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# Networks, cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue: new horizons

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*Networks are everywhere.  
All you need is an eye for them.  
(Barabási, 2002)*

**A**lmost half a century ago, American sociologist Daniel Bell announced the coming of the post-industrial and information society founded on science and technology, the rise of service economies and mass consumption. Bell foresaw the rise of networks, of the Internet, the wiring of the world. In his analysis of modern society, culture is one of three distinct realms of an amalgam (the two others are social structure and polity). Even though he would say of himself: 'I am a conservative in culture because I respect tradition', he was aware of the deep changes and new challenges that faced culture at a time when mass consumption became the leading value of modern society (Bell, 1976). Culture, according to Bell, is becoming the most dynamic part of our civilization in the constant search for a new sensitivity. In this quest, the diversity of cultural experiences plays an important part. The world's geographic borders no longer exist and, practically since the nineteen fifties, the world is opening up towards new ways of communication. Bell was a visionary who foresaw the revolutionary changes in communications, through which the transmission of international informational data, the exchange and the creation of an ever growing number of links between individuals, groups, societies, nations and continents, was to become increasingly rapid. His analysis of the contradictory effects of the structural changes (centralization and control on the one hand, and the opening

up of societies on the other) points to the key developmental factor that was to mark the end of the last century and the first decade of the new one: intercultural communication and dialogue.

### **Cultural networks, authentic expression of change**

Cultures develop through complex dialogues with other cultures. They cannot develop 'next to each other', but through dialogue and interaction. In today's digitalized, competitive and conflicting world, no country or region, no society or group can subsist by itself. Thus, today, intercultural dialogue lies at the core of international activities, and represents, as the United Nations emphasize, one of the key challenges facing humanity (UNESCO, 2009).

What is essential for the promotion of intercultural dialogue is inherent to cultural networks, namely a democratic and non-discriminatory approach to culture and cultural diversity, openness towards other cultures, a widening space for dialogue and cooperation. Hence, the practice of intercultural dialogue can be explained in relation to cultural networks as innate to the networks' *raison d'être*. Cultural networks of the so-called 'network age' and 'networked information age' of the eighties have undergone significant transformation, growing from networks through which information in the field of culture was exchanged, to networks which point to a new, more complex situation, articulated around the issue of cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue. Through the networking processes, cultural diversity and intercultural communication have been promoted. Drawing on five waves of surveys, between 1981 and 2007, of nationally representative samples covering 90 societies in all major regions worldwide, Norris and Inglehart found that communication was becoming more open and cosmopolitan and results also show that the fear of loss of cultural diversity is mostly unfounded (Norris and Inglehart, 2009).

Today, the entire field of international relations involves the activities of transnational and transcultural networks. They have an important position in redefining global communication and cooperation. Acting internationally, connected through networks, brings new ideas, new forms and new working methods to international cultural relations, based on democratization, decentralization and non-institutionalization, that is, on the non-existence of closed structures. Through their non-hierarchical, heterogeneous and horizontal character, and their flexibility, networks foster the exchange of different cultural values and facilitate intercultural dialogue. Cultural networks know no boundaries. They embrace people from across the world with different fields of interest and levels of experience but who share a commitment to intercultural communication and exchange.

Cultural networks make it possible for one culture or one society, group or individual, to gain insight into the problems of other societies and cultures, resulting in a better understanding of their own problems. They do not represent just the 'service sector' or 'infrastructure' and 'tools' for members/users/creators – they far surpass that role. Networks are an authentic expression of cultural change and of a new approach to intercultural dialogue, through which new knowledge is produced and new values are formed.

### **Potential of networks for intercultural dialogue**

In the modern world, cultures have identified some questions common to all, such as the questions of identity and diversity, as well as of migration and its impact on social cohesion, and sustainable development. The increasing understanding of these issues as common in the world indicates that an awareness of the interdependence of cultures is growing. The recognition of the value of cultural partnerships in addressing these issues is also rising. However, the potential of networks for intercultural dialogue has not yet been recognized. As the *Compendium on Cultural Policies and Trends in Europe* shows, the permeation of intercultural issues/networks in cultural policy is still incomplete (*Compendium*, 2010). Cultural policies remain essentially national in their scope and still lack a strong international dimension. Before national bodies (ministries of culture, national and local cultural agencies, etc.), the significance of cultural networks was recognized by foundations, which began investing in transnational projects of cultural networks. In this regard, even today, cultural policies are slow in recognizing the potentials of cultural networks and in supporting their projects accordingly. International cultural policies could play a vital role in supporting the growth of networks, but they need to be rethought (Matarasso, 2010) and re-focused (Cowen, 2002). It is the same with the need for new international strategies: with the growing competition from, for example, China, India or Brazil, networking activities are crucial as they draw attention to a variety of value systems and different experiences in the world.

Meanwhile, UNESCO's world report on cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue, entitled *Investing in Cultural Diversity and Intercultural Dialogue*, underlines the importance of networks in 'overcoming closed identities and promoting cultural pluralism' (UNESCO, 2009). The multidimensional character of identity (not only in the sense of individual and collective identity, but also in the social meaning of identity that is reflected in the appearance of different forms of culture, from subcultures to new digital cultures) is not an abstract question of defining the (current) situation of an individual or group, but rather a long-term issue related to the development

of all cultures and, as such, it is closely linked to intercultural dialogue and global interaction. In the realization of this interaction, the role of cultural networks is decisive. In fact, our globalized world may be perceived as a network of diverse cultures, which continuously express the necessity of interactive relations for their existence and for the development of new creative values and practices.

The 2005 UNESCO *Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions* encourages cultural interaction and intercultural dialogue, and establishes innovative approaches to international cooperation. The role of networks is stressed in one important aspect: they enable a wider dissemination of cultural and creative content, providing more opportunities to reach new and larger – even global – audiences and to access a wider range of sources and cultural expressions. The convention outlines the relevance of the distribution of and access to cultural expressions. Today, it is evident that cultural diversity and the economy are far from being incompatible, since cultural diversity reaffirms creativity and innovation. Cultural networks initiate and foster the transnational mobility of artists and the mobility of goods and services of cultural and creative industries in accessing new market opportunities internationally. Practices have shown that the networking of cultures has stimulated new dynamics of cultural diversity on a global level.

### **The role of regions and the growing importance of creative economy**

The dynamics of world development largely reside in modern regions and encompass production, trade and other elements related to cooperation and functional inclusion in the flows of international exchange and development. Regions affirm their singularities and specific creative expressions. It is thus crucial to ensure the presence of different regional and local specificities in an international context. Networks contribute to this new regional vision. Cultural networks especially contribute to the sustainable development of cultural and creative industries (CCI) / enterprises at regional and local levels and their inclusion in international communication. As stated in a study on the entrepreneurial dimension of cultural and creative industries, networking is crucial in enabling innovative processes and the development of new types of cultural expressions and collaborative solutions. Cultural and creative entrepreneurs 'rely heavily on the use of networks within highly innovative and risk-oriented environments', and the study concludes that 'in order to support the CCIs, collaboration and networks need to be supported' (HKU, 2010).

Similarly, a European Commission green paper gives the following recommendation: 'All possible networks (across Europe) should be utilised to facilitate knowledge and capacity transfer between areas lagging behind and growth centres' (European Commission, 2010).

As the UNCTAD/UNDP *Creative Economy Report 2010* highlights, the interface among creativity, culture, economics and technology, as expressed in the ability to create and circulate intellectual capital, has the potential to 'generate income, jobs and export earnings, while at the same time contributing to social inclusion, cultural diversity and human development' (UNCTAD/UNDP, 2010). The importance of expanding the economic and social potential of creative industries, and the role of networks in this process, is often neglected. The report explores the effects of networks on unlocking marketing and distribution channels for music, films etc., and the ways in which connectivity is facilitating creative collaboration.

### **From networking of cultures to networked cultures**

With the end of globalization, a rethinking of culture has become necessary. To return to Daniel Bell's vision, 'this is in fact a revolutionary change which will ultimately transform the very basis of human society'. The new era is marked by the impact of the digital revolution on cultural practices and by deep social transformations (reflected primarily in the new relations between the growing individualism and society). The transformational processes of cultural identities have evolved especially with the rise of migration phenomena and mobility. Intercultural dialogue has become a dynamic *modus vivendi* of social integration under today's pluralistic conditions. The question of post-global culture creates numerous challenges also for networks.

The processes taking place today, on the path from networking of cultures to networked cultures, are marked by the circulation and creation of values through which new ways of dialogue between different cultures are being realized. These processes are also marked by debates, conflicts and contradictions, as 'the network society is a contradictory structure, and a conflictual practice, as all societies in history have been' (Castells, 2004). The uncertainty marking our times has made the formulation of strategic lines of development difficult. Insistence on human capital as key strategic instrument, on knowledge, creativity and innovation, on sustainable social cohesion, lies at the centre of future projections, for example in the UN Millennium Development Goals and in Project Europe 2020 and 2030. They demand new models of work, cooperation and partnership in an increasingly interdependent world, by the means of networking.

Through complex processes, networks are developing more intensive collaborations and connections.<sup>1</sup> Numerous cultural institutions, governmental and nongovernmental agencies, associations, arts councils and organizations, from different countries and from all continents, are increasingly getting together for joint projects, creating new forms of networking which promote cultural diversity, the mobility of artists and other cultural workers, and, above all, intercultural dialogue and communication. A networked identity is evolving, not in the technological sense of an online identity, but rather in a cultural one, which resists homogenization and disrespect for specificities, and which, at its core, features the promotion of cultural diversity as a global issue of development. Through the process of multiple and interactive networked identity, key cultural values (*avant tout*, democratization of relations among different cultural values) and new models of global pluralistic cultural dialogue are emerging.

The issues of a possible new cultural deal (which, paraphrasing the New Deal, Mary Ann DeVlieg raises in this book), of redefining space and time, of entering a new paradigm of culture which is already being called a post-network situation and of revalorizing networks, significantly demonstrate that we are entering a new phase of network development, a phase that will be marked by the creation of new forms of diversity, increasingly transnational and transcultural, and new, networked, cultural identities. Networked cultures and identities in no way represent the end of networks and networking, or a static form of existence: their future lies in dynamic processes of transformation and change.

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<sup>1</sup> A good practice in this sense is 'Networked Cultures', initiated at Goldsmiths University of London in 2005, which investigates contemporary cultural transformations through examining the potentials and effects of networked practices. Collaborating with art, architectural and urban practices in our globalized world, it explores 'platforms of agency in which the cultural relations have become key in negotiating a multi-inhabitation of territories and narratives across institutional, social or geographic boundaries' ([www.networkedcultures.org](http://www.networkedcultures.org)). The processes towards networked cultures concern especially the (young) network generation which is growing up with disappearing borders. The example of the Transatlantic Network 2020 can be mentioned, which builds 'new innovative collaborations between young North Americans and Europeans, to address challenges that will define their generation'. One of its focus areas is creativity and innovation ([www.britishcouncil.org/tn2020](http://www.britishcouncil.org/tn2020)).

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## Links

- [www.britishcouncil.org/tn2020](http://www.britishcouncil.org/tn2020)
- [www.networkedcultures.org](http://www.networkedcultures.org)