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Magnus Lawrie
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Sharing and Sustainability Across Institutional and Self-instituted Forms

Magnus Lawrie

Abstract

In recent years, instrumentalist agendas have had a profound impact, internationally, on the definition and delivery of education. Strengthened by the economic crisis, these agendas today threaten to dissolve the uniqueness of many academic institutions. Communities of practitioners which depend upon these organizations find themselves pushed into ever more precarious economic relations. Media attention has highlighted the idea of information as a public good and brought the ethics of information sharing to the nub of a debate over openness in society. Is the focus on permeability, on access and integration, an opportunity to advance the ideal of academic gift exchange or a threat to its distinctive forms? How can individuals and cooperating groups (often time-limited research partnerships) within educational institutions gain through sharing as a social act? What effect can individuals have in forming sustainable creative networks and what chances do such networks have for embedding a lasting culture of sharing (of cooperative and interdisciplinary practices) within institutions, both educational and social, both institutional and self-instituted? The paper addresses these questions, by reference to the project Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice (ELMCIP) and some of its linked organizations. ELMCIP is a collaboration between several European academic institutions which aims to 'develop a network based creative community', focused on practitioners and theorists in the field of Electronic Literature. It has recently joined several international organizations with the objective to share datasets on published digital literature across a number of platforms. What are the influencing factors in such ventures and how might this cooperation be informed by methods evolved by P2P and Open Access communities? How can sharing be engaged from a social dimension in order to encourage sustainability beyond the lifetime of projects such as ELMCIP?

Today, in Europe, governments are dedicating themselves to reductions in welfare state spending (BBC, 2011). In Ireland, Greece, Portugal and Spain, money is being raised through the sale of public assets (Business Week, 2011), whilst similar plans are being considered in Italy (Business Week, 2011). In the UK, the economic crisis since 2007 has become a rallying point for an agenda of cuts which directly targets state institutions, both social and educational (BBC, 2011). As a consequence of these reductions, UK workers in tertiary education are facing severe job cuts (TES, 2011) and are seeing their institutions transformed; in Scotland, there remains only one independent art school (The Scotsman, 2011) and there are fears of a 'shotgun' merger between the two universities in Dundee (The Herald, 2011). Cuts affect also those who rely on the sector for short-term contracts, and for whom it is a locus of formal and informal networks. In the arts, practitioners who are members of these communities face a double bind, as funding bodies pass stringent budget reductions along the chain, thus limiting opportunities for creative practitioners to

access further sources of income. This has recently been seen in arts sectors, for example in the Netherlands, during 2011 (Dutchnews.nl, 2011). Artistic responses to these conditions range from 'outreach' programmes as part of the curriculum of academic institutions (for example, the 'Pequod' poetry project with students of Erling Björgvinsson in Malmo, Sweden), to those which could be seen as less intrinsic to the institution (an example is AND, the library and publishing project at Byam Shaw School of Art in London) and others which are altogether independent of any formal institution, such as Strickland Distribution in Glasgow, UK and the anti-cuts campaign group UK Uncut.

The cuts, which at the time of writing, in the UK, have largely still to be realized (The Guardian, 2011), are being applied to organizations instituted from above (by the state) and from below (by individuals and communities). As prominent examples, in October 2011, the BBC announced a significant and profound re-structuring, introducing up to 2000 staff lay-offs and more programme repeats in the schedule (BBC, 2011); artist-led organizations have been the major casualty in the Arts Council of England's most recent funding round (A-N, 2011). Hand in hand with the logic of cutting state provision, is privatisation. Even before considering the effect of student tuition fees, it seems that in UK higher education, privatisation is already well under way; Sally Hunt, General Secretary of the Universities and College Union states, "While public expenditure on post-16 education has risen 6% in ten years, private spending has gone up 80%. With around a third of the system now privately funded, the market is taking over in front of our very eyes" (The Guardian, 2011).

In the media, even-handed reporting has been one of the founding principles of the BBC (BBC, 2011) so that in the attack on public state institutions, sought-after impartiality in public debate may also be in peril. The concern for objective criticality is the lifeblood of academic inquiry, as underlined in an address from MacKenzie Wark to students at The Open School in New York, "The aim of education is to negate the given, and in so doing, throw into sharp relief both what is right and what is wrong with the social order. Education is not outside of the incessant struggle to make the world. It is one of the essential moments of that struggle" (The Open School, 2011).

Whether or not a clear link can be made between the critical thinking which universities have long existed to advance, and impartiality in the media, it seems there is good reason to think that both are threatened by the present unravelling of the welfare state. Two separate media stories bring a more optimistic measure to the discussion. The first concerns WikiLeaks, its continued publication of classified information and attempts to impugn the organization and those who run it (Harvard Law and Policy Review, 2011); the second, involves News Corporation and the illegal accessing of voice mail by staff at News of The World (The Guardian, 2011). Together these stories have brought the ethics of sharing to the nub of a debate which matches the availability of information and the public interest, with the individual (and institutional) right to privacy. Because of the nature of the two organizations (WikiLeaks, a hacker inspired, not-for-profit institution which tends to see

information as a public good, and News International, a for-profit, global corporation) these questions especially draw attention to issues of integrity and transparency and they resonate with concerns about the identity of our public institutions. At a time when the future direction of bastions of the welfare state (including even the British National Health Service) are under intense scrutiny, institutions face increasing pressure from the market. Hito Steyerl reflects on this situation,

> "Now the problem is – and this is indeed a very widespread attitude – that when a cultural institution comes under pressure from the market, it tries to retreat into a position which claims it is the duty of the nation state to fund it and to keep it alive. The problem with that position is that it is an ultimately protectionist one, that it ultimately reinforces the construction of national public spheres and that under this perspective the cultural institution can only be defended in the framework of a New Left attitude seeking to retreat into the remnants of a demolished national welfare state and its cultural shells and to defend them against all intruders" (2006, p. 18).

In the present political climate, geared as it is towards reduction of cultural, educational and social public goods, how can the focus on permeability, and access from markets, become an opportunity to advance the ideals of information-sharing and an academic gift economy? What effect can individuals have in forming sustainable creative networks and what chances can such networks have for embedding a lasting culture of sharing within our institutions?

These questions lead us to consider how individuals and their networks are positioned in relation to academic and cultural institutions. In broad historical terms, 'institutional critique' has been in two key phases, in the 1970s and 1990s, with a third contemporary phase in the 2000s (Raunig & Ray, 2009). More recently, Ned Rossiter has recognized, "...an urgent need for new institutional forms" (2006, p. 13). Both the accounts of Rossiter and the Transform project (2005–8) of the European Institute for Progressive Cultural Policies, inevitably take account of Jacques Derrida's work, re-thinking the university as an ideal other, whose subjects are nevertheless inextricably engaged in a with-against relation to the institution, a relation which suggests at once meeting and leaving the academy (Morgan Wortham, 2006). In his complex relationship with the university Derrida sought to both recognize and do away with its existing form. For Derrida, the institution is inseparably within our experience, of which there is no 'outside', "In abstract and general terms, what remains constant in my thinking … is indeed a critique of institutions, but one that sets out not from a wild and spontaneous pre- or non-institution, but rather from counter-institutions. I do not think there is or should be, the 'non-institutional'" (Derrida in Morgan Wortham, 2006, p. 13).

This deletion of an 'outside', has recently been challenged from an anarchist standpoint, notably by De Angelis (De Angelis, 2010). A contrasting position is apparent in Alex

Galloway's identification of protocol as a universal component of culture (2004), to which, by implication, there is no exterior. In the preface to Protocol, Galloway emphasizes the degree to which it underpins the architecture of our interactions, asserting, "...there are few logical explanations for excluding computer discourse from the fields of literary criticism, linguistics, or even poetry" (2004, xxiv). From this perspective, digital literary forms and modes of communication and sharing (technical, social and political) are mutually dependent. Creative forms that produce, network and intertwine computer discourse and language are represented in the emerging academic field of Electronic Literature. Key in this area are matters of creation, interpretation, preservation and archival of variable media. In computer networked contexts, this means importance is also placed on co-operation and sharing. Formal research is largely undertaken through short term projects within academic institutions. Projects such as the 'Media Upheavals' programme at Siegen University (which has in fact, been one of a few long term research projects) and Innsbruck University's own DILIMAG project are among numerous university-based programmes of an emerging movement led by an 'Institutional Avant-Garde' (Tabbi, 2008), prevalent in Europe and North America.

An important mainstay of this research area, for over a decade, has been the Electronic Literature Organization. It has been the home for a series of research projects as well as a source for other projects, independent of it. The ELO is a U.S. non-profit organization, established in 1989 with the principle aim of bringing, "...born-digital literature to the attention of authors, scholars, developers, and the current generation of readers for whom the printed book is no longer an exclusive medium..." (ELO, 2011). The ELO seeks to strengthen this mission through a network of academia, the arts and business. Its commitment is to collect, interpret, archive and preserve digital literature in "accessible forums, according to peer-to-peer review standards and technological best practices" (ELO, 2011). The ELO review process is based on a method of collaborative editing involving an extended group of editors who work towards 'fixing' a digital work, prior to its being made widely available. From 2001–2010 the ELO's board instigated a number of research activities, for example, The Preservation, Archiving, and Dissemination project (PAD). Its outcomes included recommendations to, "...identify threatened and endangered electronic literature and to maintain accessibility, encourage stability, and ensure availability of electronic works for readers, institutions, and scholars" (ELO, 2011). PAD also resulted in a paper 'Acid-Free Bits', which makes, "...a plea for writers to work proactively in archiving their own creations, and to bear these issues in mind even in the act of composition" (Montfort & Wardrip-Fruin, 2004). Subsequently, a framework for the migration of electronic works to stable environments, the X-Literature Initiative was begun. 'X-Lit' had the goal, "...to allow diverse stakeholders (authors, publishers, archivists, academics, programmers, grant officers, and others) to get just enough of a glimpse of each other's expertise to see how an overall system for maintaining and reviving the life of electronic literature might be possible" (Lui et al, 2005). 'Born-Again Bits', is a subsequent paper to

come out of PAD. It formulates methods to engage, "...necessary partners in an overall, renewable ecology of electronic literature" (Lui et al, 2005) and advocates "The migration of electronic literature ... in a framework that accommodates not just swarming technical changes but equally complex, swarming social needs" (Lui et al, 2005).

Parallel to the work of PAD, ELO's board has sought to structure the evolving Directory, by incorporating social and technological aspects of the Semantic Web (especially, the 'folksonomical' practice of tagging), to enhance the findability of works. Members of the community, particularly researchers, have made collections of words which categorize and label works of electronic literature. An ELO-led wiki, set up to widen participation and foster the work of keyword tagging, has given way to a web implementation of the Electronic Literature Directory, known as ELD 2.0. The ELD has the distinction of using an agreed and immutable super-set of categories and labels for the description of works, whilst the less directed, collaborative tagging practices of the ELO-wiki remain in other respects. Preservation concerns not only the content of objects, but also the connections between objects, "Those who neglect basic preservation issues very quickly discover the mess that technological obsolescence makes, not only of individual works, but of the connections among texts, images, and code-work that are crucial for any sustained, community-wide literary practice" (Montfort & Wardrip-Fruin, 2004).

Models established by the ELO continue to be investigated by ELMCIP (Electronic Literature as a Model of Creativity and Innovation in Practice), a collaborative research project, running from 2010–2013 and funded by the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA). Seven academic research partners and one non-academic partner are in the research collaboration, which examines "how creative communities of practitioners form within a transnational and transcultural context in a global ... communication environment" (ELMCIP, 2011). ELMCIP takes the community of electronic literature in Europe, as a, "model for creativity and innovation in practice" in order to study and document its formation and interactions, "...and also to further electronic literature research and practice in Europe" (ELMCIP, 2011). Further objectives are to examine, "how electronic literature communities benefit from current educational models … develop pedagogical tools" (ELMCIP, 2011), and see, "how electronic literature manifests in conventional cultural contexts and ... the effects of distributing and exhibiting E-lit in such contexts" (ELMCIP, 2011). ELMCIP's intended outcomes include the production of "an online knowledge base with materials from seminars, project information and an extensive bibliographic record of E-lit works" (ELMCIP, 2011). The knowledge base is a web-based directory of online creative works and related resources, modelled on practices of the Electronic Literature Directory.

Pivotal to advancing this agenda, was the CELL International Workshop on Databases and Bibliographic Standards for Electronic Literature, held in Bergen in June 2011. The symposium and summit was aimed at improving data exchange between Electronic Literature organizations from North American (the ELO and Brown University in the US and NT2 in

Quebec, Canada), Australia (Creative Nation) and Europe (ELMCIP, the Portuguese E-Lit Archive, University of Siegen) and included presentations involving also the University and Public Libraries of Bergen. The workshop led to agreement for the mutual exchange of records between partners. For ELO, ELMCIP and NT2 there were more concrete benefits, possible because of these organizations' experience in using the same software – a free, open source web publishing platform called 'Drupal'; if the workshop represented an instance of the academic gift economy in practice, free software was oiling the wheels.

A content management system, "...known for its flexibility and for the large number of contributors who are involved in its development" (Acquia, 2011), Drupal started life as a message board in 1999. Since then, the project reach has grown exponentially, with an estimated million or more websites deploying the software (Engine Industries, 2011). Drupal founder Dries Buytaert, describes Drupal as, "...the collective efforts of thousands of smart people working together for years, not only for their own interests, but even more so for the benefit of others" (Miles, 2010, p. 1). Today, Drupal's community is formulated around the mission, "...to develop a leading edge open-source content management system that implements the latest thinking and best practices in community publishing, knowledge management, and software design" (Drupal, 2011). This effort is built on the values of, "Flexibility, simplicity, and utility ... Teamwork, innovation, and openness in our community; Modularity, extensibility and maintainability in our code" (Drupal, 2011).

The Drupal venture has numerous facets which spring from the enthusiasms of its developers. Who are these developers? In the first place, they are system administrators and programmers who design, build and manage the infrastructure that enables the introduction of new software functionality. These are individuals as well as groups, for example, the Open Source Lab at Oregon State University. There are four steps to getting changes into the code-base that makes up a default Drupal 'Core' installation. These are: think up a feature (think it up); discuss the idea with the community (talk it out); produce the code to make your idea work (code it up) and finally, introduce the changes to Drupal Core itself (get 'er done) (Drupal, 2011). Following these steps is an act referred to as 'reaching out to the community'. As well as in the strict sense of technical contributors, developers can equally be understood as those people who enhance the project in any way, whether by creating art work, making a monetary donation, or responding to questions from users in forums. Such activity is reflected in the plethora of discussion groups that exist. 'Paying for the Plumbing' is a group devoted to discussions about funding Drupal. Other groups, for example for 'Drupal Event Organization', also do things to make Drupal a sustainable project (such as co-ordinating the community's 'DrupalCon' conferences). In fact, the groups within the sphere of 'Drupalism' are wide ranging, including even one for "friends, partners, spouses, and other associates of Drupal community members" who conspire to not participate in the 'geekdom' of DrupalCons. The diversity of Drupal is visible in projects such as 'Open Atrium' (a version of Drupal providing collaborative workspaces for teams) and 'Acquia', the Drupal 'Software as Service' provider of projects such as 'Open

Scholar' for students and academics, 'Open Public' for government organizations and 'Acquia Commons' social business software. These projects are all evidence that, "Using Drupal saves site builders from reinventing the wheel … Drupal takes you where you drive it, without having to build the car first" (Melancon et al, 2011, xliv).

With the increased sustainability this brings, especially for projects with limited resources, the widening adoption of Drupal in the E-Lit community could be a significant moment in securing the future of E-Lit data. But efforts must go beyond technical measures alone. "The people who now preserve our non-digital culture may have a hard time understanding how existing institutions can help make born-digital work accessible in the future, unless authors, publishers, scholars, and teachers of electronic literature take the time to talk with them about preservation, archiving, and dissemination issues today" (Montfort & Wardrip-Fruin, 2004). Although X-Lit made a case for bringing open standards to E-Lit practices, the extent of the community's identification with free software is so far unclear. Joseph Tabbi of the ELO, has remarked that, "The 2003 Preservation, Archiving and Dissemination group was right to recognize the necessary limits to the 'possible volunteerism of the open-source community'" (2008, p. 70), however acknowledging that, "...the ELO has not yet tested those limits" (2008, p. 70) and thereby suggesting a willingness to explore and experiment with free software methodologies. This curiosity is also demonstrated in the application of the technology and practices of the Social and the Semantic Web. The replication of data, between platforms which operate using the same software and standards, casts key institutes of the E-Literature community as free-loading participants in a culture defined by sharing. Whether this participation is for pragmatic, or for ideological reasons, the possibilities offered may not be apparent until acts of reciprocation, already practised within E-Lit circles, reach out further to the free software community.

At the fringes, perhaps, of its awareness, the academic institutions of E-Literature have a plethora of gift-giving entities, which propose models of organization through transparency and sharing of information. The Open Access movement has in the last few years strengthened through the formation of common good institutions such as the Open Knowledge Foundation, now the umbrella for a range of projects. Notable among these is Open-Bibliography, a numerically small collaboration of experts and professionals, creating formats to describe library catalogue records, which can themselves be placed permanently into the public domain, using a Creative Commons (CC0) license. These descriptors are now being adopted across large institutions such as the European National Libraries (CENL, 2011). The success of the Open-Bibliography project brings to mind the words of the anthropologist Margaret Mead, which appear on the website of the Peer-to-Peer Foundation, "Never doubt that a small group of committed citizens can change the world" (Mead in Peer-to-Peer Foundation, 2011).

The anthropologist James Leach, explored the interface between organization and free software at the 'Prototyping' conference (Media Lab Prado, 2010), where he introduced

the 'Cross-Cultural Partnership Template'. This formula to enhance co-operation, is grounded in open source principles (The Cross-Cultural Partnership, 2011). Now at version 3.0, the document remains under development. This is hardly a weakness, but instead an invitation to contribute by sharing experiences in its actual use. The agreement is an example of free software culture applied in ways that, if adopted, may constructively shape the experiences of individuals in co-operating groups. With its emphasis on social interaction, its relevance for research projects should be clear.

The Cross-Cultural Partnership Template concerns itself with value and mutuality in projects and partnerships and it offers solutions which recognize the worth of free software's culture of sharing. Open-Bibliography, a public interface between literature and free software, has evolved through using many of the co-operative processes implicit in the Cross-Cultural Template. Such projects should be significant to the emerging academic discipline of Electronic Literature, in the way they draw on free software modes of reciprocity and combine with institutional critique which, "...does not oppose the institution, but … does flee from institutionalization and structuralization" (Raunig & Ray, 2009, xvii). Understanding these forms (of organization, exchange and creative refusal) means also to recognize that, "No more than philosophy or science, literature is not an institution among others; it is at once institution and counter-institution, placed at a distance from the institution, at the angle that the institution makes with itself in order to take a distance from itself, by itself" (Derrida in Morgan Wortham, 2006, p. 13). Raunig sees, "...contemporary forms of institutional critique: transformations as ways of escaping from the arts of governing, lines of flight, which are not at all to be taken as homeless or individualistic or escapist and esoteric, even if they no longer allow dreaming of an entirely different exteriority" (2005, p. 5). This view, in conjunction with Derrida's challenge to 'counter-think' the institution may be a vital approach to making and maintaining the connections between university E-Lit programmes and the plethora of organizations (self-organized, self-instituted forms) that make and feed digital literary life.

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