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.*
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.
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
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
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
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.
**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
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
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
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)
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
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
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
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
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


