Pitching Possibilities of Emerging Culture:

Positioning Kickstarter as a Cultural Institution and its contributions to the development of Cultural Policy Framework for open digital cultural practice

DOIREANN BONFIELD

Summary:

Kickstarter's mechanism of practice stands as an **open, digital modality** to financing 'creative projects' through a rewards system structure. Within the platform's socio-cultural division, this mode of mediation allows for a basis of cultural production that is determined by an engaged public whose motivations may reside outside of commercial interests. Framing the mechanism of practice as a cultural institution serves to illuminate its socio-cultural feats' alignment with prescriptions of 'core cultural institutions', all the while exposing cultural hierarchies and restrictive iterations of 'culture'.

A dual methodological approach is undertaken; a discourse analysis is employed to deconstruct the barriers to embracing emerging cultural practices and conditions of production within cultural institutions and cultural industries discourses. The theories of Raymond Williams are applied to support the discursive analysis and comparative construction of Kickstarter's mechanism of practice as a cultural institution.

#8

Socio-cultural dimensions of Kickstarter's mechanism of practice, including its informal communities of engagement and public knowledge assets, are then situated within Williams' inferences on technological mediation to cultural production. The *public* socio-cultural valuing processes, borne of the platform's *digital* mechanism of practice, are understood as determinants to an emerging democratic, digitally-mediated course of cultural production.

Key words: Kickstarter; cultural materialism; emerging culture; cultural production; cultural institutions; digital mediation; cultural engagement.

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

Introduction:

Kickstarter is a crowdfunding platform that provides financing services to a

variety of projects ranging from entrepreneurial, to cultural and social (Mitra &

Gilbert, 2014). The platform accommodates project creation in a host of

countries, with the US having the largest pool of creators and crowd

engagement. There remains an impetus to fund creative socio-cultural

productions outside of a wholly commercial arena upon the platform. In this

capacity, Kickstarter's practice serves to illuminate potential development for

public cultural policy frameworks within an institutional context. Framing

Kickstarter as a cultural institution - justified by its mechanism of practice -

serves to situate its online platform and practice within existing cultural

institutions' concepts. Central to this positing is Raymond Williams' theory of

cultural materialism; counter to the predominant iterations of culture

maintained within cultural institutions, Williams conceptualises culture as a

continuously-changing, signifying system determined by meaning-making

practices through which social groups engage.

Kickstarter may be viewed as an alternative outlet to the financing of cultural

productions - liberating creators from the pressures of conventional funding

avenues. However, the predominant perception of the firm's practice is held

as something separate to culture-making. By insisting upon the cultural value

and meaning-making embedded within the *practice*, Kickstarter has the

potential to succinctly exhibit shifts in cultural production and cultural

engagement within public, cultural institutional spheres. To frame its mechanism of practice as a wider 'cultural practice' aids in developing a cultural discourse that has largely overlooked the feats of 'practice as culture'. It is to contribute to a cultural dialogue working to recognise and integrate increasingly important concepts of 'open, digital' cultural practice within public, cultural institutional domains.

As a hypothetical cultural institution, it becomes easier to apply the socio-cultural dimensions of Kickstarter to Williams' valuation of social agency and intention subsumed within cultural materialism. The discursive construction allows for a clear capturing of its socio-cultural feats that may serve to inform future frames of emerging cultural forms and practices, especially those of an open, digital foundation; 'only by locating technologies inside existing social relations, thereby appreciating some of the conflicts and contradictions in technological development, can we start to grasp the possibilities and the limitations of particular innovations' (Freedman, 2002: 349).

Purpose and Objectives:

The pace of digital media advancement challenges the development of policy frameworks within culture institution spheres. Central to this development is the democratisation of cultural processes; the technology-based accessibility to cultural production, dissemination and participation has come to forge

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

novel forms of cultural experience. Cultural digitisation must be accompanied
by adequate cultural policies, if opportunities for access and participation of
individual and collective creativity are to be justly awarded. However, there is
a distinct lack of policy prioritising open digital cultural practices within
institutional spheres.

To highlight such shortcomings, the project counters the 'culture' upheld by
cultural institutions; in this context, cultural institutions are interpreted as the
most efficient nodes of public cultural engagement. 'Culture' within such
spheres becomes an unchanging concept and implies a hierarchical
designation of cultural value. This encourages passive cultural engagement.
Moreover, its predominant iteration has denied a processual version of
'culture'. This limits the potential role of digitisation for the maintenance of
existing cultural institutions and development of novel ones.

By examining the workings of an established, open-access digital cultural
practice of an online platform, a sufficient frame from which culture is
understood as a processual practice can be forged. This is demonstrable by
framing Kickstarter as a hypothetical cultural institution. 'Culture' is prescribed
as a continuously changing and collective practice. This application stems
from Raymond Williams' cultural materialism. Williams sought to prescribe
culture in its entirety i.e., context and production of cultural projects or
products are as significant a component of 'culture' as that which is perceived

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

as a given 'cultural' entity. By adopting Williams' concept of culture and the
social phenomena constituting it, this serves to illuminate the socio-cultural
feats of the platform's open digital cultural practice. It may be then applied to
the design of public policy concerning open digital practice and cultural
production.

Research Methods:

To investigate how positioning Kickstarter as a cultural institution contributes
to the development of cultural policy frameworks for open digital cultural
practice, a case study was undertaken. Integrating its mechanism of practice
and its subsequent cultural practices into potential strategies for the
development of cultural institutions was achieved by analysing the platform as
a potential cultural institution. Systematically describing the characteristics of
the organisation's practice aided in expanding conceptions around open,
digital cultural practice. A single-case, exploratory case study design was
employed.

The aim of the research project set out to understand 'how' the socio-cultural
sphere of the crowdfunding platform may come to inform future policy
regarding open access to cultural practice and engagement through
examining the social phenomena associated with the platform's funding
mechanism. As such, the unit of analysis was a system of action. This
required secondary data - namely journal articles and previous studies on

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

both digital cultural policy implementations, and the crowdfunding firm,

Kickstarter.

Explanation or theory-building was the data analysis pattern employed (Yin,

2003). Selected literature and existing data were compared; interpretations

were concurrently organised around discursive bands relevant to the

research question aims: Communities of engagement, public knowledge

assets, accessing culture production, and 'culture as practice'. The

relationships of the platform's practice were systematically examined and

integrated into constructive discussions on the potential of the platform's

capability to inform future cultural policy frameworks. These theoretical

developments referred consistently to the conceptual framework of Raymond

Williams' theories surrounding cultural practice and production. Potential

policy recommendations, applicable to an open-access cultural engagement

outside of a commercial context, were derived from findings.

To ensure of adequate construct validity, the sources from which the theory-

based analytical strategy were applied varied. A methodological triangulation

increased confidence in the interpretation process and so a discourse

analysis was also employed. The working definitions of culture in a cultural

institution context were examined and contested to dissect the cultural

authority upheld through dominant iterations.

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

Findings:

Application of Raymond Williams' 'Culture':

Williams' cultural materialism claimed 'culture-making' was 'governed by the
manner in which particular cultural activities or texts are financed, produced,
circulated and received - a process mediated by a range of economic,
political, technological, *social* [emphasis added] and cultural forces which set
limits upon, and exert pressures upon, the available repertoire of cultural
forms' (1981: Ch. 7; Flew, 1997: 12). It accommodates 'a diversity of social
theory' and social indicators ignored by the valuation processes in dominant
cultural institutional discourses (Jackson, 1996: 234). The central conflict
concerns traditions that do not pertain to the entirety of William's social
determinants. Instead, 'culture' denotes the acceptance of cultural forms
dictated by the valuation processes of cultural authorities retaining discursive
dominance within public cultural institutional spheres. By contrast, a
renegotiation of cultural productions, relevant to the public's capacity to
support or engage, is captured in the discourse surrounding crowdfunding. As
such, this discursive field serves as a microcosm for a course of culture that
is determined by public engagement. Kickstarter's practice excites a greater
consideration of Williams' cultural materialism as it accommodates a basis of
cultural production aligned with an engaged public.

Williams' sense of culture serves to expand the designation of 'culture', and
thus, 'cultural institutions' (1977; 1981; 2017). Adopting this 'culture' and

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

applying it to potential initiatives concerned with publicly engaged cultural
production reframes the relationships between cultural institutions' stratified
social orders, and prioritises the inclusive social determinants of cultural
formation. Williams' 'culture' encompasses continuous cultural processes
revealing and expressing '*social locations'* - something of which is made more
transparent upon Kickstarter's platform given its structure (1981:13).

Denying 'culture' as a procedural practice obstructs consideration of the
conditions of cultural production. This relates centrally to communication
inhibition. Culture is communicated in public institutional contexts but is
denied a wider democratic communicative capacity. Rather than
reincorporating the socio-cultural context of the existing content of public
cultural institutions, the appliance of Williams' 'culture' should serve to create
an invitational platform from which 'culture' is visible and interpretable as
'processes mediated centrally by social relations' (Williams, 1981). An open
access 'creative site' of socio-cultural relations determining culture in real-
time may be informed by Kickstarter's practice.

Characteristics from which to Inform Potential Public Cultural Policy:
A 'digital pitch' discourse emerges from Kickstarter's practice. Potential
cultural products are exposed to *an open market of reception*. In such cases,
potential cultural productions are subjected to forms of valuation and contain
in them a basis of production aligned with an engaged public. The cultural

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

and social processes determining the pledge changes the value of a potential project, if realized. Conventional cultural institutions focused on forms of cultural authority dictated by valuation processes championing hierarchical cultural worth. By fostering this practice of open cultural production and valuation, the materialisation of finished projects (in socio-cultural sphere) are more reflective of an authentic continued state of socio-cultural sentiment and progression. This speaks of the platform's ability to expand social relations of cultural production so that it may subvert influences of mediation by dominant factors such as professional authority (Williams, 2017; 1981). Socio-cultural codes and intentions distinguish cultural production from the circuit of commodities as facilitated by the publicness of the platform (Appadurai, 1986).

Kickstarter's mainframe has a 'public knowledge' attribute, acting as grounds to test marketability and shared cultural sentiments (Valanciene & Jegeleviciute, 2013). Outside of the immediate market information that can be attained from the platform, Kickstarter placates other ideas around public knowledge such as valuation processes. This is especially the case with projects situated within a socio-cultural sphere. Creators rely not only on the perception that their project is of high quality, but also upon warm-glow altruism that in turn reveals the socio-cultural inclinations of a public (Qui, 2013). Descriptions of backers' motivations, when considering pledging, offers a statement on their valuation of the socio-cultural worth associated

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

with potential cultural products. This can be garnered as information about a course of cultural reception and reveal the extent to which cultural process are accepted (Williams, 1981).

That the platform spurs broadened valuation processes stands as a structural feat. Public knowledge is attained through onsite visibility of the public's role in determining the conditions of financing, promotion and reception. The accessibility of the platform's mainframe allows this structure to exist in public domain. Open funding acts as a filtration of new cultural products that are realised as part of an inclusive socio-cultural context. Importantly, cultural good formation in this context 'presupposes the existence of a public sphere'; 'cultural production is social and material' (Hasitschka et al., 2005: 150; Velkova & Jakobsson, 2017; Williams, 1977: 138).

The capacity to 'create' in a publicly-engaged and publicly-valued context may be applied to the structuring of a public cultural institution endorsing the tenets of cultural materialism. This infers counteraction to traditional cultural institutions' course of cultural policy adaptations. Kickstarter's technological foundation is the essential component of the firm's mechanism of practice which supports feats of public knowledge and engagement. The digital infrastructure provides an efficient form of social engagement and exchange. It acts as an enabler to the formation of the site's cultural knowledge structure and an alternative from traditional funding avenue incentives and pressures

ordinarily facing cultural creators. Its digital outlet comes to dictate conditions of production relevant to its stated capacity; that is, its digital structure facilitates financing of platformed potential cultural productions (Bahkshi & Throsby, 2012; Throsby, 1999).

Kickstarter's mechanism of practice primarily functions on a reward-system. There remains a distinction upon the platform regarding pledgers' intents guiding the funding activities. Socio-cultural projects' funding receptions are determined by their rewards systems; however, a project may employ forms of exchange by way of 'warm-glow altruism'. This is critical for project success rates within the socio-cultural division of the platform. It is form of engagement that can be separated on the basis of pledgers' intent and their individual processes of valuation.

Recognition, encompassed in warm-glow altruism, is of significance because this exchange reveals a form of social agency distinctly detached from obvious economic motive. It speaks of a sentiment that pledgers may contribute to something of individually perceived socio-cultural value rather than a venture that they may benefit from on a material basis. The factors of 'choice' determines the socio-cultural value produced. A social agency unbound by the ideological underpinnings of the platform taps into theories of Williams' emergent cultures (2017). These communities of engagement communicate both identity investment (subsumed in the very act of pledging)

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

and organisational identity formation. The mechanism of practice establishes
the conditions under which these communities of engagement are formed.
Within a broad, macro-organisational context, these notionally collective
identities are defined as 'groups of actors that can be strategically
constructed and fluid, organised around a shared purpose and similar
outputs' (Cornelissen et al. 2007; Wry et al., 2011: 450). The purpose of
these socio-culturally inclined communities of engagement can be roundly
described as 'support' for the development of cultural productions. This
'support' extends to a cultural dialogue of exchange, attention and valuation
outside of a purely profit-driven operation.

Conclusion:

Summary and Future Research Potential:

The digital mechanism of practice is illustrative of a purposeful design of
experiences for personal engagement regarding funding and valuing creative
processes. Raymond Williams' teachings on advances in communication
technologies contend that innovation emerges within particular social and
economic contexts, asserting that a moment of new technology is a moment
of choice. Decisions presiding over the development of such platforms
relates to the choices of ICT producers whereby their intents are largely
developed from the socio-economic context of a digital capitalism. The central
issue is the choices of powerful groups determining technologies; 'a situation
that for Williams explains the gap between the potential and actual social

#8

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

benefits of communications technologies as they are increasingly subject to commercial considerations' (Freedman, 2002: 431).

The socio-economic context assumed of the firm's creation differs to the conditions it has created for aiding cultural productions. Centrally, the structure enables public determination of a course of cultural production. Within this infrastructure, a form of social agency free of commercial considerations, are exhibited. This offers a line of justification in affirming Williams' valuations of the social forces that determine technologies' purpose. It is in its public engagement capacity that this technology reveals a social purpose concerned with a publicly influenced strand of cultural creation and valuation. Innovation taken not as the mechanics of the firm itself, but as the potential cultural innovation it harbors, is situated within a socio-economic context reflective of a wider, 'everyday' unit of cultural determination. This 'public' imbues production with an inevitable commercial impetus. However, it is also instilled with a sociality that is worthy of identity, validity and centrally, the public facilitation of another form of mediation to cultural production that is outside of a capitalistic basis.

'Open' technologies are 'socialised' in such ways that determine their purpose. However, the most significant potential of its practice relates to the functioning of a specific subset of social relations generated from the platform. Social agency and social intentions reveals a unit of users who

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

demonstrate the possibilities subsumed under wider social concepts of
democratic digital mediums for purposes of cultural value creation.

The case of Kickstarter's mechanism of practice speaks largely of
potentialities. Kickstarter, in its purely hypothetical state as a cultural
institution, offers a clearer framework to apply its socio-cultural dimensions to
Williams' valuation of social agency and intentions combined with
technological mediation. Social agency is represented largely by engagement
with socio-cultural projects. This is accommodated for through the site's open
digital infrastructure. The intentions in pledges cannot be as coherent an
analytical unit; intentions may be underpinned by forms of altruism. It is these
social components exhibited on the platform that signal to the potentiality of a
public, digitally-mediatory mechanism of practice to cultural production that
can exist outside of a capitalist ideology. Such a technology is conceive-able
as a result of these socio-cultural determinants.

By aligning Kickstarter's practice with the characteristics of core 'cultural
institutions', it unveils the workings and purposes of the platform's essential
functioning force - its communities of engagement. The characteristics of this
social unit reveals a reserve of knowledge on social agency and its capacity
to engage cultural productions. It also stands as a unit capable of determining
the conditions of strands of cultural production. It allows for a form of
production that comes to be the materialisation of social agencies or

#8

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

individualised intentions that may reside outside the ideological arena from
where the practice is situated. Social intent and agency, underpinned by
altruism, and bound in certain engagements of practice is indicative of an
emerging inclination towards a production and valuation of culture that is
outside its original capitalist basis.

There remains an imbalance of power underlying Kickstarter's mode of open
cultural production. The obvious is economic access. But the unit of
determination for pitched socio-cultural projects relate to valuing processes of
communities of engagement; the inferred developments that can be garnered
from the potential of this social unit is that open-sourced mediation to cultural
production has the capacity to be applied to systems of exchange and
sharing outside of a purely capitalistic foundation. This may relate to Williams'
ideations around a wider 'digital commons' or a simplistic civic digital space
concerned centrally with 'public benefit and not private gain' in cultural
production engagement (Williams, 1983; Freedman, 2002: 436). However,
the existence of a crowdfunding mechanism of practice, for which Williams
describes as another 'ideological form of sharing', is integrated into digital
capitalism rather than being constituted by it. This is as a result of the
facilitation of choice - enabled by its digital mode and represented by
interpretive communities of engagement - which allows for perceived socio-
cultural value to determine cultural production. It is in this capacity that an
emergent culture - open and digital in character - may arise free from the

#8

Pitching Possibilities of
Emerging Culture

DOIREANN BONFIELD

hegemonic capitalist logics determining cultural production. As such, there

persists a priority to encourage further research on the development of an

open-access 'creative site' of socio-culturally engaged publics determining

culture in real time (Williams, 1977; 1981; 2017).

Doireann Bonfield is a graduate of a BA in English and Geography and an
MA in Environment, Society, and Development with honours degrees from
NUI Galway. Her area of interest focuses on the intersection between cultural
policies and economies, and digital mediation.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Appadurai, Arjun. (1986) The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural
Perspective. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

Bahkshi, H., & Throsby, David. (2012). New Technologies in Cultural
Institutions: theory, evidence and policy implications. International Journal of
Cultural Policy, 18(2), pp. 205-222.

Cornelissen, Joep. P., Haslam, S. Alexander., Balmer, John. M. T. (2007).
Social Identity, Organizational Identity, and Corporate Identity: Toward an
Integrated Understanding of Processes, Patterning and Products. British
Journal of Management, 18(1), 1–16.

Flew, Terry. (1997). Cultural Materialism and Cultural Policy: Reassessing Raymond Williams. Social Semiotics, 7(1), pp. 5-19.

Freedman, Des. (2002). A 'Technological Idiot'? Raymond Williams and Communications Technology. Information, Communication and Society, 5(3), pp. 425-442.

Hasitschka, Werner., Tschmuck Peter., & Zembylas, Tasos. (2005). Cultural Institutions Studies: Investigating the Transformation of Cultural Goods. The Journal of Arts Management, Law and Society, 35(2), pp. 147-158.

Jackson, William. A. (1996). Cultural Materialism and Institutional Economics. Review of Social Economy, 54(2), pp. 221-244.

Mitra, Tanushree., & Gilbert, Eric. (2014). The Language that gets People to Give: Phrases that Predict Success on Kickstarter. Pp. 49-61. Proceedings of the 17th ACM conference on Computer supported cooperative work & social computing. [Online] Available from: https://doi.org/10.1145/2531602.2531656

Qui, Calvin. (2013). Issues in Crowdfunding: Theoretical and Empirical Investigation on Kickstarter. Entrepreneurship & Marketing eJournal. [Online] [Accessed 8 May 2020]. Available from: http://dx.doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2345872

Throsby, David. (1999). Cultural Capital. Journal of Cultural Economics, 23, pp. 3-12.

Valanciene, Loreta., & Jegeleviciute, Sima. (2013). Valuation of Crowdfunding: Benefits and Drawbacks. Economics and Management, 18(1), pp. 39-48.

Velkova, Julia., & Jakobsson, Peter. (2017). At the Intersection of Commons and Market: Negotiations of Value in Open-sourced Cultural Production. International Journal of Cultural Studies, 20(1), pp. 14-30.

Williams, Raymond. (1977). Marxism and Literature. Oxford University Press, Oxford.

—— (1980). Problems in Materialism and Culture. Verso, London.

—— (1981). Culture. Fontana, London.

—— (1983). Towards 2000. Chatto & Windus, London.

—— (2017). Culture and Society. Penguin Random House, London.

Wry, Tyler., Loundsbury, M., & Glynn, M. A. (2011). Legitimating Nascent Collective Identities: Coordinating Cultural Entrepreneurship. Organization Science, 22(2), pp. 449-463.

Yin, Robert. (2003). Case Study Research: Design and Methods (3rd ed.). SAGE, Thousand Oaks.