

# Third world networks: the democratisation of culture

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Karen Jaynes

As Culturelink asked me to contribute to the theme of networks in the twenty-first century, I wondered what I could share that would be of interest and value to a broad cross section of those working in the cultural sector globally. The title of the Third World Culturelink Conference immediately gave me an idea: third world networks. In South Africa we are networking in a third world context, which adds a particular nuance and meaning to the networking we do. Arts and culture has an added urgency and meaning in the third world, which encourages people to network. So I would like to share from my experience and raise what I believe to be some important questions for networks going forward. And in order to do that, we need to revisit some issues that we have perhaps forgotten or that we take too much for granted.

In South Africa our culture, like our politics, was strongly controlled for many years under the apartheid regime. When the dust settled after 1994, new attempts were made to control what culture was in our country and who would have access to it. The question of what culture is, and who owns it, is a critical one.

*The Encyclopaedia Britannica* defines culture as ‘integrated patterns of human knowledge, belief, and behaviour that are both a result of and integral to the human capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding

generations. Culture thus consists of language, ideas, beliefs, customs, taboos, codes, institutions, tools, techniques, works of art, rituals, ceremonies, and symbols'. If all of this is culture, then who can it belong to apart from everyone. One of the organizations I work with is the Performing Arts Network of South Africa (PANSA), and one of its primary aims is the democratization of information, or doing the best to ensure that all artists know of all opportunities; that art is not only an elitist affair; and that everyone has equal access. In today's world, knowledge is currency, and those who control knowledge hold the power. Therefore, one of our critical roles, particularly in our interactions with government, has been to promote and encourage transparency and accountability. These two aspects are crucial not only for government, but for everyone involved in the cultural sector.

As I am focusing on cultural policy, I would caution that this is a very complex topic. Cultural policy can be many things, and we tend to focus on it as being policies by governmental and political bodies to govern the how, why, and most especially the how much, of arts and culture. Let us try and broaden these definitions. Should artists themselves not have policies – whether they call them visions, manifestos or principles? Should we as networks not have policies – about who our membership is and what our mandates are? What about the private sector, big business, should they not have policies about culture, be it culture within their business or their role in the broader picture of arts and culture? If culture belongs to everyone, then why should we limit ourselves to government being the keepers of cultural policy?

And when it comes to governmental policies, how much power do they and should they have? I have stated that knowledge is power – this government already has. Money is of course also power – government has this too. How do we ensure that too much power, too much ownership, is not left in the hands of government? This comes back to our role as networks and our role as *democratizers* – it is an awkward word, but I cannot think of a better one. If we are representing artists and networks of artists, then we are well placed to play a role in the creation of or mediation of cultural policy. This is what networking is all about – using yet another kind of power, the power of numbers. One artist saying a policy should say a particular thing can be ignored, a thousand registered arts organizations saying the same thing cannot be ignored as easily. It is our job to engage with cultural policies and policy making – understanding existing policies and their ramifications, understanding our constituency and their needs, and mediating between the two.

One radical shift in cultural policy development, which PANSA was able to engineer, was by engaging with government to grapple with the eternal issue

of cultural ownership and the role of government within that. The day heard our provincial Minister of Arts and Culture say ‘I understand now – it’s not our job to create culture, or to decide what culture is created, but rather to create a facilitative environment in which artists can create’ – that was the day I knew we were doing something right. What networks are, at their core, are artists taking responsibility for themselves and their own issues. They are artists moving away from a sense of entitlement and towards a proactive way of doing art. They are artists looking at the problems they are faced with and coming up with solutions, and not complaints.

Policy is definitely an area where less is more: less control, less rigidity, less restriction – more freedom, more capacity, more potential. Any cultural policy needs to take into account that culture is a living thing – it is eternally evolving and shifting as humans evolve and shift. Cultural policies should focus on mechanisms, procedures and methodologies. What we as artists should be pushing for is fewer policies. People have expressed trepidation about lack of regulation of culture, particularly in the digital realm. Why is it that we like so much to be told what to do and how to do it? For example, recently South Africa proposed a minor amendment to the copyright law. We like copyright law, in general, it is a good thing; it protects the rights of artists – right? Well, this amendment had the best of intentions. It was to do with the protection of indigenous knowledge, and at its core was the battle to preserve *Rooibos*, a herbal tea commonly drunk in South Africa which an American company had just merrily copyrighted as a trademarked phrase. But they decided: let’s not stop there. And they introduced a small clause concerning the copyrighting of traditional song and dance. They proposed the establishment of a bank of these songs and dances, and that once they had been catalogued they could only be performed exactly as catalogued, and only by people of the cultural group which laid claim to these songs and dances. In effect, they were proposing to define in very specific terms who owned certain pieces of culture. The implications of this little sub-clause would have been monumental. Trying to define whether or not you were entitled to use a dance – if it was a registered Zulu dance and the producer of the show was Sotho, but the dancers themselves were Zulu except one of them was Xhosa, but actually the choreographer was Jewish ...

Imagine telling the New Zealand rugby team that only Maori team members could perform the *Haka*?

Imagine telling Scotland that they were no longer allowed to sell tartan to tourists unless they could prove their lineage?

Happily, enough artists rose up and complained, and as a result this particular sub-clause was wiped off the amended copyright bill. But there are several similar pieces of policy and legislation waiting to happen. It is our job as networks to maintain the balance between the artists and the rapid evolution of arts and culture, and the policy makers who are inevitably lagging behind. Here is our challenge as networks: to keep art and artists at our core. This was raised by other experts, and is echoed by Lawrence Lessig in his inspiring talk on 'Who owns culture', when he says that 'we need to hear less from lawyers, lobbyists, activists and arts managers, and more from artists' (Lessig, 2005). We as networks need to have that same realization as that arts minister did, that our job is not to create art or decide what art gets made, but to create the space in which artists can create. Let me close with a quote from Lawrence Lessig, an appeal to artists and to arts networks:

'How is art made? Tell us. Tell us how to use the tools of law to regulate you. Because unless you start showing us, you artists, you authors, you creators, unless you start showing us how you create and have always created ... the only way to end this extraordinarily destructive rhetoric, is for artists to sing to us in a way that distracts us from the craziness' (Lessig, 2005).

## Reference

Lessig, Lawrence (2005). 'Who owns culture'. New York Public Library  
<http://video.google.com/videoplay?docid=6122403781064290619>