

This is an extract from the concluding chapter of *'Making is Connecting: The social meaning of creativity, from DIY and knitting to YouTube and Web 2.0,'* by David Gauntlett. The book was published by Polity Press in March 2011.

This is not the whole conclusion chapter – it is about a third of it, but this extract includes the main summary points.

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9. Conclusion

In this concluding chapter I will begin by summarising and pulling together key arguments from the book. This starts with a section about our philosophical heroes, John Ruskin and William Morris, as I want to reiterate their core points and connect them with today's issues. Then everything else is boiled down into a set of five key principles, namely:

1. A new understanding of creativity as process, emotion, and presence
2. The drive to make and share
3. Happiness through creativity and community
4. A middle layer of creativity as social glue
5. Making your mark, and making the world your own

I will outline each of these, and then discuss the political connotations of the 'making is connecting' thesis. Finally, I will describe some 'imagined futures', where we will look at the potential implications of this book's arguments in the areas of media, education, work, and politics and the environment.

The lessons of Ruskin and Morris

We started the book with a discussion of the ideas about everyday creativity suggested by the Victorian social critics, John Ruskin and William Morris. These arguments, after 150 years, remain extremely powerful and relevant. We saw that making things is part of the process of thinking about things. Making leads to pleasures and understandings, gained *within* the process of making itself, which otherwise would not be achieved.

We also saw how amateur craft, and what I call everyday creativity, has been consistently derided over two centuries. The manufacture of everyday objects, and the media of entertainment and information, has become professionalised, and it is in the interests of those companies and professionals to run down the work of amateurs (although they do not *always* do so¹). Meanwhile, ‘art’ itself has also become a professional field of experts and elites, who carefully police the borders of their practice. A significant part of the joy of craft, and online creativity, is of course that it does *not* rely on hierarchies of experts and elites to be validated, and does not depend on editors and gatekeepers for its circulation.

Ruskin made the excellent point that roughly-made and non-professional things embody a kind of celebration of humanity’s imperfections – the very fact that we are *not* machines. The collaborative mish-mash that characterises many Web 2.0 services is a heightened version of this. Ruskin argued that human creativity must be unleashed, and should risk failure and shame, so that the richness of humanity could be properly expressed. You may remember that he was thrilled by the sometimes silly and ugly sculptures to be found ornamenting Gothic cathedrals, as they were signs of the uninhibited life and freedom of quirky individual artisans. This is rather like the point made by internet commentator Clay Shirky, in his 2010 book *Cognitive Surplus*, that even daft websites – such as those collecting silly photos of cats with comic captions – reflect a zesty, everyday, creative liveliness which we should embrace and value, especially because they suggest to other everyday amateurs that ‘You can play this game too’².

Ruskin also helped us to make the connection from *individual* creativity to the ‘big picture’ of social stability. He showed that societies may establish apparently rational systems, which are intended to ‘cure’ inefficiencies, but which as a side effect silence individual voice and strangle independent creativity, and so ultimately create a much greater sickness. This Ruskin point also has a modern-day counterpart, in the recent work of Nick Couldry, which we will discuss in a few pages.

Ruskin’s enthusiastic supporter, William Morris, was a creative *producer* throughout his life, as well as critic of industry and politics. He drew our attention to the fact that we need *models* of good practice. Criticising present realities is important but insufficient. It can be hard to picture what the future would look like, and so to be

making things, as examples of future creative diversity, in the here and now, offers a powerful and tangible form of inspiration to others – and challenges the apparent inevitability of the present. This idea is shared by the makers of punk zines, and the knitters, stitchers, and guerrilla gardeners, as well as the makers of YouTube videos and Audioboo recordings, who show by vivid example that you do not have to accept all of mainstream culture, and can start to create your own alternatives instead.

Morris contended that people need to be able to make their mark on the world, give shape to their environments, and share knowledge, ideas, and self-expression. Ivan Illich made the same points, in a different way, 100 years later. Both thinkers observed that these opportunities provide a feeling of joy – or, when they are lacking, a dull misery. These arguments are today more vital than ever, and since we live in a world with so much media – and, now, so much *potential* for everyday personally made and distributed media – they offer a kind of prescription for how we should proceed.

Since – as critics of this book may like to point out – the majority of people remain, most of the time, viewers and consumers of mainstream professional stuff rather than makers and sharers of amateur material, this is a prescription that may seem ambitious and radical. But there are clearly many signs of this potential – not least of all in the staggering growth of people using social networks where personal creative material is shared. Facebook went from zero to 500 million active users in six years; and in five years, the number of videos viewed on YouTube went from zero to two billion every day³. These particular platforms may not, in the future, be the ultimate sites of everyday creativity, but they certainly show that people are willing to give it a go.

Five key principles

This book has highlighted a number of key principles, which I offer as tools for thinking about everyday life, creativity, and media. Here, I have tried to draw together the main points, and numbered them from one to five.

1. A new understanding of creativity as process, emotion, and presence

The standard definition says that creativity should be judged on its outcomes, which are required to be original and paradigm-shifting. I argued that this way of understanding creativity is unsatisfactory because it rejects everyday activity that we would normally describe, in a ‘common sense’ way, as creative; and especially because it is about the final product, rather than the process. There also seemed to be a philosophical flaw in a definition of creativity which would not enable anyone to identify ‘creativity’ unless they happened to be in possession of a God-like overview of the history of previous

innovations in that sphere. A new definition was therefore proposed, in longer and shorter forms (see the discussion on pages xx–xx). The shorter one was this:

Everyday creativity refers to a process which brings together at least one active human mind, and the material or digital world, in the activity of making something which is novel in that context, and is a process which evokes a feeling of joy.

This approach to creativity is valuable, I would say, because it correctly recognises the imaginative process of, say, knitters and bakers, amateur engineers, gardeners, Lego enthusiasts, bloggers and YouTube videomakers, as the creative activity that it is – engaged in because the makers *want* to, and because it gives them *pleasure*. In the longer version of the revised definition of creativity, we also recognised that others may be able to sense the *presence* of the maker, in the thing they have made – the unavoidably distinctive fingerprint that the thinking-and-making individual leaves on their work, which can foster a sense of shared feeling and common cause, even when maker and audience never meet.

2. *The drive to make and share*

It is clearly the case, as we have seen from a range of offline and online cases mentioned in this book, that people like to make and share things. This may not be *all* people, partly because modern life has sought to render personal creativity unnecessary, but it is *some* people, with the potential to be many. They enjoy making and sharing things without the need for external rewards such as money or celebrity; although low-level recognition and reputation – being able to impress the people around you – may be a motivating force. But they just do it anyway.

In the discussion of motivations in chapters 3 and 4, we saw that people often spend time creating things because they want to feel alive in the world, as *participants* rather than viewers, and to be active and recognised within a community of interesting people. It is common that they wish to make their existence, their interests and their personality more visible in the contexts that are significant to them, and they want this to be *noticed*. The process of making is enjoyed for its own sake, of course: there is pleasure in seeing a project from start to finish, and the process provides space for thought and reflection, and helps to cultivate a sense of the self as an active, creative agent. But there is also a desire to connect and communicate with others, and – especially online – to be an active participant in dialogues and communities. These are impulses which should be supported and developed by the websites and technologies of the future – as well as the toys and games, education and government programmes, and everything else of the future, as we will discuss in the ‘implications’ section below.

3. Happiness through creativity and community

We have seen that humans are very bad at predicting what will make us more happy. Indeed, it is a matter of historical and current fact that we typically allocate time to activities which are the wrong ones, working harder in an attempt to increase wealth, at the expense of the social engagement which can actually improve our enjoyment of life.

Happiness research shows that happiness is strongly associated with the quality of our relationships and our connections with others. Nothing else comes close. Richard Layard, a leading economist and happiness researcher, even ends up saying: ‘Increasingly, research confirms the dominating importance of love’⁴. In chapter 5 we saw that happiness is also heavily associated with self-esteem, and having projects to work on; and that work needs to be *meaningful* if we are to be satisfied and healthy. Crucially, we saw that although the happiness research identifies a number of variables and circumstances which should be able to assure humans of greater happiness, we cannot simply line up the ‘correct’ lifestyle elements and expect happiness to flood in. Happiness has to be worked towards, and it flows from action, not passivity.

All of this suggests that creative projects, especially when either online, or offline but linked via online platforms, are invaluable for human happiness. We should also remember Layard’s stark warning that shared purpose is essential for human stability, otherwise we can find ourselves unexpectedly crushed by loneliness and stress. ‘The current pursuit of self-realisation *will not work*,’ he says, least of all from the consumption of readymade products⁵. Communication, exchange, and collaboration in the production of everyday life, ideas, and community, is much more rewarding.

4. A middle layer of creativity as social glue

Social scientists have traditionally analysed social life at the level of individuals, groups and families – the down to earth ‘micro’ level – or in terms of organisations, institutions, and governments – the more abstract ‘macro’ level. More imaginative analysts, such as sociologist Anthony Giddens, have sought to connect the two levels by showing how the perception of macro-level expectations influences individual micro behaviour, and how everyday practices can in turn reinforce, or change, the macro established order⁶.

The discussion in this book, however, has often concerned activity in what we might call a middle layer. Social capital theory, as we saw in chapter 6, suggested that ‘meso-level social structures’ could act as ‘integrating elements’ between individuals and society⁷. Making and sharing activities, online and offline, can be seen as a disorganised (or, rather, lightly self-organised) cloud of creative links which can bind people together. These ties may not necessarily forge links between individuals and formal institutions, but they certainly connect people with others in unexpected, unplanned and perhaps rather anarchic ways. This creative cloud carries no single coherent message,

(5) – Extract from ‘Making is Connecting’ by David Gauntlett – see www.makingisconnecting.org

but its existence, representing people doing what they want to do, *because they want to do it*, raises a challenge to the lifestyles of individual consumers, and to the ambitions of organised businesses and governments. These are people who want to make their own stuff, rather than only having stuff that is made commercially or on an industrial scale; and who are interested in that kind of thing made by others. This brings us to the last of the five principles.

5. Making your mark, and making the world your own

Human beings need to be able to make their mark on the world, and to give shape and character to the environments that they live in. They need tools to do this, as Ivan Illich showed (see chapter 7). Ideally, these are tools which can be used in any way that a person likes, to do whatever they want. Tools which only offer a predetermined set of opportunities, or which are scaled up to provide uniform ‘solutions’, Illich warned, deny creativity and impose the fixed meanings of others. But mastery of a creative tool means that an individual can invest the world with meaning, and thereby ‘enrich the environment’ with the fruits of their vision⁸. This is not a specific roadmap towards a better society: the vision is only that there must be the ever-present possibility and potential of unpredictable and unplanned creativity – and that the *tools* for this must be readily available and easy to use.

This mention of such tools may lead modern readers to immediately think of Web 2.0: but it also has implications for what Web 2.0 should really mean. It means that Web 2.0 tools should be as open and as inviting of creativity as possible; and offer platforms where people can truly make their mark, express themselves, and shape the environment. As Jaron Lanier has argued (see chapter 8), it cannot involve simplistic templates where identities are reduced to a tick-box level. Expressive messiness, rather than Facebook-style neatness, is therefore to be encouraged – even by those of us who, for whatever psychological reason, prefer things to be tidy. Furthermore, distinctive creative contributions, and individual expressive voices, should be distinguishable – and therefore the idea of pooling all human knowledge and creativity into one mused-together repository (or unified electronic consciousness) is not necessarily a wonderful idea.

In addition to the websites and software, new internet *devices* should also be naturally enabling of making and sharing – something which, for instance, as discussed in chapter 8, the first version of the celebrated Apple iPad was emphatically not. The idea that Apple can turn the internet into a neat and tidy experience, which is easy to use and rather beautiful, and where Apple has generously checked every possible program for suitability before allowing it to be available to you, may have a straightforward appeal to many users, but is also an underhand threat to the free Web that we have become used to.

Furthermore, our creative activity should be able to live on platforms that are *sustainable*. To date, commercial companies have created the most successful platforms, such as YouTube, Blogger, and Flickr; and they have generally managed *not* to ruin their sites, or the user-created content, with too much intrusive advertising. But things change, and licensing your carefully crafted material to an unpredictable and possibly unprofitable website may not be the best way to ensure that it is still visible, and nicely presented, in five years' time. The solution? Ideally, a consortium of enterprising governments would support a global online repository and community for digital creative work of all kinds, run by an independent non-profit foundation. Like YouTube and other such platforms, it should have no gatekeepers and a minimum amount of restrictions. This idea is not, at the moment, on the cards; but the fostering of everyday creativity is one of the most crucial things any government should do, as we will discuss below.

[This chapter then continues, with sections which do not appear in this extract, entitled:

- *The political connotations of 'making is connecting'*
- *Creativity and being heard*
- *Some imagined futures*

Those sections are followed by this final section:]

In conclusion

The near-future scenarios I have painted above are all part of the shift that I have described as being from the 'sit back and be told' culture which became entrenched in the twentieth century, towards the 'making and doing' culture which could flourish in the twenty first. Although I think there is an appetite for such a change, we could hardly say that this would be an easy shift. Many people have become comfortable with the undemanding role that contemporary culture expects us to enjoy – it appears pleasant enough, allows us to consume wall-to-wall entertainments, and nothing very bad seems to happen. But at the same time, we are not left feeling very whole, or fulfilled, or creative. And bad things *are* happening – see all the evidence of social isolation, fragmented communities, environmental pollution and climate change in particular – but we choose not to really notice them.

It doesn't seem right to suggest that people just don't know what's good for them: but the empirical research on happiness and well-being does show a clear mismatch between the things which we say help us to feel positive, alive, and connected, and the things which we actually spend most time on. It sounds illogical, but we all do it. And because modern life is often tiring and complicated, we are often likely to welcome the

blessed relief of the ‘sit back and be told’ elements which don’t require us to *do* very much. The ‘making and doing’ culture does require a bit more effort – but it comes with rich rewards.

Making things shows us that we are powerful, creative agents – people who can really *do* things, things that other people can see, learn from, and enjoy. Making things is about transforming materials into something new, but it is also about transforming one’s own sense of self. Creativity is a gift, not in the sense of it being a talent, but in the sense that it is a way of sharing meaningful things, ideas, or wisdom, which form bridges between people and communities. Through creative activity, where making is connecting, we can increase our pleasure in everyday life, unlock innovative capacity, and build resilience in our communities, so that we can face future challenges with confidence and originality.

For other material, videos, links and more, see: www.makingisconnecting.org

NOTES

¹ For instance, upmarket newspapers in the UK, especially *The Guardian*, have tended to be relatively curious and positive about online culture, although the bigger-selling tabloids, in particular the *Daily Mail* and *Daily Express*, have generally gone for ridiculous scare stories. The fear of the online amateur amongst media professionals is most lucidly expressed in Andrew Keen’s book *The Cult of the Amateur: How Today’s Internet Is Killing Our Culture and Assaulting Our Economy* (London: Nicholas Brealey, 2007).

² Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (London: Allen Lane), p. 17–20. The ‘lolcat’ site he picks out is <http://icanhascheezburger.com>.

³ Facebook statistics and timeline can be found at <http://www.facebook.com/press>. YouTube statistics are periodically highlighted at the Official YouTube Blog, at <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com>. The post about exceeding two billion views per day (‘nearly double the prime-time audience of all three major U.S. television networks combined’) was from 16 May 2010.

⁴ Richard Layard, *Happiness: Lessons from a New Science* (London: Penguin, 2006), p. 66.

⁵ Layard, *Happiness*, p. 234, emphasis added.

⁶ A summary of this approach appears in the chapter on Giddens in my book *Media, Gender and Identity: Second edition* (London: Routledge, 2008).

⁷ John Field, *Social Capital: Second edition* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 160.

⁸ Ivan Illich, *Tools for Conviviality* (London: Calder & Boyars, 1973), p. 21