

The Digital Strategy 2.0

Submission by Dr Brian Opie
Executive Director,
Te Whaingā Aronui The Council for the Humanities
Brian.opie@humanities.org.nz

The Strategy is impressive in its scope, and especially in its emphasis on the importance of public forms of dissemination of and access to knowledge of all kinds. In this respect, the rethinking about the role of public broadcasting in all media forms is exceptionally important, since these media play a critical role (like cultural institutions generally) in the circulation of knowledge throughout society. Innovation can be understood in its most general form as the unpredictable outcome of that circulation of knowledge, which provides the seedbed for cultural formation and economic production.

On Connection

Social justice in a democracy requires that every citizen should be able to participate in the processes of decision-making for his or her society. Participation is an issue of access to information and the socially dominant means of communication. If digital ICTs are now the de facto dominant means of communication, then it is imperative that all citizens should have access to them, without barriers of cost and lack of training.

A major challenge is the implicit model of development which supports much of the argument in the Strategy. On what basis are New Zealand's "economic and social aspirations" (16) being defined? If the models are what they seem to be - high-technology, large population, capital rich advanced western societies, which New Zealand officially and constantly measures itself against – is there a risk that investment decisions will not produce the desired effects? How are other small, democratic societies responding innovatively to the issues raised in this document? As with all aspects of development in New Zealand, the state is required to play a much larger role than in societies where the private sector is well-resourced (3.2, p.16).

In the development phase of a new transport or communications technology, it is understandable that the technology itself and the social agencies and firms which supply it should take the foreground (Actions). An infrastructure has to be put in place. But it is the social and cultural (including economic) purposes which it serves which are most important. It is actually Content (5.1) which provides the technology with its rationale. The statements made under 5.1 would seem to confirm this view, but they do not seem to be consistently worked out through the document as a whole.

e-Research (18)

It would be much better for this topic to be included under Content and Collaboration. While REANNZ and KAREN are attempting to be inclusive in their approach (while

nonetheless putting most of their funding into science and technology projects), it is not particularly helpful in the formation of policies for advanced computing investment in New Zealand to make the technology the focus of policy. The crucial issue is, what capabilities do New Zealanders engaged in advanced research in ANY discipline or field need?

At present, as is the case internationally, it is the needs of science which provide the models and drive the investment in advanced computing. In other countries, however, there is more recognition of this lack in policy and planning than there is in New Zealand. Two examples are: the Humanities High Performance Computing project initiated by the National Endowment for the Humanities in the United States (and, notably, *Our Cultural Commonwealth*, a report on cyberinfrastructure by the American Council of Learned Societies; and the report of the Australian Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences Working Group published in the 2008 Review of the NCRIS Roadmap (pp.21-29).

The explanatory statement in the Executive Summary of the Cultural Ministers' report, (Strategy, p. 29), noting the difference between the sciences, and arts and culture, in access to and take up of digital technologies, is fundamental to this situation: "This is partly because the high capacity digital infrastructure needed by the sector is not yet widely available, but also because the understanding of and training in new technologies is lacking in many creative organisations and enterprises" (3). The issue here is less a failure in the arts and culture sector than it is the almost exclusive concentration on investment in science and technology as the key to economic development in western societies.

On Confidence

The goal statement.

I cannot find any subsequent reference to "strengthening national identity" in this section, unless it is the reference to building "more cohesive communities". There is a fundamental lack of coherence in the Strategy about this matter, for example, an aspect of the goal under Connection is "to help New Zealand integrate with the global community" (16). If this means adopting the same technical standards for ICTs as the rest of the world, that's obviously sensible. If it means "assimilate culturally and socially to the global community", then that clearly works against the development of a distinctive cultural identity for New Zealand. See below on Digital Culture.

Skills

The proposals all emphasise digital skills, that is, training in the technology. In the pre-digital, mass education period of the second half of the twentieth century, writing was the skill an individual needed to use alphanumeric literacy effectively as a communication medium. Students having been taught to write at school were supposed to need no more teaching when they reached tertiary education. When this was found not to be the case, special writing courses were set up to meet this advanced literacy problem. It was then found that most students did not apply much of what they learned in their "content" courses. So, "writing across the curriculum" was developed, and teachers in all subject

areas (including university) were expected to teach writing as an integral part of the subject. I would suggest that this approach remains entirely relevant to literacy and skills mastery in an ICT environment (even if it has never been adopted in New Zealand, and has been only partly adopted anywhere). The importance of thinking through and with, rather than about, the medium of communication is not taken up in this document. Content and medium are not easily separated.

Digital Culture

This term has two distinct but clearly related meanings in the Strategy: the use of digital technologies in cultural production, which is largely the topic of the Content section; and, a set of values, beliefs, meanings and practices which are characteristic of societies in which digital technologies are pervasive.

The former comes into play when cultural content becomes the focus of thinking about the creation of economic and social value; the latter is manifested throughout the Strategy in all the references to “mindset” change, for example, in the apparently descriptive account of the internet generation etc (p.21). The problem with all the references to speed, the removal of time-space boundaries, the infinity of content is that they are not statements of fact so much as statements of a specific cultural interpretation and application of digital technologies. It is noted that “many New Zealanders are now comfortable with digital technologies” (20); another way of making this point is that New Zealanders are introjecting the cultural values and practices *designed into* the technologies we import. To what extent are these values and practices consistent with inherited cultural values, on which national and cultural identity, including New Zealand’s ability to differentiate itself in a global marketplace, are based (44)?

This is not a luddite view of technology, but a request for clarification at a fundamental level of thinking in this policy document. It would be helpful to know to what extent New Zealand contributions to software development, for example, have value because they have New Zealand cultural values and practices designed into them.

On Content

The Strategy refers both to copyright (14) and to “open access to publicly funded scientific and cultural research” (33). A recent paper argues that the copyright regime costs Australia much more than the country gains from it.

The value of open access approaches to knowledge policy needs to be more closely investigated in New Zealand. The setting up of Creative Commons Aotearoa New Zealand [www.creativecommons.org.nz] aims to assist in the work of realising the innovative potentials of New Zealand’s cultural (and scientific) knowledge.

On Collaboration

This is clearly of fundamental importance if New Zealand, as a very small democracy dependent on other countries for most of its new knowledge, is to forge its own place in

the post-industrial world order. Effective collaboration can make up for the lack of capital which otherwise would support innovative behaviour, and would make more locally informed outcomes possible.

New Zealand needs to concentrate more on what it can do best, which is to find solutions to its own future from informed conversation across our society which attends closely to the formation of appropriate models of development, relevant to its history and size. It is easier to import those models, but their fit is questionable. Knowing who and where we are as a nation is crucial to our social and economic contribution in any field internationally, whether in science, IT applications, community development, environmental sustainability, and so on.

On Achieving Our Digital Potential

There is a strong division running through the Strategy, which allocates the economy to science and technology and national identity to heritage. Besides the fact that “heritage” is a critical component in tourism, a major factor in the economy, and that references are made to digital creative arts, the role of cultural knowledge in general is implicitly allocated to a support function, “well being” or “traditional knowledge” rather than to innovation. In Aotearoa New Zealand, more than in larger industrial societies, the stocks of cultural knowledge are likely to be much more important factors in innovation. How these stocks of knowledge are to be recognised in this way is a major issue for policy and planning. It is also very important in the area of cultural identity.

The emphasis on a “mindset change” (7.1 and elsewhere) is right, but it is perhaps the current mindset in government rather than in the public which needs some closer investigation (see above under “Digital Culture”).

The arts, culture and humanities-aronui sector in Aotearoa New Zealand represents a large proportion of the socially, culturally and economically productive population in New Zealand. An estimate for Australia suggests that humanities, arts and social sciences researchers constitute more than 50% of the research work force. This segment is acknowledged in a variety of ways in the Strategy, but the dominant assumption of policy thinking remains, that science and technology are the principal knowledges of economic value. This is understandable because it is those segments of the research and business community which contribute most to the formation of policy in these areas and for which analysis of their economic value has been undertaken.

The Council for the Humanities has taken some major initiatives pertinent to Collaboration and a culturally oriented view of the social, cultural and knowledge creation capabilities of ICTs which is taken up in this and the Content section. The two most relevant to this strategy are:

- the Humanities Research Network [www.humanitiesresearch.net.nz], which aims to create a virtual environment for interaction between researchers and knowledge organisations in the arts, culture and humanities-aronui sector; and

- Creative Commons Aotearoa New Zealand [www.creativecommons.org.nz], a goal of the Digital Content Strategy which the Council undertook to implement. CCANZ is benefiting from some funding from the CPF fund, for the stage 2 development of its website which is to be completed in June 2008.

Of particular importance is the ability of these two digital projects to facilitate collaboration between national and regional cultural institutions and professional knowledge workers in tertiary education institutions.

To achieve their full potential, these initiatives need significant further investment, especially to enable their educational role in the exploration of new opportunities in the digital ICT environment to be accomplished.

Obviously, to have the Sector Forum give the same weight to the sector involved in the creation of cultural knowledge as is given to the science and technology sectors would produce a more balanced policy and strategy framework. A more inclusive account of the economic role of digital knowledge work would be another outcome, because the cultural sector contributes to the creation of knowledge through communities as much or more than through traditional business organizations, in contrast to the science and technology sector.