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'Crossing the Technical Rubicon': Marketising Culture and Fields of the Digital[1]

Brett Hutchins

> Information technology, and all that it now offers, has crossed the technical rubicon into the realm of consciousness, to the realm of culture. Multi-media today gives us instruments which allow us to shape information in so many forms that they can become an integral part of our life's experience. (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, n.p.)

Presented under the heading of 'Multi-media: Cultural Production in an Information Age', this statement in the 1994 national cultural policy, *Creative Nation*, combines insight about the likely impacts of digital media and communications on the cultural industries with a dash of technophilia. The timing and tone of this policy are important markers of a time period in which the Internet was popularly narrated as a revolutionary catalyst for self-expression, consciousness and personal freedom. For instance, the iconic Mosaic graphical web browser had been launched just a year earlier, making the experience of surfing the web both more pleasurable and widely available. The mid-1990s also signalled the 'moment of *Wired*', a magazine and brand that popularised digital technologies through a heady mix of hyperbole, romanticism and faux counter-cultural sentiments (Streeter 2011). *Wired's* over-excited stories and headlines promoted a quixotic worldview in which networked computing somehow made it possible to simultaneously 'change the world, overthrow hierarchy, express yourself, *and* get rich' (Streeter 2011, p. 133; original emphasis).

Despite a shared focus on the 'information superhighway', the differences between the futures envisioned by *Creative Nation* and *Wired* are unmistakable. *Creative Nation* articulated a necessary and ongoing role for the state and policy in the production, circulation and promotion of Australian national culture both at home and abroad, encompassing the broadcasting, telecommunications, film, television and information technology sectors, amongst others. Digital media and communications are

forms, networks and infrastructures to be leveraged in support of this goal. The consumer technology boosters at *Wired*, and their fellow travellers on the NASDAQ stock market, promulgated a future in which governments are rendered obsolete by a utopian form of 'good capitalism' (Streeter 2015, p. 3108). This mode of capitalism promised to unleash the transformative power of an aggressively individualist, free market, hi-tech entrepreneurial ethos on a global scale (Marwick 2013; Streeter 2011). Digital innovation – or, more accurately, 'novelty in technology' (Arthur cited in Banks 2012, p. 159) – *is* culture in this formulation, as entrepreneurs collude with venture capital to 'change the world' and disrupt existing social, cultural and political systems.

The problem is that the aggressively individualist model of hi-tech capitalism prevailed, capturing the cultural and political imagination and giving rise to a powerful 'Silicon Valley ethos' (Levina and Hasinoff 2016). Fine words about the importance of the cultural industries and the creative arts, as broadly conceived, have been expressed by political leaders in Australia and elsewhere over the years. But, with varying levels of enthusiasm, successive governments have subscribed to a formula in which the circulation and expression of national culture through digital media is the de facto result of the state 'getting out of the way' of market actors. Benign neglect would somehow release the spontaneous energies of networked digital communications, democratised online expression and user-generated content (and it did … for US-based global corporate behemoths such as Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix and Google/Alphabet). State intervention is best directed towards commercial incentives to stimulate investment and market activity in the cultural industries, thereby encouraging digital innovation and the potential export of products, platforms and services to the region and world. This approach has delivered uneven outcomes at best, as the spluttering performance of the video games development industry indicates (Commonwealth of Australia 2016; Keogh 2017). Indeed, the current Australian Prime Minister, Malcolm Turnbull, embodies both this trajectory and the animal spirits of the early web. Turnbull invested in the Internet Service Provider, OzEmail, in 1994 and became Chairman. He walked away AUD$60 million wealthier after the company's sale in 1999 to

the ill-fated WorldCom, watching on as the dot com bubble burst spectacularly in 2000 and 2001 (Head 2002). He now leads an embattled federal government devoid of an articulated national cultural policy, let alone one that considers the role of digital media in maintaining a distinctive national culture.

This chapter approaches *Creative Nation* as a 'symbolic text' that is 'a marker of social, technological and economic shifts' (Homan 2016, p. 39), particularly given the historical intersection between its release and the popular excitement that surrounded the World Wide Web in the 1990s. This landmark policy is used to analyse why a clear vision of the interdependence between digital and online media and the explicit development of national culture through policy has fallen by the wayside. This capacity was central to government thinking in 1994, built on a foundational assumption: 'If, as a nation, we can create a vibrant multi-media industry, we will go a long way to ensuring that we have a stake in the new world order yet retain a distinctly Australian culture' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, n.p.). Given the social and cultural foundations of technology (MacKenzie and Wajcman 1999), digital media and communications promised exponential rewards for the nation and its cultural industries if supported in a sustained and strategically coherent fashion. However, culture has been ignored as a key policy priority in the years that have followed, as digital media and communications became over-determined by corporate investment, trade and market agendas (O'Connor 2016). The neglect commenced in earnest after the election of the John Howard-led Coalition national government in 1996, followed by a series of Labor and Coalition governments in the ensuing decades.[2]

The case presented in this chapter begins by outlining why 'fields of the digital' is a useful concept in thinking through the relationship between cultural production and digital media. In its support for a nationally focussed set of cultural industries, *Creative Nation* is then positioned as an example of why an evolving sense of national culture and identity needs to be maintained in the face of globalising media and commercial forces, and the effects of failing to do so. The chapter concludes by suggesting that, in terms of federal government policy-settings around digital media and

communications, culture is now little more than a by-product of STEM-dominated national innovation agendas and economic productivity concerns.

In an effort to comprehend this lamentable state of affairs, attention now turns to French sociologist, Pierre Bourdieu, and his concept of field. Bourdieu did not analyse technology in a systematic fashion, meaning that the following discussion draws on applications, adaptations and critiques of field theory in the context of media-related industries, practices and communications (Benson and Neveu 2005a, 2005b; Bourdieu 2005; Couldry 2012; Hesmondhalgh 2006; Homan 2016; Ignatow and Robinson 2017; Marlière 1998; Thompson 1995).

Fields of the Digital

Presented as part of a theoretical tripartite alongside capital and habitus, Bourdieu's (1993) concept of field is helpful in identifying why a limited conception of the relationship between digital media, culture and policy persists. 'The digital' exists at multiple scales, across intersecting sites, and possesses variable features. The field is necessarily transformed into dynamically interlaced and multiplying field<u>s</u>, drawing in an array of technological infrastructures, cultural and economic activities, and communications and media practices. These range in scale, encompassing cultural production and consumption, national network construction and policy-making, and trade policies and intellectual property regimes. A substantive and consistent vision of the public good and cultural value is, therefore, essential in articulating the role and function of national culture in relation to transnational digital information flows and the multinational private interests that channel and commodify them. The need for an active state and policy sector is underlined by economic asymmetries between the resources available to global technology corporations and many national governments. For instance, the combined cash reserves of Apple, Microsoft, Alphabet (Google's parent company), Cisco and Oracle are estimated to be over US$500 billion, which compares to the AUD$66 billion (US$47 billion) held in Australia's foreign reserves at the end of 2015 (McDonald 2016).[3]

'Fields of the digital' signals a rethinking of how fields interact, intimating the existence of countless intermeshed fields that are, to differing degrees, structured by and/or embedded in digital communications networks (cf. Ignatwow and Robinson 2017). By way of contrast, Bourdieu's theory is based on account of modernity in which the social world is subject to identifiable differentiation into specialised spheres of action – politics, economics, journalism, religion, education, etc. – that exhibit degrees of autonomy, semi-autonomy and interdependence vis-à-vis other fields over time (Couldry 2012; Hallin 2005). Bourdieu's account adheres to the 'heavy' institutional logics of the nation-state as expressed under the conditions of industrialism. However, the rise of informationalism and transnational digital communications introduces a more fluid or even 'liquid' set of social relations, as expressed through the logics and morphology of the network (Bauman 2000; Castells 2000). In a mediatised age, the problem is understanding how fields interact dynamically given the role of media and networked communications in and across almost every field. As media theorist Stig Hjarvard (2013) states:

> … we find that the media occupy a prominent place in a growing number of fields' heteronomous poles, thereby challenging those fields' autonomous poles. Thus, the degree of mediatization may be measured according to how much the respective field's autonomous pole has weakened. The media, too, have autonomous and heteronomous poles … (p. 40)

Fields now operate in parallel and interdependently at different scales depending on the users and purposes of the communications networks in question. There were once 'fields inside fields inside fields (like a series of Russian dolls) parallel to each other in their internal organisation' (Benson and Neveu 2005b, p. 4). The effects of digitalisation and datafication mean that fields attain relatively porous membranes that see them change shape and move in and out of each other, as well as expand and contract in size depending on the activities occurring in and around the network.

The challenge of digital media and communications is to make sense of increasingly extended chains of interdependence within and between fields (Elias 1978). The difficulty for the cultural industries is that governments and policy-makers have frequently ignored this challenge, opting instead to diminish the 'public good' by assessing it primarily in terms of wealth creation and commercial success (Turner 2012, p. 113). A similar story can also be told in the US, UK, many countries in Europe and parts of Asia and Latin America. The consolidation of 'neoliberalism as *doxa*' (Chopra 2003) was (and is) a simultaneously economic, political and cultural phenomenon. The ascendancy of the information technology, digital media and telecommunications sectors globally, combined with the ideological dominance of neo-liberal economic policies and governments, naturalised a new set of political arrangements and policies. These policy-settings legitimated a 'grand contradiction' – 'a passion for [state] intervention in the name of non-intervention [in markets]' (Grantham and Miller 2010, p. 174). This process established a seemingly unassailable affinity between the policies thought necessary for technological innovation, and high levels of privatisation, deregulation of markets, the free flow capital, falling levels of taxation and reduced wage costs (Couldry 2010, 2012; Dwyer 2010; Harvey 2005; Levina and Hasinoff 2016; Miller 2007; Rushkoff 2016).

Mark Andrejevic (2013) identifies that the market now acts as 'the master algorithm' in an 'Internet-facilitated information society' (p. 64). Profit maximisation equates with cultural authority, with this authority then reaching into 'the realms of the political and social' (pp. 64-65). A troubling self-legitimating logic is evident in this equation. From the viewpoint of the major tech-firms, it is self-evident that the market knows best because the popularity of their hardware, software, networks, user-generated content, user-bases and advertising show this to be the case.[4] But sitting beneath their quarterly reporting statements is the fact that companies and services such as Facebook, Snapchat, YouTube and Apple are feeding voraciously on the raw material of mediatised cultures – communication, symbols, representations, information, images, audio, news, individual and collective expression, and creative communities of variable geography and durability.

The term 'fields of the digital' highlights an apparent contradiction. At one level, the complexity of interactions within and between fields increases exponentially in relation to the growing size, density and use of digital media and communications networks, which are further complicated by newer sociotechnical assemblages such as mobile Internet and sensor based networks (Andrejevic and Burdon 2015; Herman et al. 2015). This pattern, on the surface of it at least, makes it difficult for any single field to exercise a determining power over other fields. Yet, at another level, in the eyes of national policy-makers the economic field exercises primary definitional force in the assessment and manifestation of cultural value across a vast range of activities, including broadcasting, publishing, film, news and games. This situation highlights why the role of governments and policy-makers continue to matter – they perform a major role in deciding how digital technologies are distributed and operate through funding and subsidies, research priorities, education systems, community-based media programs, regulation of media and telecommunications markets, and the provision and allocation of network infrastructures. The consistent failure of governments to update and connect cultural policy agendas like *Creative Nation* to these mechanisms is not about digital technologies *per se* or the complexity of mediatised cultural fields. It is about a lack of political will to harness the operation of digital media, and the intermeshed fields that flow through them, for anything other than marketised outcomes. The result is a prioritisation of economistic categories such as efficiency, competitiveness, productivity and price signals that overwhelm attempts to promote distinctive forms of national cultural expression through policy development and implementation. This situation has continued even as loud voices have been raised from within the cultural, creative and arts sectors about the destructive effects of these categories on the priorities and resources required to enlarge 'the greater public good' (Eltham 2016, p. 2; see also Keep 2015; Schultz 2016).

Viewed through the lens of Bourdieu's sociological project, 'fields of the digital' speaks to how longer-term historical currents travel within emergent contemporary conditions. The communication dynamics made possible by digital media forms and practices since the 1990s are new and require

sensitisation to mediatisation processes and specific forms of network power (Castells 2009; Couldry and Hepp 2017). But these dynamics are also subject to the institutional effects of a long-standing ideological compact between the state, policy, corporations, financial institutions and markets, which exerts considerable force in privileging the economic above all else. In a lecture addressing the state of the journalistic field delivered in Lyons in 1995, Bourdieu stated that 'all microcosms are constructed against the commercial'; a development with threatening consequences for not only journalism but 'in every field' (Bourdieu 2005, p. 43). 'The commercial' presents this threat because:

> As Einsteinian physics tells us, the more energy a body has, the more it distorts the space around it, and a very powerful agent within a field can distort the whole space, cause the whole space to be organized in relation to itself. (p. 43)

The state of cultural policy in relation to digital media is, I argue, a manifestation of this threat and distortion in the network society. There is nothing 'natural' about the 'advertising-saturated, audience-ratings-driven media culture' that Bourdieu critiqued over two decades ago (Benson and Neveu 2005b, p. 2). There is also nothing natural about today's 'advertising saturated–analytics driven–data mining–algorithmically governed–privacy eroding' digital media culture that perpetuates the systematic and unrelenting commodification of culture and everyday life (cf. Andrejevic 2013; Fuchs 2015; Morozov 2015; Mosco 2014).

An Australian Internet?

The significance of *Creative Nation* as Australia's first comprehensive national cultural policy cannot be underestimated. Its release represented a much-needed 'governmental framing of culture' that moved cultural policy out of the 'backwater' it had previously been trapped in throughout many industrialised democracies (Cunningham 1992, p. 22). Nonetheless, *Creative Nation* has also been subject to fair criticism. It displays an occasionally defensive and ahistorical posture about the assault of 'homogenised international mass culture' (Rowe et al. 2016, p. 9). In the matter of accessing state

funding schemes, it confirms an unhelpful 'majors-indie divide' that is biased towards the 'institutional heft' of major performing arts companies over smaller companies (Meyrick cited in Eltham 2016, p. 19).[5] It is also noticeably short on detail in regard to copyright regulation given that it deals with 'multi-media' and the 'information superhighway' (Homan 2016, p. 39).[6]

Despite these and other weaknesses, *Creative Nation* confronts a tricky question in the early history of the World Wide Web, especially as the mid-1990s were a time when the swift diffusion of online communications fuelled teleological assumptions about the imminent hegemony of global media. Is it possible for government to support the construction or 'making' of national identity through digital and online media (cf. Turner 1994)? *Creative Nation*, in its treatment of multi-media, answers this question in the affirmative, declaring 'it is what we put onto the [information] highway that really matters' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, n.p.). This statement is accompanied by perceptive observations about the need to encourage 'dialogue and interaction between the creative and software communities' and a series of targeted measures. Areas identified include film (the Australian Film Commission), national cultural institutions (museums and galleries), broadcasting (the Australian Children's Television Foundation), telecommunications (the Telecommunications Policy Review), education (schools, tertiary institutions, and the Australian Film, Television and Radio School) and industry (the Australian Multi-media Enterprise).

The position advanced in *Creative Nation* is that government can and should support the continuing (re-)creation of national culture through digital media and communications. It is a prescient claim in light of social and political events in the years since, including the reinvigoration of assorted ethno- and religiously-based nationalisms around the world, and the prominence of political movements based on populist appeals to nationalism. In consumer and tourism markets, national identities are now subject to appropriation and mobilisation for branding purposes in an effort to 'sell' the nation for international consumption (Volcic and Andrejevic 2016). National factors also continue

to display considerable resilience throughout television industries and systems, informed by a range of cultural, linguistic, market and technological variables (Turner 2009; Turner and Tay 2009).

Digital and mobile scholar Gerard Goggin recognised fourteen years ago that there is, in fact, an 'Australian Internet' shaped by ceaseless local, national, regional and global interactions and relations (2004, p. 5; see also Miller and Slater 2000). Discourses and experiences of the nation and the national are embedded in the way people located in specific national and cultural contexts experience, use and understand the Internet and its manifold applications. These phenomena are fundamental to how users of the Australian Internet connect to 'international networks and media flows' and the ways in which contested national identities fit within these 'larger frames of reference' (Goggin 2004, pp. 6-8). The announcement of the *National* Broadband Network (NBN; my emphasis) in 2009 – 'the single largest nation building infrastructure project in Australian history' (Swan 2009) – offers symbolic and material endorsement for Goggin's argument. The network has since served as a site for sharply conflicting political visions about the role of the state, regulatory arrangements and private investment in nation building efforts.[7] The controversy surrounding the NBN also connects to a recently rediscovered focus on the role of national media systems (e.g. Australia, Brazil and China, among many others) in structuring media cultures and practices. Even in the midst of globalisation processes, nation-states and national spaces remain central to how media businesses, markets and cultures operate because there is 'no inevitable, straightforward shift from the local and national to the global' (Flew and Waisbord 2015, p. 632).

It is a problematic time for national governments to neglect cultural policy given the threat and actuality of so-called digital disruption, which has imploded reliable assessments of cost, labour inputs and commercial returns in the production and reproduction of intellectual property in particular (e.g. book and magazine publishing, journalism, popular music, broadcasting) (Mason 2016). A progressive and adaptable sense of national history and identity, and their associated forms of cultural expression, are arguably more important than ever under these conditions. A compelling example of advocacy for

the value of government investment in national culture is offered by Australian writer, editor and academic, Julianne Schultz (2016), in her 2016 Brian Johns Lecture. She displays a clear-headed appreciation of how 'fields of the digital' trigger a high level of complexity in the flow of content and culture, as well as revealing a much older story about the exercise of market power in and across national territories.

Schultz explains that the largest and best-resourced technology corporations are able to scale their operations effectively to leverage economies of scale in digitally networked media and markets. She uses a shorthand term and acronym, 'the Age of F-A-A-N-G' (Facebook, Apple, Amazon, Netflix, Google and others), to emphasise the reach and influence of these companies. Their rapacious appetite for cultural content of all types means that national cultural institutions and industries are caught in a pincer movement. Pressing on one side are FAANG and their many competitors. In collusion with highly mobile venture capital, these companies accumulate revenue and content by capturing and commodifying the media practices and experiences of millions of users:

> …technology companies have figured out how to make money in an unprecedented way from the marriage of technology and culture.
>
> As a result we are seeing a massive redistribution of wealth from the cultural sector, where meaning is created, to the technology sector, which has figured out how to market, distribute, reach and make money out of it in ways the cultural industries never imagined possible.
>
> Now, in the Age of Fang there are a handful of global companies shaping tastes, distributing and exploiting information we didn't even know we generated …
>
> What makes this different to say, the rise of the multinational firm of the middle years of the 20th century – the great corporations that sold energy, transport and consumer goods – is that culture and the art and craft of making meaning are at the heart of the new corporations …

> The new mega profitable firms make their billions by capturing and creating meaning and belonging: personal information, news, video, copyright, education, music, and information that is the sinew of everyday life – directions, health, banking, shopping. (Schultz 2016, n.p.)

The routine experience of shared culture is channelled towards commercial objectives by digital media services that, by design, eliminate the connective tissue of non-commodified civic and public spaces (Couldry and Turow 2014; Couldry and van Dijck 2015). Pressing on the other side are governments and politicians that, in their valorisation of economic agendas, find it easier to attack or reduce the budgets of national cultural institutions such as the Australia Council and the ABC than intervene in markets. This mindset makes it more likely that an expanding set of cultural expressions, activities and identities will be captured and curated by the operations of FAANG and their ilk.

There is a perverse irony in the situation outlined by Schultz. The intangible values of creativity, belonging and sharing long perpetuated by national cultural industries and institutions are the very same values fetishized and commodified by connective media services such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter (van Dijck 2013). The conclusion of Schultz's analysis recalls Bourdieu's critique of the distorting effects of the commercial on every field. The purpose of cultural policy and funding by government needs to be defended and maintained or 'we will be reduced as citizens to passive consumers in a digital marketplace that values us only for our ability to pay' (Schultz 2016, n.p.).

Conclusion: The Ideas Boom (and Bust)

The continuing absence of a national cultural policy leaves open the question of whether or how culture features in other government policies dealing with digital innovation and the technology sector. This is a subject deserving of a separate essay length critique. The Department of Industry, Innovation and Science's *Australia's Digital Economy Update* (Australian Government 2016) and the *National Innovation and Science Agenda* (Australian Government 2015) both call for examination in this regard. These

documents ignore the cultural industries as sites of meaningful innovation or implicitly reduce them to by-products of an 'exciting' and 'agile' digital economy. The *National Innovation and Science Agenda* in particular is one of Prime Minister Turnbull's signature policies, featuring the cringe-worthy slogan, 'Welcome to the Ideas Boom', on its cover (Australian Government 2015). It presents a vision of Silicon Valley-style entrepreneurialism taking root in Australia in which culture *is* venture capital, start-ups and a commercial 'innovation ecosystem' (p. 8). It is also a model based on a limited understanding of history, underestimating both the duration and scale of public sector involvement, investment and research in the founding and growth of the information technology and digital media industries in the US (Castells 2001; Lander and Schmidt 2017).

Taken from *Creative Nation*, the quotation presented at the outset of this chapter alludes to the crossing of the Rubicon River in northern Italy by Julius Caesar and his army in 49BC, setting off a chain of events that helped form the Roman Empire. By way of analogy, the Internet and the digital 'revolution' it unleashed represent the passing of a technical threshold. Media and communications and the 'realm of culture' are now mutually constituted to an unprecedented degree. Such ideas are reflected in the adaptation of Bourdieusian theory, or 'fields of the digital', in an effort to deal with the operation and social structuring effects of digital networks and media use. From a policy formulation perspective, however, the rubicon crossed in the mid-1990s was one in which culture became synonymous with marketisation and economistic categories, fuelled by rapid expansions in information technology, digital media and telecommunications. For all its significance and good intentions, the seeds for this development are even embedded in the Introduction of *Creative Nation*: 'This cultural policy is also an economic policy. Culture creates wealth' (Commonwealth of Australia 1994, n.p.). The tragedy is that, in the subsequent absence of a detailed and evolving national cultural policy, private wealth creation is the governing logic of culture in the digital age.

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[1] An Australian Research Council (ARC) Future Fellowship (FT130100506) supported the research presented in this chapter.

[2] Although, as many readers are aware, a serious effort was made to redress this state of affairs in March 2013 with the launch of the national cultural policy, *Creative Australia* (Commonwealth of Australia 2013), by the then Federal Minister for the Arts, Simon Crean. Unfortunately, Crean was sacked from his ministerial post just 12 days after the launch of *Creative Australia* following a botched Labor Party leadership spill. His government was voted out of office six months later. *Creative Australia* was disregarded by the incoming Coalition government that featured new Arts Minister, George Brandis, and then scrapped altogether in the 2014-15 budget.

[3] Apple's cash reserves alone were estimated to be US$215.7 billion in 2015.

[4] Conveniently ignoring the political, civic, legal, environmental, market competition, privacy and security issues that flow from this situation.

[5] This ongoing divide arguably helped set the scene for the actions of the then Arts Minister, George Brandis, in 2016. Funded by cuts to the Australia Council, Brandis set up a (now partially defunct) National Program for Excellence in the Arts that favoured the operations of large companies. Ben Eltham (2016, p. 1) offers a vivid account of the 'bloodbath' that occurred 13 May 2016 because of this policy preference. Referred to as 'Black Friday' within the arts sector, 65 organisations were defunded and over 100 organisations were informed that their four-year funding applications had been unsuccessful.

[6] In 2013, the issue of copyright was revisited in the then Labor government's *Creative Australia* policy (Homan 2016; Commonwealth of Australia 2013).

[7] A theme satirised wonderfully by the Australian television comedy series, *Utopia*, which is screened by the ABC and Netflix (http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/utopia/).