

2019-11-26 Notes for Europeana talk

Hi Everyone.

I'm Michael Peter Edson, waiving "hi" to you from far away in America. I'm sorry I can't be with you physically, but I'm with you in spirit. Thank you for welcoming me for a few minutes, virtually, into your professional home.

So, what did we just see?

The first video was from the first ever Marshmello Concert in Fortnite, held in February, 2019.

10 million people attended this concert. If you're like me you had no idea this even happened. Fortnite has about 300 million active users, and for many people it is their hangout, their social media, their community, an integral part of their social life, and I would say, quite obviously, their culture. There are no opera houses, museums, or archives about this, that I know of, yet. But we know that not everything that is "culture" has an institution devoted to it.

The second video was of Jibo, a robot designed specifically to be "social". It was not a successful commercial effect, but it nonetheless had a profound impact on people. In testing and focus groups, participants refused to leave their sessions until they had personally said goodbye to Jibo. People feel empathy with a wide variety of...entities. If Jibo moves us, and we care for

it, and it...creates...even on some basic level, is it part of our culture?
Might the Jibos of the world, collectively, have a culture?

The final video was a dance routine performed by “Spot”, a utility robot developed by Boston Dynamics. Spot is designed to do things like carry bricks and run errands on construction sites. Dirty, dangerous, tedious work. But spot can also dance, move with beautiful dexterity. The creators of this video were quick to point out that spot didn’t improvise these moves, and that the video took over 40 takes to produce. But I would add that this is frequently the case for human performers as well. I recently saw the Mariinsky ballet in St. Petersburg: those dancers do not choreograph their own performances and some of them have been training and rehearsing more-or-less non-stop for 10 or 20 years. I have no doubt that before we know it, Spot and his friends will be choreographing their own work. Will we allow ourselves to think of it as culture? Will these performances be part of our, collective, cultural heritage?

But I skipped a video. Right before Uptown Spot was a piano performance by researcher Chris Howard. The first piece he played was a Bach prelude, but the second piece he played was composed by an algorithm. Most people can’t tell the difference.

In one experiment held over 20 years ago, Composer Steve Larson challenged computer programmer David Cope to a competition: a pianist would play pieces by Larson, Bach, and one of David Cope’s computers

before a live audience and the audience would vote on who they thought composed which piece. “Larson was convinced that people would easily distinguish between soulful human compositions and the lifeless artefacts of a machine”, wrote one reviewer [reference: Homo Deus, by Yuval Harari]. In fact, at the end of the performance, when the audience voted, they thought that the computer’s piece was genuine Bach, that Bach’s piece was composed by Steve Larson, and that Larson’s piece was composed by a computer. Audiences, I am told, are sullen and angry when they find out that the music that moved them spiritually was composed by a machine.

Now why did I show you this? Why did I take your time with this here on the second morning of your Europeana Annual General Meeting?

I did it for a couple of reasons.

The first was to make a point about culture and institutions. To create a vivid reminder that “culture” is so much broader, bigger, deeper, and more dynamic than we account for in our daily work. Our institutions are amazing, but the world is more amazing still. To those 10m people who attended the Marshmello Fortnight concert in February, it was their culture, and it was *real*.

So if we really are serving the cultural needs of Europeans, and perhaps of everyone, everywhere, we need to think more broadly and more

imaginatively about what “culture” means.

The second is to make a point about technology and change. As crazy as the world is right now, particularly concerning the dark side of platforms, privacy, and social media, my own subjective studies and intuition tell me that we are in the proverbial calm before the storm. It’s likely to get weirder, and weirder in ways that we can’t really anticipate, before things calm down again, if they ever do. And if you factor in a wildcard or two coming from, oh, let’s say AI, robotics, materials science, nanotechnology, quantum computing, biomedical engineering. Well, then all bets are off. Dancing robots that love you and computers composing music that moves your soul are the harbingers of the culture that is lived “now”, moving forward, and into the future. Not the culture that we see in a rear-view mirror.

So we’re going to need to spend more time, collectively, looking at “now” and looking forward into the future, than we’ve used to.

The third is to make a point about speed. I think the speed and scale of change today: dancing robots, robots that love you, AI compositions, 10million people at the Marshmello Fortnite concert — — not to mention phenomena like globalization and Climate Change, are really testing the limits of our cultural capacity to understand what is happening to us and to take action, when necessary, fast enough to make a difference. The old ways of working, slowly and deliberately, still matter, but they don’t matter at all in some of the most critical challenges we face. And this is new. In the

words of environmental activist Alex Steffen, “when it comes to climate change, winning slowly is the same as losing.” And in particular regarding climate change, there is no doubt that we must win. That, and much else, will require an acute attentiveness to speed and to the civic actors, the cultural forces, mostly young now, and young at heart, who have a different sense of speed, and a different sense of the consequences of slow, careful, deliberative ways of yesterday.

And finally, hidden in these fun little videos is an implicit message about networks, capacity, and resilience.

A few years ago, when we were just beginning to form our vision for the Museum for the United Nations, we knew that the problems we were tackling — extreme poverty, displaced people, gender equality, the climate emergency — were so vast and difficult that we could never make progress alone, with “top-down” control. We knew we needed to be part of a network, but we struggled to put words around it. What it should be? What even IS a network? How does one work? How does it help?

And as soon as we started asking these questions something really striking became apparent. Everyone we talked to, from the largest, most successful institution to the smallest one or two person part-time NGO — everyone who was working on a difficult challenge, at any scale, felt that they wanted, needed a strong network. But everyone felt that they were working in relative isolation. In silos. Everyone wanted to do more, but for the most

part nobody really knew how. One guy who ran a neighborhood development NGO in Rio de Janeiro stood on his local plaza and told me “the people on this side of the square don’t know how to talk to the people on that side of the square. The people on this square don’t know how to talk to the people on the next square,” and so on. Climate action NGO’s in the Netherlands tell me they know how to talk to other NGOs, but not local citizens. At UN Headquarters they told me that they never see and talk to “normal” people. And in Addis Ababa the “normal people” told me they never see and talk to people who work for the UN. And so it goes.

And that’s a pity because a lot is actually known about how networks work. How to measure their strength, their resilience, their characteristics, and what steps can be taken to nurture and improve them. Quantitatively, we know that a network like this [image], will be more powerful, more capable of innovating, of sustaining effort, of sensing, reacting to, and anticipating opportunities and change than a disconnected and disjointed network. We’ve known this in business, I think, for 20 years. But very very few organizations in the world are motivated, dedicated to, and focused on nurturing these connections.

So, I think when we look back, hopefully, 50 or 100 years from now and we ask ourselves “what was it that made the difference? How did we survive, and thrive, despite long odds” — it’s likely we’ll say that it wasn’t the servers, the collections, the buildings, the exhibitions, the public programs. Or rather, we’ll say those things mattered, among many others, but as a

means to an end, which was to create and strengthen the network, the connections between people, so that the world, as it is, could be understood and the know-how and imagination and vitality of millions, and billions, of people could be connected, and flourish.

So, to overcome the challenges we face and build a strong, resilient future...so that we can enjoy our talking, choreographing, classical music composing global online festival convening robotic dogs...we're going to have to think more broadly about what culture is, who owns it, and who it is for. We're going to need to work fast. And we're going to need each other.

Thank you. And enjoy your conference.