS milieu to the urgency of localization and for creating software interfaces that are able to translate the ideals of sociality inherent in FLOSS practices to the relationships between lay users, software, the hacker scene, software developers, artists, critics and accessible technological interfaces

Beyond 'First Wave New Media Culture'
We assert that it is time to move beyond the self congratulatory mutual self recognition that characterized the global expansion of what may be called first wave new media practices. To continue in that mode would be to allow us to degenerate into a clique of cliques of global new media practitioners, united by an arcane 'inspeak' and insulated by the hermetic comdfort of their practices from the exigencies and disturbances of the world outside our media labs, gatherings, galleries and conferences. Rather, new context media practitioners will have to learn to be open to each others vulnerabilities, they will have to work with difficulties in translation, will need to learn to live with and thrive on the fluid, unpredictable and dynamic (as opposed to the solid and stable) nature of the contemporary global moment.

Types of Collaborations
What kinds of Collaborations Do we See ?

Firstly, between practitioners based in different spaces and cultural contexts
between theorists/curators/critics/researchers based in different spaces and cultural contexts
between practitioners and theorists/curators/critics/researchers
between practitioners of different kinds of media practices
between practitioners at different levels of visibility and recognition
between practitioners, theorists and inhabitants of urban neighbourhoods and localities

3 Models for Collaborative Practice
We also propose that serious attention be paid to the task of evolving different models of collaboration, not just those of people making things together, but also based on the idea of dialogue and conversation.

The Dramaturg Model: Here, for instance we propose the 'dramaturg' model which is used in some theatre practices as something that might merit serious consideration. This entails a structural accommodation of interlocution and interlocutors in the shaping of a practice. Practically, it may involve the dialogic presence of theorists, writers, researchers in situations where media processes and objects, or art projects are being created. This would necessarily involve the cultivation of hospitality and attention by practitioners towards people engaged primarily with discourse, just as it requires theorists and researchers to be sensitive to the exigencies of practice and artistic creation.

The Archive Model: Another model of collaboration could emphasize the rigorous documentation, chronicling and archiving of a practice. Here, practitioners could enter into a seriously considered

relationship with people dedicated to the act of documenting and archiving what practice entails. Here documentation would not be seen as a 'service' performed for the practitioner, but crucially as a means to ensure the durability of a practice through critical annotation and detailed description. What this necessarily involves is the creation of many archives of practices and process. Here, we also see the necessity of the public rendition of processes a key function of extended archiving. Involving writers and documentary filmmakers to work with the archives of completed and ongoing artistic collaborations will generate a 'public intelligence' of processual work that we feel will be crucial to the imperatives of wider audience development for new media/new context media works

The Ensemble Model and 'Collaboratories': Collaboration can also be dynamised through structured co improvisation and ensemble playing. This would require media practitioners to learn from the traditions that animate the worlds of music and dance where the presence of performing bodies in given co ordinates of space and time as ensembles can be a sufficient condition for acts of collaborative creativity. Situating programmers, technicians, artists, practitioners and theorists from different backgrounds in conditions of real time, offline conviviality in 'collaboratories' - workshops, residencies, tactical media labs and field work - (collaborative laboratories) can produce conditions of high synergy. This recognizes that the deepening of new media practices are crucially dependent on the interplay between embodied learning and knowledge. On the conventions of knowledge sharing that often tie communities of practitioners together. This requires us also to deepen our awareness and understanding of the ethic of friendship and informal solidairy that significantly underpins substantial aspects of the 'everyday life of pracitce' in new media cultures.

Users and Producers
In a new media context, the distinctions between producers and users, practitioners and audiences, writers and readers are characterized by porosity. Users can be and often are producers, however, mere access to media technology and networks does not in itself provide the productive agency. In order to facilitate productive agencies and critical media literacies, we need to think of audiences as partners in collaborative processes, and requires support for development, education and outreach activities that bring audiences/users and producers/practitioners into close contact. As new media is an emerging domain of practice, support for it also involves sensitivity to the urgency that audiences and practitioners both feel for developing the conventions and expectations that are pertinent to questions of audience-practitioner interaction appropriate to the field. This means support for familiarization, for informal and formal immersion and education processes, for publications that contextualize works and practitioners, and for greater attention to activities that involve young and new audiences by cultivating a heightened curatorial sensitivity and innovative outreach strategies.

Collaboration as Transformation
We need to acknowledge that collaboration is a transformative process, that it changes people, organizations and institutions, challenges them and provokes them to grow and branch out in different directions. This can be a necessary precondition for collaboration, just as it may be a consequence of its success. In the event of the inauguration of a relationship between partners who are not at the same level in terms of infrastructure, the upgradation of resources may be a necessary precondition for the collaboration to occur. In other instances, the desnity of exchanges and upscaling of activities that occur during the process may demand a process of deepening, expansion and renewal, within each node in the networks. This process of growth often requires an expansion in capacity and infrastructure which need to be understood and acted upon by the structures (at the governmental, inter governmental and non governmental level) that enable and support collaborative networks.

Duration and Time
Collaboration also necessarily involves duration and different temporal registers. There can be synchronous as well as asynchronous modes of collaboration and dialogue, and both merit

consideration and support. Sometimes it may be crucially necessary that people come together to work at the same time, at other times the process of collaboration may require intervals, periods dedicated to re-evaluation and assessment and re-engagement at a different level of intensity and activity. Support for one form of engagement (short term, intensive, goal oriented) should not preclude the possibility of durable for support alternative (long term, processual, durable) temporal registers. We need to recognize that the interplay between these two rhythms is vital for both research and artistic practices.

Practitioners and Publics
Finally, we need to recognize and endorse the fact that in the end, the most important collaborative process is that between practitioners and their publics. This is especially true in the case of new media/new context media, because the cultures of online file sharing and digital peer to peer protocols have already laid the foundations for the blurring of the boundaries between users and producers, audience and artist, publics and practitioners. We need to found structures of support for creaive audiences and creative end-users, by enableing communities of fans, artist-audience interfaces and a vibrant critical culture that actively intervenes in artistic production. This will invlove support not only for those who speak and perform, but also for those who listen, view, read and participate. New media practices will require infrastructural support through the creation of pods, interactive archives, workshop spaces and listening rooms in all cultural institutions and public spaces which will become the hubs of a dense and dynamic culture of pleasurable and informed exchange through art and creativity.

This will require us to be imaginative not only about how we see practitioners, but also about how we see publics, and will involve rethinking the paradigm of 'permissions' and consent that an audience implicity grants to itself and those it has come to see. In the end this could involve a transformation of how we see creative activity and art in society, but that is precisely the challenge new forms of communication place before us. The streets of our cities are live with signals, and we have to learn to respond to them.

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