

“Culture roots us in  
our past and enables us  
to imagine and create  
our future...”

## EXPRESSIVE LIVES

Edited by Samuel Jones

COLLECTION 27 - DEMOS

### 1 Expressive life and the public interest

Bill Ivey

#### **Reconsidering culture and democracy**

The current global economic crisis coincides with a reexamination of the role of cultural institutions in society and with rising public concern about the character of the regulatory and legislative frameworks that shape the creation and distribution of art and information. In addition to already-engaged issues like fine-arts funding, intellectual property protection and telecom policy, the current economic downturn has launched a re-examination of values and an inchoate longing for a new path to happiness and a high quality of life in Western democracies. Today any discussion of art, creativity, heritage, media and the internet is inevitably merged into a broader conversation about democracy, values and public purposes.

The fine arts that have come to rely on various government subsidies or benefits for their financial health are newly challenged to justify themselves in the light of the diminished capacity of government agencies, corporations and private donors. In the US, the nonprofit arts sector is widely seen as overbuilt, and the metaphors and instrumental arguments that have validated the arts as a destination for public largess appear increasingly inadequate given shrinking resources and challenges from competing sectors like education, health care and the environment – sectors that advocate from a base of strong consensus support. Can the arts find a path to a sturdy platform from which to maintain and advance a robust public-interest argument for government support and various incarnations of private patronage?

At the same time as arts institutions face a decrease in public and quasi-public funding, critics of democratic political process have examined the architecture of the larger cultural system, expressing growing alarm that the market-defined mechanisms of law, regulation and corporate practice in which art, heritage and information are created and consumed have drifted far from public purposes. In the US, as in many parts of the world, the consolidation of media has given excessive authority to a narrow set of voices and the mergers of arts companies – film, broadcasting and sound recording – have created daunting obstacles to entry for new artists and daunting restrictions that must be navigated by anyone who would generate new meaning by reconfiguring art from the past. Underlying these challenges is the expanding footprint of intellectual property law and the growing inequity in access to the tools of digital-era knowledge and creativity – inequities that threaten the quality of democratic discourse. Can the matrix of law, government regulation and corporate practice that shape culture and communication be taken on as a whole and realigned with the public interest?

To date these issues have been addressed piecemeal. As copyright authority James Boyle puts it, we lack ‘a perception of common interest in apparently disparate situations’. Cultural institutions have advanced the arts as instruments of economic development, have asserted that engagement with arts can enhance learning in arts and sciences and have earnestly reached out to draw in non-elite audiences unaccustomed to attending the symphony or art museum. Simultaneously but separately, multiple

advocacy organizations have attempted to influence government policy by crafting arguments supporting a less restrictive copyright regime, limitations on the ownership of radio and television outlets, and the preservation of a free and open internet. These parallel efforts have neither secured the standing of arts organizations nor rolled back the de-regulatory march of market interests in art making, media or communication. The policy frame in which cultural issues have been argued has proved to be inadequate to the task of either securing a public-interest orientation toward the fine arts, or reconfiguring the context of communication and knowledge creation. This failure is especially unfortunate because the looming transformation of the world economy has already forced the leadership of Western democracies to seek strategies for Expressive life and the public interest advancing quality of life beyond reducing poverty or advancing health care and education. If concerned policy makers can advance a compelling metaphor, the global downturn offers an opening through which a 'new abstraction' asserting the public policy value of cultural vibrancy can advance.

### **The inadequacy of current frames**

At present the 'idea space' within which art, media, technology, creativity and heritage are discussed is not up to the task of sustaining a broad public interest conversation. Our most basic terms are problematic. Other Demos essayists have cited the work of critic Raymond Williams, who devoted much of his career to tracking the multiple meanings attached to the term 'culture'. In general, Williams' definitions divide into two categories – the artistic and the anthropological. Arrayed along a continuum, we understand 'culture', at one end of the spectrum, as denoting the fine arts ('Culture' with a capital 'C'); positioned at the opposite extreme is our sense of culture as 'the sum of human behaviour'. Recent political discourse in the US has elevated a third arena of meaning, namely 'culture as values', as in 'Red State/Blue State' and the 'culture wars', rounding out a tripartite definition close to that advanced by Lawrence E. Harrison and Samuel P. Huntington in *Culture Matters*. Although *culture* makes an appearance at a few points in this essay, I would argue that its multiple meanings render the term nearly useless in policy discourse.

Thus the phrase 'cultural commons' suffers from the same plethora of definitions that drag down 'culture' on its own. Cultural commons usually indicates a body of material to which a group – say, the citizens of a nation – has access. But the 'commons' idea also feels inherently static and historical; even a bit musty in its connotations. One can easily imagine a symphony performance, square dance or even a football match as part of a cultural commons; it is a bit harder to fit in televised political debate or rules governing the ownership of radio stations. 'Public sphere' and 'public domain' exhibit a different problem; if our commons tilts toward heritage and history, the 25 public sphere seems to be about maintaining a special space for speech and political discourse that is free of interference from state, church or industry, while the public domain appears limited to questions of ownership and law – in short, an arena of free access to intellectual property.

Accumulated usage has compromised 'art' as thoroughly as it has 'culture', with 'art', on the one hand, sometimes denoting only visual art (or even just painting) or, when capitalized as 'Art', referring collectively to the traditions of opera, orchestral music, ballet and modern dance, some theatre, but not hip-hop, country music or basketry. This sieve-like quality of key words attached to artistry, heritage and knowledge would be amusing were it not for the multiple misunderstandings, flawed concepts, phony hierarchies and siloed advocacy efforts this failure of language has sustained. It seems highly unlikely that public policy can resuscitate these terms or phrases simply by arguing that they actually encompass anything other than what is currently understood.

### **Expressive life**

The universally popular biblical paraphrase that 'there is nothing new under the sun' accurately characterizes 'expressive life'. The phrase does not advance anything brand new, but rather takes a fresh bite at the anthropological definition of culture, combining many elements in new ways; leaving others behind. I introduced expressive life in my book, *Arts, Inc.*<sup>4</sup> The phrase draws in part on my training as a folklorist and the sense of community, heritage, connectedness and history embodied in the folklorists' sense of tradition. Thus 'heritage' constitutes one half of expressive life: the part that is about belonging, continuity, community and history; it is expressed through art and ideas grounded in family, neighborhood, ethnicity, nationality and the many linkages that provide securing knowledge that we come

from a specific place and are not alone.

'Voice', the other half of our expressive life, is quite different: a realm of individual expression where we can be autonomous, personally accomplished and cosmopolitan – a Expressive life and the public interest space in which we can, at times, even challenge the conventions of community or family heritage. For folklorist Bau Graves, heritage is critical and the continuity of tradition is 'the glue connecting the present with the past', referencing 'the pride of history' while 'providing the cues needed to make sense of the disparate data of the present'.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand, for author and consultant Eric Booth, voice is most important. He cites 'the power of the fundamental act of creation' as a vehicle for a sense of personal expression, accomplishment and control.

'Heritage' reminds us that we belong; 'voice' offers the promise of what we can become. It is, I believe, reasonable to assert that an individual life that exhibits a balance between heritage and voice can be thought of as rich and empowered and, as a corollary, of high quality and capable of happiness.

At times the two sides of expressive life are congenial, as when a traditional storyteller in a rural village adds an element of personal style to a favorite community narrative. But more often the halves contend with one another. The ritual dance at a wedding invokes ancient practices and shared meaning; an 'outsider' artist paints images based on religious visions or the dreams of mental illness unconnected to community or tradition. Thus, as folklorist Barre Toelken explains, art (or expressive life) exists 'along a kind of spectrum, ranging from expressions in which community values and aesthetics impinge upon the artist to expressions in which the artist impinges upon culture'.

Applied to public policy, expressive life functions as a new abstraction, a framework in which to address creativity, heritage, media, fair use, cultural industries, intellectual property and trade in cultural goods. Expressive life defines a new policy arena that enables the dismantling of barriers that have prevented key actors from engaging cultural vibrancy as a public good, enabling policy makers to draw the boundaries of discourse in a manner that answers Boyles' call for us to find 'common interest in apparently disparate situations', facilitating engagement with disparate but interconnected issues. Although today neither fully realized nor completely grasped by the general public, the concept of a 'vibrant expressive life' can be likened to the accepted notion of a 'healthy environment'. When viewed as a whole, expressive life encompasses many interconnected elements critical to quality of life in the same way the confluence of air, water and wildlife gives an inclusive character to the policy regime engaging environmental protection.

### **Expressive life and arts organizations**

Arts organizations in the US and UK face enormous challenges. Those totally dependent on government support must compete before a backdrop of budget cutting in which the arts may be easily passed over in favor of more pressing social needs. Although US museums and performing arts organizations draw on income streams beyond government, they are also at risk; earned income, corporate giving, private patronage and foundation grants have all been reduced in the current downturn. Can the positioning of fine arts within the frame of expressive life help secure cultural organizations? I believe it can.

For more than a century, the fine arts have made the case that they are of unique value and thus entitled to various forms of subsidy. To the extent that these arguments have succeeded, the art and arts organizations constitute a classic 'merit good' – the hybrid commodity discovered in the late 1950s by US economist Richard Musgrave. Merit goods are products that circulate in the regular economy. You can, for example, go out and purchase a ticket to hear the symphony concert or choose to buy a pair of socks; both are private goods. But the arts are different: there exists sentiment that a product like classical music – or subsidized housing for the poor, or free public education – offer diffuse public benefits, and that it is worthwhile for government to intervene in order to increase the availability of performances, housing or schools beyond what the market, through purchases, would supply. Thus were created grants, subsidies, and – for the arts in the US – the benefits of nonprofit status. Unfortunately, the ease with which the fine arts falter as a priority in stern economic times is testimony to the truth that, although the arts are viewed as merit goods, they are not especially strong ones.

### **Expressive life and the public interest**

Reframing art and reforming arts organizations as components of the broad ecology of expressive life can address both problems, strengthening institutions in two ways. First, by connecting the concept of the fine arts with the concepts of the musical instrument manufacturer, the presence (or absence) of foreign films at the local multiplex, the availability of private guitar and piano lessons, ownership of radio stations, the quality of local architecture, and access to historical popular recordings and films for classroom instruction, arts institutions are harnessed to a set of cultural interests that boast broad popular support. Linking the fine arts with a network of arts learning, urban design, internet access and media ownership strengthens the public support essential to the maintenance of government subsidy – building a stronger merit good.

Second, by positioning arts institutions within the frame of expressive life, new solutions to old problems emerge. For example, through the closing decades of the last century arts leaders in the US were dismayed that fewer and fewer domestic orchestras secured contracts with American record companies. However, even as the number of recording orchestras steadily declined, complaint never converted into practice – intervention in the well-being of classical music continued to focus on providing support for performances of old and new compositions. No one ever took the logical step of exploring the nooks and crannies of the arts system to uncover the obvious truth that unwieldy and onerous union contracts were the real problem and no one engaged the influence of government to recalibrate labor agreements to serve larger artistic and public purposes. An ecological approach assessing the well-being of orchestras within the wide frame of a vibrant expressive life could have identified and addressed a problem that was not about funding. By viewing individual artistic activities as components of an ecological system – an interconnected environment made up of market forces, disparate cultures, community attitudes, government policy and corporate practices – problems can be addressed through a broader set of interventions.

The fine arts community has positioned itself as uniquely valuable and uniquely entitled to public largess, at times by denigrating popular and amateur (unincorporated) art as inferior. Although it may be initially uncomfortable for arts organizations to redefine themselves as one part of a broad and rich ecology of expressive life, the connection with popular enthusiasm enabled by such a reconfiguration is essential if the fine arts are to retain their standing as valued merit goods.

### **Expressive life and government**

For policy actors, the concept of expressive life offers an arena in which disparate issues shaping the cultural system can be addressed in the light of broad public purposes. By viewing individual issues through the lens of their impact on expressive life, we can begin to redress the harm produced by decades of narrow regulation and legislation targeting special interests of media and telecom companies.

In the US, the Telecom Act of 1996 substantially eliminated restrictions on the number of radio stations that could be owned by one corporation. The new law, tightly focused on the interests of broadcasting chains, failed to anticipate that consolidated ownership would generate centralized programming practices, significantly narrowing the opportunities afforded record companies to audition new music through product provided to individual stations. No one in the chain of policy making and legislative reform anticipated the collateral damage that spread laterally from newly de-regulated radio in the late 1990s, but the impact was sufficient to contribute to the decline of the US record industry. Such anecdotes are all too common. The term of copyright, internet music royalties, the price of cable television service, trade in cultural products, mergers in the entertainment industry and nonprofit funding are only a few of the other issues shaping art, information and communication that have been addressed with scant attention to the public interest, generating unintended consequences. By stepping back to assess any change in law, regulation or corporate practice in the light of its impact on expressive life, policy actors can begin to restore an appropriate balance between public purposes and the marketplace.

## **Expressive life and the public interest**

Over the past half-century, policy actors in Western democracies have been strikingly unable to define quality of life in anything other than material terms; we either want to act directly to reduce poverty and increase wealth, or, by intervening in education and health care, indirectly influence the capacity to accumulate or retain money. But today it is widely understood that our global economic downturn will dial back wealth and economic growth, begging the question that is only now being tiptoed around in the halls of power: 'If the dream of a bigger car, grander house or more exotic holiday is taken off the table, how can policy leaders act to advance a high quality of life for all?' A vibrant expressive life, offering a yin–yang balance of 'heritage' and 'voice', affords government leaders an arena of action in which quality of life can be affordably advanced through smart public policy. The application of a consistent and coordinated public-interest standard to intellectual property law, media ownership and regulation, trade in cultural goods, fine arts funding, cultural exchange and arts learning will help secure expressive life as a critical sector of government. However, to advance a vibrant expressive life – access to voice and heritage – as a public good within democracy, governments may need to create or reconfigure ministries or departments of cultural affairs to match the character of this new ecology.

## **Conclusion**

In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, US observers lamented the near-destruction of the New Orleans Ninth Ward, a poor, mostly African-American neighborhood that maintained rich vernacular traditions in music, cuisine and folk performance. Although it is understood that the homes and businesses of the district can be rebuilt, the subtext of most analysis of hurricane damage suggests that something more was lost – something closer to the 'soul' of the Ninth Ward. What was destroyed, of course, was the context of expressive life – the markers of history, place and continuity that constituted the Ninth Ward's heritage, and the public spaces, relationships and opportunities to learn that enabled the district's many voices. That so many understand that something precious was lost, while at the same time so few seem capable of advancing initiatives that would address anything deeper than lost buildings and wages, is testimony to the challenges to be faced in defining expressive life as a critical arena of public policy.

As Sandy Nairne reminds us in Chapter 5, in the nineteenth century, John Ruskin and William Morris launched the global Arts and Crafts movement. Widely viewed as a response to the deadening influence of the early industrial revolution, the movement honoured nature, rural living, home-made art and cultural heritage. Although it helped define the DNA of American Progressivism, today heritage and creativity have mostly been excised from the dreams of US political reformers. Perhaps the consequences of market excess and the linked-butlonely isolation of our digital, online age will encourage a fresh look at expressive life – at the humane interventions that inspired Arts and Crafts leaders long ago?

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## **Notes**

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1 Boyle, *The Public Domain*.

2 Harrison and Huntington, *Culture Matters*.

3 For a useful discussion of the public domain and cultural commons, see Boyle, *The Public Domain*. Lewis Hyde offers a succinct definition of the public sphere in 'Frames from the framers'.

4 Ivey, *Arts, Inc.*

5 Graves, *Cultural Democracy*.

6 Booth, 'Finding the smallest unifying particle in the universe'.

7 Toelken, 'Heritage arts imperative'.

8 Musgrave's notion of 'merit goods' is little used in present-day economics, but the concept sheds light on issues related to subsidized arts. It is defined in Richard Musgrave's volume, *The Theory of Public Finance*.