

ANONYMOUS COMMUNITIES: UPLOADING/ DOWNLOADING COMMUNITY ARTS

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Community arts are a broad and interconnected field. From the local to the global it has created opportunity for countless artists, arts organisations, community groups and individuals. The digital has become a space for community, and though often complex and contested, it has taken on a ubiquity and a primary social context on a mass scale. The following paper examines platforms where these two areas overlap and diverge. How successfully can an online platform fulfill the requirements of an artistic community given the constraints of web based interaction? Can community arts sit comfortably in a location where time and space are both elastic and hard-coded? What levels of engagement or tools are available for community arts practitioners online? In looking at examples such as the Australia Council's site The Platform of 2013, and the sizeable web entity, deviantArt the research attempts to find a starting point for where more traditional forms of artistic expression and promotion are heading. Many such sites exist and the choice, though not arbitrary, is certainly not definitive of what is possible. Both sites, however, attempt to draw together those who create and those who appreciate art, with possibility for growth and reinvention as technology develops.

KEYWORDS: Community Arts, Digital Communities, Access

INTRODUCTION: THERE'S NO PLACE LIKE HOME(PAGE)

The everyday uses of the Internet are more interesting, more nuanced, more differentiated and more dull than the futurologists would have us believe (Hine, 2000, p. 13).

The strength of deviantART's community, is an impressive thing to behold ... a 10th anniversary bash ... filled the three story Hollywood House of Blues to capacity, with deviants flying in from as far away as Australia, Singapore and Brazil (thousands more tuned in on livestream) to participate in a daylong program of art tutorials, craft workshops and Q&A sessions (Wang, 2011, p. 28).

As if the notion of 'community' was not already contested, complicated and diverse enough, in the past 10 years with the rise of Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), multiple online communities

have been created, ubiquitous, ever-present, and for the most part, accessible. The proliferation and flourishing of these communities have been driven by the communities themselves, manifested by ‘users’ with the desire to provide spaces and opportunities for engagement and sharing (Rheingold, 2000) and supported by the technologies developed to facilitate computer mediated communication or CMC, (Jones, 1998).

The literature suggests that there is both a mundanity and romanticism at work in exploration and uses of the internet and its potential to support human endeavour through sharing tools and information in building communities (Hine, 2000; Jones, 1998). Stephenson (1994) located the internet and cyberspace as ‘a European idea, rooted in Deuteronomy, Socrates, Galileo, Jefferson, Edison, Jobs, Wozniak, glasnost, perestroika, and the United Federation of Planets’ (p. 2). According to Jones (1998) and Rheingold (1993), however, democracy and community takes on new forms and meanings online where ‘arguing over where online social formations map directly on to those that occur either ideally or actually in offline settings may be a distraction from the study of whatever develops online on its own terms’ (Hine, 2000, p.9).

Although these communities are part of the macrocosm of online experience, this research does not seek to analyse or explore social media or user groups/platforms such as Facebook, Usenet/Newsgroups, Twitter, or online forms of gaming. In addition this work is not a chronological approach to the development of the internet and related technologies or a functional analysis of site builds. Instead it looks at two examples and current literature highlighting; the complexity of anonymity and public membership, homogenisation versus community, and engagement and freedom versus control (Baym, 2010). Broad concerns of online communities have an important bearing on specific communities of interest. The internet’s influence on the ideas of democracy, temporal space, access, and capability, provide a framework for locating the community arts and community cultural development in a new and expanding discourse.

A TALE OF TWO SITES

1. The Platform (Australia Council)

In 2013, the Australia Council launched The Platform, an online initiative utilising the internet practitioners in the community arts area to create a tool for recording, promoting, and improving community arts initiatives. The project was one of three development projects – *National Local Government Cultural Forum* and *Creating Australia*, a cross-sector organisation for *Community Arts and Cultural Development* (CACD) – identified and then funded in 2013. Visitors and potential users of the site were encouraged to be active contributors to The Platform’s development of features by commenting via a linked Twitter feed.

The Platform system’s aims are:

- practical and universally accessible, as well as inspiring and beautiful.
- powerful and multi-layered, as well as intuitive and easy to navigate.

- flexible and cutting edge, as well as respectful of privacy and ownership (2015).

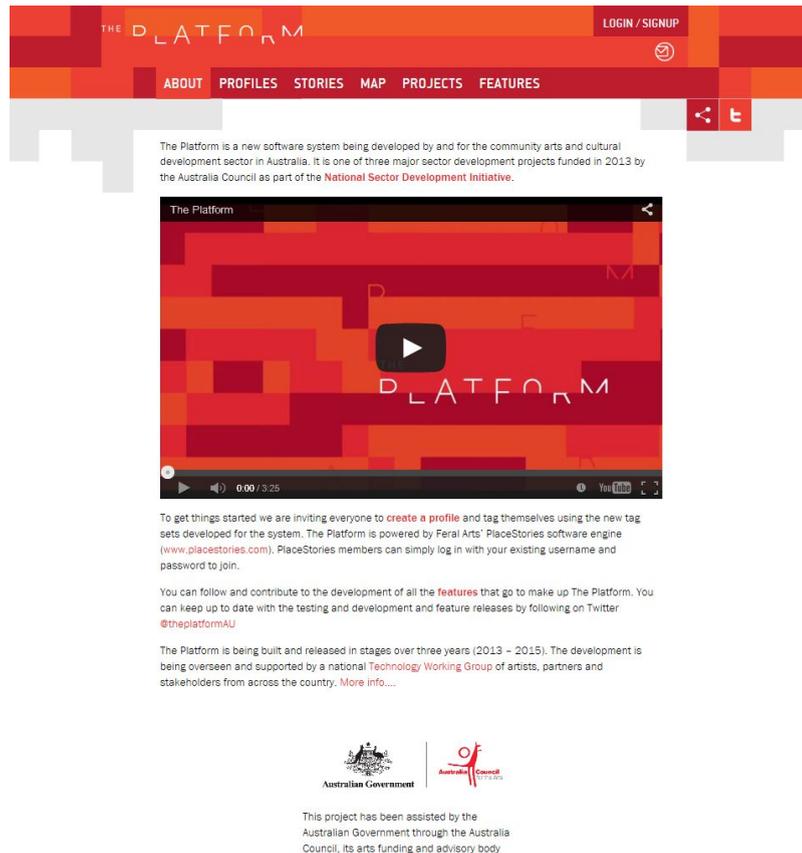


Figure.1 The Platform, *Homepage*. (2015) Image, Screen Capture.

Practitioners and community arts initiatives can sign up as members via a link on the homepage. The sign up requirements for The Platform are comparatively standard, often replicated across similar sites requiring registration via a login. In this example; a full name, identifying whether you are a sole practitioner or with an organisation, an existing email account that becomes your login, username, and a password. In addition, some richer, differentiating data is required. This information creates the community member's unique identifiers in the system allowing for others to connect and interact (The Platform, 2015) :

- A brief profile outlining ‘a little about yourself and your role in the community arts and cultural development sector.’
- ‘Tags’ – a way of identifying both broad and specific categories and affiliations, which in turn can be used by other community members to search for specific projects.

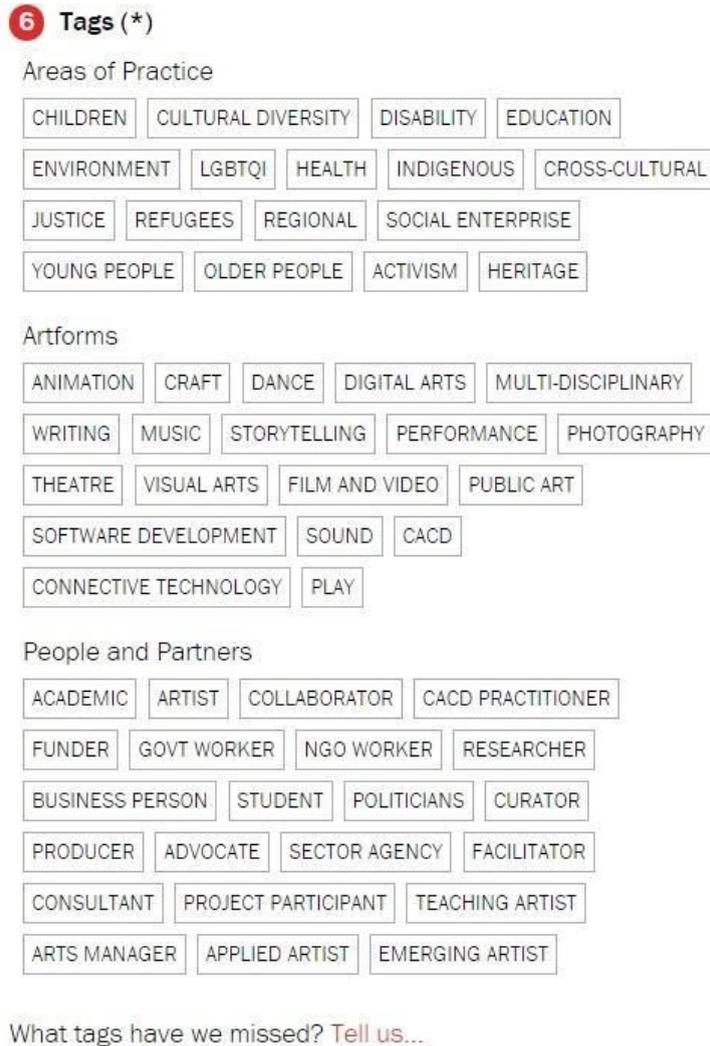


Figure. 2 The Platform 2015, *Tags*, Image, Screen Capture

- Location- this is used to place practitioners and initiatives on a virtual map, linking their activity profile with a physical location.
- A profile picture.
- A website URL.

The data provided is used to create the unique outward facing information in the 'Profile/Stories/Map' tabs. The site was developed in conjunction with Feral Arts' 'Placestories' software system. Feral Arts further outlined the aims and build of the project in their annual report for 2013:

The Platform is designed to support community arts and cultural development - both as a sector and as a practice. It will revolutionise our capacity to work together, amplifying the value and impact of the great work we all do in communities across the country. At the heart of the system is an internal software engine built to power and

connect our work over the next decade...The Platform is about the things we do together as a sector – the things we can't achieve working in isolation. Overtime we will build a unique shared national knowledgebase of our very best content and to make it available for everyone to use in their work – now and in the future (p. 10).

Although superficially The Platform has met some of the goals regarding creating an easily navigable site supporting the activities outlined in its rationale, there is no visible evidence suggesting whether the broader goals of community building have been achieved. The presence of profiles suggests activity, however the site itself does not have a space where outcomes are summarised or reported. The claim made by Feral Arts that the 'system will help make us more visible more accessible more searchable and more shareable' is not readily verifiable (p. 10). Project implementation and success is also problematic given that sites such as The Platform are subject to changes of policy and government funding (Stone, 2015).

With the uptake of the use of digital technologies and the internet being identified as a major area for growth in Australian arts policy, a local government initiative, badged as an 'online 'flight recorder' for arts projects', is currently in production (Smithies, 2015, p. 5). 'Zippy Arts Project System' (ZAPS) will record community arts and cultural development initiatives, and the datasets recorded will provide a tool for precedence. The site, acting as a repository for practitioners and organisations in developing and designing their projects, will provide guidelines on compliance, an understanding of funding requirements, and the legal responsibilities for any activities undertaken under the auspices of local government (Smithies, 2015).

2. deviantART

'Our mission as a website is clear: to entertain, inspire, and empower the artist in all of us. From offering new tools for artists to developing more ways to discover each other, everything we work on is driven by this goal and we've planned big things for 2015 and beyond... As a company, we find ourselves constantly influenced and generally in awe of the community members that make DeviantART the unique and cultivated home for artists it's become' (Heidi, 2015, para. 5).

Wang (2011), in her article for *Entrepreneur* magazine, charted the rise and scope of the brain-child of CEO Angelo Sortira and co-founders Matthew Stevens and Scott Jarkoff, deviantART. Sortira '*wanted to build the deepest, most vertically integrated network that ever existed*' (italics in original, p. 24). deviantART has gone on to amass a community of digital artists and commentators of over 14 million and has been identified as 'one of the world's first online communities formed around user generated content' (Wang, 2011, p. 24).

Functionally deviantArt provides fairly standard tools for the user. Recognisable features such as the browse function allows users and members to search for specific content in a vast

repository of digital art content. The site architecture allows for easy navigation and the look is uncluttered and clean. Members have access to an email system, chat boards, and to the ability to comment on artist's work or submitted articles. The featured story section looks at 'elevating our community observations and conversations' (deviantART, 2015). Members sign up by linking an existing email account and this allows the 'deviant' – the colloquial term for a deviantART community member – to upload creative content. The content is also available for viewing by non-members and is categorised by Today, Browse, What's Hot, Undiscovered, and Daily Deviations.

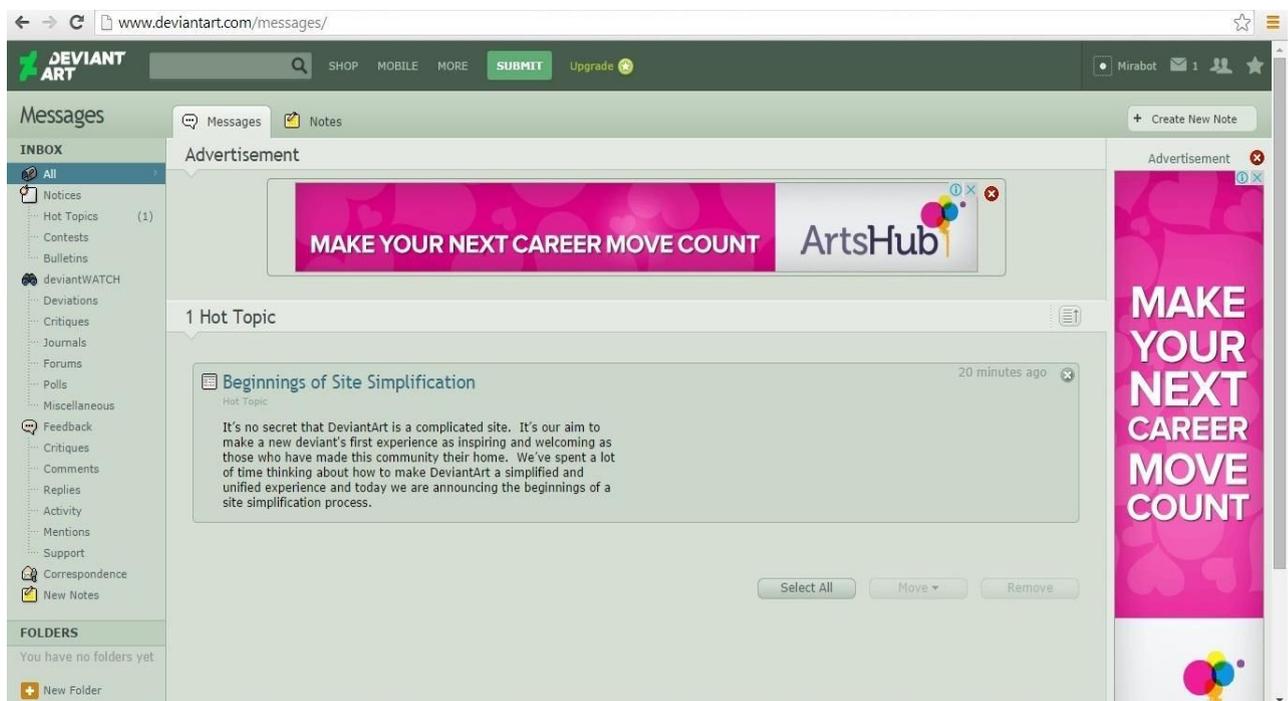


Figure.3 deviantART 2015, *deviantART- Messages*. Image, Screen Capture. (2015)

A feature of the web user interface in 2015 was to provide ease of access and use. By the organisations own admission deviantArt 'is a complicated site', (deviantART, 2015), and is a marked point for discussion when analysing applicability of a given site for practitioner use. For site users' ease of access and an understanding of site navigation can mean the difference between active engagement and ready disengagement (Baym, 2010). Sortira has, over time, developed a 'Rules of Engagement' to strengthen, build and provide parameters for the community. As an example, the site elicits early buy-in from 'the crowd' – as community members are known – for any planned updates or changes, by 'seeding the concept and getting approval and to pitch it, blog it, be transparent about it, and do some outreach and education... or else people will feel betrayed and leave' (Wang, 2011, p. 24). By actively involving community members in this way, the site is able to manage change and expectations, and gauge any potential issues for new concepts and technological applications.

In order to maintain a site the size of deviantART, Sortira recognised that by necessity there are smaller communities within the larger group:

deviantART employs a ‘fair exposure’ policy so that all users feel as if they belong, even if they are not part the ‘popular’ crowd. The system makes sure that no matter how big or fast a single community grows, the front page always features a balance of groups and mediums. (p. 24)

Artists and their initiatives are supported both online by providing tools and information sharing and by inclusion in offline activities. In 2009, artist Shepard Fairey, known for the iconic ‘Obey’ and Obama ‘Hope’ posters, invited the DeviantART community to remix his original artwork for the ‘DEFEND EQUALITY LOVE UNITES’ campaign. The campaign was driven by Freedom Action Inclusion Rights in the US as part of their remit to ‘promote equal rights and combat homophobia’ (Anonymous, 2009). In particular, Fairey lent his name and reputation to the cause of repealing California’s Proposition 8, which sought to ban same-sex marriage. The director of Freedom Action Inclusion Rights (FAIR), Andrew Oldershaw, explains that the project was to ‘engage a brilliant viral artist community in order to have a whole new group of vibrant artists to commit themselves to the cause of equality in the name of love’ (Anonymous, 2009, p. 1).

In his doctoral dissertation, Perkell (2011) affirms this positive community focus by stating:

deviantART brought together a diverse set of art worlds and creative practices via a seemingly conventional set of interfaces, features, and functionality. In turn, participants on the site helped manifest, reproduce, and transform these tensions in art practice and web use. (p. 1)

Perkell also acknowledges that his findings ‘illustrate flaws in conventional accounts of creativity in a world with the web—accounts that fail to recognize the active, contested, and ongoing work underlying the mutual production of creative practice and the web’ (p. 1). The tensions generated by the uneasy relationships between the arts and traditional business models, communities and the internet, highlight the evolving circumstances of a medium in flux. Creative sites and their communities benefit from continued debate and questioning, encouraging growth and improvement.

Other artist/user generated content sites based on membership and a broad ideal of community, include Behance (2015), and Pinterest (2015). These sites do not share the scope or the depth of the examples provided, and do not have the same level of moderation or formalised approach to community. They are online spaces where individuals can share images, ideas, and build networks and collaborations either professionally or casually.

As beneficiaries of the web 2.0 ethos and functions (Christodoulou, 2013), The Platform and deviantART have points of similarity. They both encourage communication via integrated social media tools, such as Twitter, comment section, and live chat boards. Both sites provide visually appealing interfaces, and integrate community feedback into continuous site

improvements and upgrades. A culture of support is advocated for all community members, where information sharing and a celebration of achievements are encouraged as part of site interaction.

Users are encouraged to develop a greater awareness of others' creative outputs, which can act as a conduit for collaboration. However, there are differences with regard to visions and goals. The Platform appears to link more closely to traditional notions of community arts. A number of projects may have a digital arts focus but the site has a largely utilitarian and proscribed purpose in order to capture and report on national community arts outputs. deviantART, in contrast, is a commercial site providing an environment for digital arts and artists to be promoted.

‘ANONYMOUS BODIES IN AN EMPTY ROOM’

The internet and its many interfaces, has been described by Kolke and Reid (1998) as having a ‘seeming ineffability of community collaboration...a failure to achieve the vision of cyberspace as public sphere’ (p. 8). Another criticism that is also levelled at online community is that ‘because the spaces with which we are now concerned are electronic, there is no guarantee that they are democratic, egalitarian, or accessible’ (Jones, 1998, p. 22).

Online anonymity is an often discussed phenomenon, explored with both positive and negative attribution to online communities. Baym (2010), posited that on ‘...a societal level, anonymity opens the possibility of liberation from the divisions that come about from seeing one another’s race, age, gender, disabilities and so on’ (p. 34). Conversely, however, by engaging with online communities ‘social identity cues would not be apparent’ resulting in a loss of ‘sense of self and other’. This impersonal environment would make these media inherently less sociable and inappropriate for ‘affective bonds’ (p. 54).

The lack of physical boundaries for online communities is in contrast to traditional face-to-face communities. The sense of belonging to a community, however, is impacted by discussion of global communities versus locally focussed engagement (Jones, 1998). Hine (2000), talks about the internet in a temporal and a spatial context, and observes that both aspects are structured in multiple ways due to asynchronous communication and a virtual geography. The absence of physical meeting locations, combined with the sense of altered time, impacts how communities and individuals interact. Kolke & Reid (1998) explore the more misanthropic view of the fragmentation and dissolution by quoting Jones (1998); ‘the geographical rootlessness and decentralisation of virtual communities destroying the concept of the polity’ (p.13). Despite the potential for the negation of community and engagement, Jones (1998) suggests that community formation and maintenance is aligned to actions and communication rather than to location and time:

...communities that can manage to think, speak, and act collectively can defend their interests much better than the ones that cannot; people who define their communities of shared interests in narrow ways will fare differently from people who define their interests in

broad ways; communities that can form working alliances with other communities based on shared interests will fare better than those that cannot. (p. 12)

CMC has been discussed variously in connection with the internet and community (Hine, 2000; Jones, 1998; Kolko & Reid, 1998; Rheingold, 2000), and certainly informs any discussion around the efficacy of community arts online. The ways in which communities online connect and share is supported by CMC in an integral and vital way. Generally, CMC refers to: ‘a range of different ways in which people can communicate with one another via a computer network... both synchronous and asynchronous communication, one-to-one and many-to-many interactions, and text based or video and audio communication’ (Hine, 2000, p.157).

Community and communication, as experienced on a daily basis on the internet, is due to an important development leap of the early 2000s, Web 2.0. Web 2.0 is generally characterised by ‘user-generated content’ (Baym, 2010, p. 16). For artists and artist communities:

Web 2.0 can bring together artists and audience despite their geographical location... Communities of artists can easier disseminate their work through art focused blogs, wikis, web feeds, social media sites, social networks, etc., rather than galleries. These applications could at least complement the traditional techniques (Christodoulou, 2013, p. 15).

Democracy and the recognition of community and individual voices online are of particular interest to those involved in the field of digital ethnography (Hine, 2000). Agre (1998), believes that ‘People are not often aware of the extent to which the associational forms of their communities serve the purpose of fashioning a collective voice and that the roots of democracy lie in associated forms: People learn solidarity or division through their associational involvements’ (p. 11).

In online, as in face-to-face communities of interest, empowerment and equality are built on exercising democracy where robust discourse and acting collectively to defend shared interests (Agre, 1998). The health and well-being of an online community is arguably maintained by encouraging active participation, while a sense of belonging is managed by understanding some of the natural and imposed hierarchies within a community (Tharon, 2010).

Logging in may make you a member of an online community, but may provide little in-depth engagement. And for those who do engage there is also the potential to be involved in the less savoury side to online communities; flaming, trolling and cyber-bullying (Baym, 2010). Kolko & Reid (1998) argued that ‘it is a mistake to think that the Internet is an inherently democratic institution or that it will necessarily lead to increased personal freedoms and increased understanding between people’ (p. 7).

Rheingold (2000) provided a solution to some of the negative impacts of online interaction by suggesting that conflict can effectively be dealt with online by consolidating value and the

values of a community. Beyond an original rationale, site originators and managers must continue to reiterate the ethos of the community, and as communities grow, they must also be willing and able to dynamically integrate community input. The internet does shape the way we interact, yet, it should not determine the limitations of community engagement.

CMC increased digital interactivity and online engagement via arts-related sites leads to limited and extended notions of community arts identity. Jones (1998) proposed that online engagement requires a new definition of community relying 'more upon shared social practices than on physical boundaries' (p. 9). In existing and developing sites and technologies, the drawing together of arts practitioners and arts managers using technology, is allowing digital platforms expanded avenues for capturing, mapping, recording, creating, and celebrating of community arts and cultural development initiatives. It still requires the vision of at least one and then the buy-in and input of many to build robust and safe digital communities.

As the way we conduct and understand arts communities changes we lose sight of rationales and the requirements of healthy ideas of community and collaboration where 'Interaction ought not to be substituted for community... and to uncritically accept communications between personae, individuals and community is inadvisable... many of our online relationships are embedded in one's off-line' (Jones, 1998, p. 31). The new emphasis is on the capability of community artists and those managing community cultural development initiatives, to physically and culturally navigate digital platforms, create new marginalities and neo-ethnicities (Poster, 1998). Artists and community arts practitioners must include an awareness of recognition of attribution and rights ownership of creative materials online (Blacklow & Gorman 2001). In order to build and maintain sustainable and robust creative communities it is important to understand, review and reassess the use of digital technology and the internet in realising ethical and positive outcomes.

Increased agency for user-generated content and collaboration raises concerns. Maintenance and mediation of online community forums and sites require increased and consistent vigilance and input. Agre (1998) asked important questions around the design and identification of intended activities for sites such as *who* the site is for and how content and interactions will be managed. Those creating and moderating online will need to replace quantitative measures in gauging community benefit and outcomes (Tharon, 2010). The internet is labyrinthine and many layered. Certainly those searching for any kind of community can find that they are hampered by the sheer density and scale of the World Wide Web. Hine (2000) cites ideas by Harvey (1989), where 'people and machines, truth and fiction, self and other seem to merge in a glorious blurring of boundaries' (Hine, 2000, p. 18).

Even if the site of community is found there are technological and cultural protocols to be observed. Even if a community manages to register, and login, will they be 'culturally' accepted or will there be 'language' barriers; jargon and expected understanding of normative terminology? (Tharon, 2010) Where there are no clear indicators to age, gender, economic background, race, or sexual orientation, there is the possibility to create something entirely new, and to provide democratic voice and opportunity for vibrancy and inclusion (Baym, 2010; Rheingold, 2000; Hine, 2000). A reframing of what is considered 'marginal' or other is possible

Online communities are still made up of people, with shared interests, differing levels of expectation, varied backgrounds and experience. Jones (1998) makes reference to pseudo-community and poses important questions such as where the idea of what is genuine has changed due to our increasing use of digital technologies and our reliance on internet communication.

In 1970, Alvin Toffler wrote *Future Shock*, presaging the digital revolution of the early 1990's. The vision is grim, predicting negative psychological impacts on individuals and society, the result of absorbing too rapid change (Buchanan, 2010). The discipline of Future Studies or 'Futurology' more broadly covers the '...study of the possible (and assumed to be likely) nature of the world in the near future based on what is known about present trends in demography, technology, and economic geography' (Buchanan, 2010).

This neutral definition allows for a realistic reading of how the future is to be understood and navigated, and serves as a basis for the positive potential growth, change, and further implementation of technology in our everyday lives. Agre (1998) echoed this, stating that the kinds of fear around a future in which 'everything will be digital, everyone will be wired... and the physical world will wither away' (p. 3) is wrong. Rather than a monolithic culture, there is a flourishing of communications media, the potential for a multiplicity of forms and forums (Agre, 1998).

CONCLUSION

In exploring existing examples and literature around broad notions of online communities, there is evidence for the potential for empowerment through anonymity in online communities. Also present is the danger of disconnection, potentially leading to disengagement and in extreme circumstances, animosity and abuse within the community. The masking that allows for certain freedoms to share and feel protected can also lead to lack of boundaries in online communication. The internet's function as a working tool and a reflection and manifestation of human creativity and innovation leads to new readings of democracy, society and communication.

The temporal and aspatial properties of the internet necessarily lead to challenges in measures of success and community wellbeing. Economic and political factors impact sites and the communities they support as well as the goals these initiatives set out to achieve. Changes of government lead to changes of focus and funding, and so, existing policy and legal requirements need to be readdressed, though perhaps, reinterpreted for digital and online contexts.

The use of technologies and specifically the internet have seen communities expand, diversify, specialise and grow in complexity. Digital technologies have created the impetus for rapid change and an interesting series of challenges present themselves. As we negotiate the diminishing line between controlling the technology and information we create or being

controlled ourselves, there is continual adjustment of our everyday work and social interactions.

For community arts and community cultural development, there are opportunities and challenges ahead, but most importantly is to remember to balance our quest for innovation with what we already know. The tools and space can be provided for the building and maintenance of community, but the discourse must continue, taking into account our expanded societal wisdom in order to create, build, and grow our communities into sustainable, dynamic, healthy and creative spaces.

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