



Culture Lab: A laboratory for culture

Atau Tanaka

Director, Culture Lab Newcastle

It is nearly 45 years since the seminal early work at the intersection of art and science took place - in 1966, the Experiments in Art & Technology brought together engineers from Bell Laboratories with artists, composers, and choreographers in the downtown New York scene. The concept of the media lab took form now 25 years ago with the founding of the MIT Media Lab in 1985, putting in place methods of innovation, a vision of a digital society, and models of governmental and industrial sponsorship that set the pace through the dot.com era. Now with wide penetration of broadband Internet access and with advanced mobile technologies in the lay-person's pocket, the digital society has arrived. Media laboratories have sprung up internationally. They can be industry labs, they can be art labs, they are in universities as much as they can be embedded in local communities. The notion of a medialab can be embodied in one word, but there is no longer a single definition much less a single institution. Meanwhile with the rapid democratisation of technology, the social relevance and societal purpose of the medialab has shifted.

Broadly there are 4 types of media labs: university labs, industry R&D labs, media art centres, and citizen labs. The diversity of labs represents the richness of the area, however points out the fragmented nature of the field.

Founded in 2006, Culture Lab confronted this shifting landscape in establishing its identity. A basic challenge exists in domains that are by nature interdisciplinary to establish common methods, and harmonised evaluation criteria. At the same time, any mandate for the field needs to be responsive to changes in technology and society.

The concept of the media lab is highly relevant in today's information driven society. This has a direct impact not just on technology, but on fields such as the digital humanities. The model of the media lab as an interdisciplinary research centre and motor of innovation driven by the advancement of digital technologies has made fundamental contributions to today's information society.

There is a need today to facilitate exchange of ideas and establish best practice to aid in bootstrapping shared understanding across cultural and scientific disciplines. What is at stake is a vision for the place of the media lab in contributing to culture, well being, and social innovation in an information society.

Throughout the 1990's, innovation in this area was technology driven. Today, with wide ranging penetration of broadband and mobile technologies, innovation in digital media shifts to questions of access, cultural meaning, sustainability, and social benefit. There has thus been a profound shift in focus from technology innovation to social innovation.

In projects like Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy, we draw upon a range of contemporary thought in scientific, artistic, and social science theory. This includes theories of science and society (Latour), practices of everyday life (De Certeau), technology as extensions of man (McLuhan), critical media theory (Kittler) as well as theories of the creative class (Florida), and of sense-making, social ties and new economies (Sennett).

A new model for the media lab needs to be formulated to respond to these shifting contexts. We must look at new societal contexts in order to formulate a vision for a future media lab that is not driven only by technology but also by strategies for sustained development and increased social relevance. There is broad societal benefit whereby a media lab that is configured in the ways defined by this action will be one that is more engaged with the society within which it exists.

Such a vision will have broad societal benefits of the transfer of technology and know-how beyond experimental media art to all forms of cultural production. This creates pathways for the increasing take up of digital technology in traditional art forms. This will have the ultimate effect of new audiences and broader participation.

At Culture Lab we operate in the increasingly relevant area of Practice-based Research, where practice is informed by research and theory reflects on practice. Practice, in this case, refers to research practice as well as artistic practice, and to the cross-fertilisation of art and science. The output from practice-based research feed into the development of cultural programmes that harness these technologies in broader social settings. This involves the establishment of innovative curatorial and exhibition presentation approaches, and the formulation of relevant evaluation methods and the drafting of guidelines for successful social engagement. This work is interdisciplinary by nature and is embodied in acts situated in the real world.