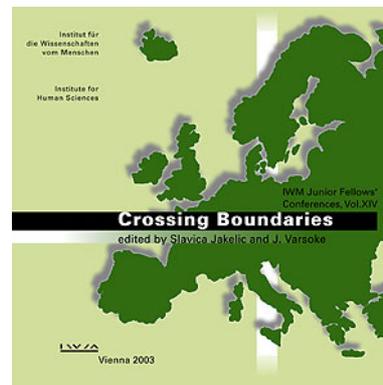


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## **New Media Culture: Internet as a Tool of Cultural Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe**

Slavomir Krekovic

*New media enable new cultures to transform society. Now that the process has accelerated to the point where it is visible on a daily basis, most people understand that new communication media mean new ways of life. Indeed, it is now possible to see how new ways of creating and distributing symbols have made it possible throughout history for people to change existing cultural practices, and through these changes in the way people socialize, to transform societies.*

Howard Rheingold

The main focus of my paper is on certain aspects of the transformation of the cultural sector in post-communist countries of Eastern Europe. I am dealing with the importance of emerging cultural institutions and activists, which I think play a considerable role in the process that these countries have undergone since the fall of communist regime. My assumption is that these organizations are going to take over the role of the state as the main actor in the cultural sphere (as it was the case

in past decades). Today it is obvious that new digital technologies, especially new communication networks connected within the Internet, are one of the main tools that enabled the establishment of radically new models of cultural production, management and information distribution. However, it is not well-known in what ways and scales cultural NGOs and individuals from Central and Eastern Europe are using new technologies, especially the Internet, and to what extent it is changing the whole cultural mechanism. That is why I want to focus on the following questions: What is the impact of this new medium on the transformation process? How does it differ from traditional media? How (and by whom) is it used in the post-communist countries? Why is the Internet so important in the cultural sphere? I will then analyze a new international socio-cultural phenomenon that is strongly related to the Internet and use of new technologies in connection with art – I will call it ‘new media culture.’ This phenomenon leads us to new definitions related to new forms, new modes of expression, as well as new social discourses. My aim is to describe the overall picture of this movement that has emerged in the last couple of years, and to compare the new media culture development in the post-communist countries to that of the Western ones, which are also undergoing a cultural transformation as regards to new possibilities offered by digital technologies.

I am interested in describing the situation and problems concerning the relationship of technologies and culture in these countries on a practical and policy-oriented level and would also like to suggest some solutions to actual tasks. Several questions concerning the relationship between the global network and cultural communities in the particular countries arise: What are the cultural, social and political consequences of the use of the Internet in our field of interest? What models of information dissemination in the cultural sphere are being implemented? Who provides the necessary financial support for various cultural projects? What is their long-term sustainability perspective?

Within this context we can observe an interesting relationship between the global and the regional aspect – we can see how it is possible to take advantage of globally accessible tools, know-how and experience in order to support local culture and how to make it globally accessible and open to a wide international public. We can find a political aspect in it as well, thus the questions: What conclusions could be drawn for the cultural policies of the post-communist countries, which (I would argue) have to undergo remarkable changes? Do these cultural activists and small institutions have any political influence?

During the past 40 years we have witnessed the process of isolation of the socialist countries from the rest of the world. The sphere of culture suffered from this isolation as well, above all by lack of artistic freedom and insufficient communication with the western part of the world. Now, several years after the change, the cultural sphere in the former communist countries is still facing considerable problems. We got rid of the main difficulties, we have freedom as well as more communication possibilities. However, there is still lack of appropriate cultural policy and, consequently, there is not enough support for culture in general and for the non-state culture in particular. Several problems have to be solved in order to achieve a well-functioning cultural sector: division between the state and non-state cultural activities and artistic creations, or still very unsatisfactory information flow between the cultural community of a particular country and the rest of world (which cannot be increased by the use of traditional media). There is no doubt that the influence of the state in cultural areas is still too extensive: post-communist states often attempt to reduce their own support of artistic creation, leaving artists and institutions to the action of market forces and private initiatives. I will try to describe some of the necessary goals of cultural transformation where a shift in the following areas should occur.

1. Cultural values – from building up a centralized and state-regulated cultural policy to recognizing and supporting the freedom and independence of artistic creation.

2. Financing of cultural activities both in the physical or virtual space – from directive support of state cultural activities towards new models, taking into account artistic qualities and importance of the particular work of an individual or institution; from centralized financing to finding new ways of functioning of culture based on several independent financial sources, which means above all appropriate legislation that would allow/support private sponsoring, etc.

3. System of education – more emphasis should be placed on the importance of culture and art for the society as well as on providing more information about contemporary culture.

4. A functioning sphere of efficient independent media – that would provide information about what is going on in contemporary culture on a national and international level. I believe that this media should be more flexible than in the past; today, we already have several examples of such projects in Eastern Europe.

We see that the transformation should affect the sphere of art creation, cultural management/information-distribution and, last but not the least, general knowledge and the involvement level of a wide audience. Let us have a look at the importance of the Internet and new institutions and activists in the transformation process.

During the past several years numerous organizations emerged in Eastern European countries, many of them working also in the field of cultural development. By coincidence, since 1995 we can also observe a rapid growth of the World Wide Web and increasing number of Internet hosts. Many of the new NGOs are working in the field of art, especially new media art, supporting and managing various activities, from web sites and net specific projects to magazines and festivals. I will try to show how these organizations are using the Internet to promote contemporary culture and how the Internet is changing the entire cultural mechanism in these countries.

Basically, the only use of the World Wide Web and other Internet services is in spreading information. But unlike in the case of the old media, every individual or institution is allowed to use it in two ways: as a recipient and as a content-creator. The Internet is the first many-to-many medium: every computer connected to the net can now become a broadcasting station, publishing house or art gallery, depending only on the skills and intentions of the owner. This democratic nature of the net is well suited for providing an alternative information channel, as an opposition to classical mass media. And unlike the old institutionalised media, it offers far more flexibility and it can become a powerful tool of social interaction.

One well-known metaphor compares the Internet to a chaotic library, where a vast amount of knowledge is archived but the main problem is how to get access to it and not drown in a sea of disinformation. As the Internet is not a catalogue-entry-based-system, it is not easy to find a piece of information if we do not know where it is stored. Thus, besides access to the network, we also need navigation points and communication nodes providing us with the easiest path to relevant information. The main importance of Internet-based projects in the transforming countries resides in building nodes referred to as Internet portals, which can relate other activities of the institution as well.

Currently there are several models in the cultural sphere that change the actual concept of cultural mechanism, including artistic creation and promotion as well as social interaction, and are based on the possibilities of the Internet. The main advantage is that content is accessible for free, at least thus far, and can be very specific

according to a user's preferences. These models vary by their interactive possibilities and also in their local/regional or more global orientation. Of course, there are often projects that combine several of these possibilities. I will describe some examples of the established models in Eastern Europe.

### 1. *Web publishing*

There are regularly updated Internet journals dealing with far more specific topics than it was possible within the old media and therefore with strong community-building potential, run by private publishing houses, various NGOs, and individuals. These journals can have either national/local or international impact, depending on the language they use. In the sphere of culture they are new possibilities of mediating a content that could be not a part of the private mass media; only a small percentage of the population, mostly well-educated and young people, would be interested in it. Examples: *5D.sk* – Slovak-software-company-run cultural and scientific online journal; its development has been stopped because of financial problems; *cyberpipe.org* – Slovenian webzine dealing with netculture; *kyberia.sk* – an example of a webzine/social space related to culture, science and technology, run by one person.

### 2. *Archives, virtual libraries, galleries and "knowledge" databases*

These archives, libraries, galleries and databases can basically store any type of information and are mostly equipped with a search engine, enabling the user to find relevant information. We can distinguish text archives (which are similar to journals but are not updated regularly, or sometimes not updated at all), commented databases of other websites, databases of artists' biographies or their works, Internet galleries. This is usually the way the local culture and artistic works can be presented to wider international public. Examples: *scenis.org* – searchable database of performing arts; *message.sk* – digital art gallery.

### 3. *Discussion forums/message boards/chatrooms*

These are often connected to a webzine or existing standalone. They represent one of the most powerful community development tools, connecting people according to their interests, although not very suited for serious discussions. Examples: *nyx.cz*, *cyberpipe.org*, *kyberia.sk*.

### 4. *Mailing lists, electronic conferences*

These can be open or closed, moderated or un-moderated. Examples: *cyberpipe.org* – offers both moderated and un-moderated mailing lists; *buryzone.sk* –

small gallery and space for cultural activities in Bratislava, using weekly mailing about the upcoming events; *zion.sk* – Slovak cultural webzine, sending weekly mail with updates and comments.

#### 5. *Internet radio and TV stations*

The phenomenon of “streaming media” arose with increasing bandwidth of data-transfer. The content is “streamed” from the server to the client machine and can contain audio, video or text. This brings new possibilities for the promotion of non-mass oriented and non-commercial culture together with new opportunities of user actions: the user is not a passive consumer of the radio program any more, but can choose and set up parts of the broadcast from the real-audio-files archive according to his own preferences. Examples: *Pararadio* in Budapest, *Radio Jelení* in Prague, *Radioart.sk* project in Bratislava.

#### 6. *Net-specific artistic projects*

The Internet brought new possibilities not only in the sphere of art presentation but also affected the very nature of artistic creation. Net.art, Internet-specific art, can be created by anyone with access to the network, and it completely changes the essence and functioning of art within the society as we have known it until now. Today, there are several artists from Central and Eastern Europe who have already become well-respected new media art pioneers – Vuk Cosic (Slovenia), Alexej Shulgín (Russia), and others.

#### 7. *Open source software development movement*

This provides necessary technical background for all independent activities and its main goal is to promote free software access and voluntary involvement in the development process. The community includes programmers from all over the world (software platforms: Linux, PHP, MySQL, Apache, Perl, Slash, PHPNuke, etc.; in the artistic sphere e. g. Pure Data – tool for digital sound processing).

#### 8. *Collaborative projects, networking, cross-border co-operation*

This concerns funding (Interfund network), know-how sharing, innovative initiatives like joint radio broadcasts, meetings and workshops. Examples: *ASU* (Art Servers Unlimited) meetings and network, *ORANG* network of independent Internet radio stations, *MAG.NET-Electronic Culture Publishers* international network of magazines dealing with electronic culture, *Eurozine* network of cultural magazines.

As we can see, compared to classical media, radically new strategies of information distribution have emerged. These tools are flexible enough to serve as general models of information nodes in the world wide chaotic library. The Internet gave birth to the phenomenon that we may call 'new media culture,' which strongly affected the cultural practices in Central and Eastern Europe. 'New media culture' is a term that might help us describe the kind of changes that happened in cultural and social mechanisms after the expansion of digital technologies. It incorporates groups of people and practices related to new media, cultural institutions and artists that are using digital technology, promoting computer literacy and demonstrating cultural as well as social and political power of the network and networking. The international open source software development movement, which emerged during the 1990s, was of big importance for this "subculture." Moreover, a completely new phenomenon/model related to new media culture emerged during the last couple of years – art servers. There are complex Internet portals joining several of the described features and acting as an important communication node to the local artistic and cultural community. Art servers as virtual spaces for cultural activities are often connected to a physical space or institution, such as media lab. In the Eastern European countries there are several projects of this type: *Ljudmila.org* (Slovenia), *Kuda.org* (Yugoslavia), *C3.hu* (Hungary), *Interspace.org* (Bulgaria), *Rixc.lv* (Latvia).

The Internet is an important tool for fast, flexible and free information exchange, not allowing any censorship or other barriers at the present time. Uncontrollable information flow represents power in a political sense as well. The Internet, as opposed to traditional mass media, is a "pull" medium, which means that it forces the user to be active:

We might think about new media culture as being a sort of ideology, but I would prefer a different view that asserts the idea that the Internet supports critical thinking and non-ideological approaches to culture. In the last couple of years we observed a shift in ways of artistic expression concerning the usage of new media: from experiments with the nature of the medium itself, to media activism and hacktivism where artists or hackers are trying to express their opinion and be influential in questions concerning globalization, the way multinational firms use to act, or politics. This change is recognizable in both Western and Eastern media art. The use of the Internet furthermore caused radical changes within the system of art creation and distribution. Free distribution and creation represent a democratic model, where the quality of the work itself can be the only important feature: as I have al-

ready mentioned, there was a shift from “one-to-many” artistic production model to the “many-to-many” model.

From the geographical perspective, and because of the importance of the network for cultural transformation, the Internet is becoming the main tool for know-how and information exchange between East and West, as well as between East and East. Within this framework we can basically distinguish two ways of information circulation. Firstly, “uploading” local cultural items to the global level, which requires multiple language platforms (web sites with databases, Internet radio stations, etc.); the widespread use of English tends to minimize the importance of language as a vehicle of cultural difference. Secondly, “downloading” cultural elements from the global level (which is, of course, imaginary), using the knowledge, know-how, software, but also communication behaviour learned in the Internet in the local context.

I believe that an increasingly important role in developing a civil society is played by local communities (“territorial collectivities”). Scattered individuals congregate around various poles of interest and new virtual communities, developing completely new forms of discourse. However, these may be not only the local or national communities, since many people from Central and Eastern Europe are becoming members of international mailing lists, participating in discussion forums and reading webzines that might not be exclusively bound to a local context. Also, open-source software development is no longer a matter of English native-speakers only. An individual’s active participation in several online communities at the same time is not only an interesting research field for social scientists but it suggests (above all) an open flow of information, which acts as a catalyst of the transformation process. In Central and Eastern Europe there are emerging communities of non-professionals interested in contemporary art, culture, music, etc., which was not the case before the Internet era. Another aspect of social interaction is that the Internet is building connections between small cultural institutions and activists in different countries – it serves as a tool for developing cross-border and transnational co-operation. We could find several joined international projects and networks, managed by cultural NGOs, festivals, magazines or art servers.

The Internet serves as the world’s largest knowledge database and creates therefore a new dimension of education. The necessary conditions for this are computer literacy and access to the appropriate hardware. There are many cases where new information and communication technologies have been introduced with adequate accompanying guidance and young people have quickly established links with their

counterparts around the world and launched networked group activities, developing a community awareness.

As we know, there are many projects in Europe using the Internet as a tool for production/management/publishing/information distribution in the cultural field. But, if we compare Central and Eastern Europe with its Western counterparts we can see several differences between institutions that are running these projects. For instance, most of the online archives of contemporary art in Western countries are managed by the state, which also provides support for the infrastructure development and technical as well as financial support for new media art and artists (this is the case for *Basis Wien Archive*, *ZKM Centre* in Karlsruhe, and *Ars Electronica Centre* in Linz). Civic NGOs are more visible in the field of activism or open source software development and are mostly run by artists themselves in order to achieve a certain degree of independence. In Eastern Europe the state is not involved in doing any of that. Moreover, the funding of Internet-based cultural projects is quite modest or, like in Bulgaria, is completely absent. Most of the NGOs working with new media were supported (or even founded, as we can see in the case of the *C3 Centre* in Budapest) by the *Soros Foundations Network*, which was established by American businessman George Soros. It is surprising that in these regions independent NGOs often play the role of state and are far more active in the field of productive use of new technologies.

Generally speaking, creative activity and its complex relation to society are today poorly recognized by cultural policy in the post-communist countries, as opposed to the West. There are several areas of cultural policy where changes should be put into practice.

1. Education. There is no doubt that the productive use of technologies depends on education and that online communication requires special skills. That is why it is important to organize training programs and workshops promoting computer literacy. Organizers are mostly cultural NGOs that should gain support from the local authorities.

2. Access to the Internet. The Internet has become a force of globalization and has created a considerable gap between those who have access, knowledge, and freedom to use it, and those who do not. The division into information-rich and information-poor societies is a big danger that we must avoid, and which deteriorates the democratic and “universal” potential of the Internet. There are considerable differences in the usage of new technologies not only between Western and Eastern countries but also between urban and rural areas within the East. Access to the

Internet is one of the official priorities of the European Commission and also of some governments in Central and Eastern European countries.

3. Financial sustainability of the third sector and artistic or art-supporting projects. A new model of supporting new media initiatives and non-state cultural institutions and artists in general is to be created. It should remove the division of culture into a state and non-state culture, provide enough funding possibilities to enable long-term sustainability of cultural NGOs, and guarantee support for independent artistic creation. Cultural policy-makers should ensure that resources are being channeled to the people who are in fact doing the work – small institutions, which are frequently overlooked because of their low profile. And, as Sally Jane Norman suggests in the paper *Culture and the New Media Technologies*, since grass-roots structures tend to draw a broader, more representative range of people working with new media than large institutions (in terms of gender, ethnic origin, professional background, etc.), closer contact with these structures may help cultural authorities to constitute more representative delegations when organizing official encounters and debates on information and communication technologies. Many of the cultural authorities cannot understand the interest of cross-disciplinary projects with new media, and ignore them on the grounds that they do not “fit” in the pre-determined categories and funding structures.

4. Networking and communication between the non-state organizations dealing with culture and new technologies will be the critical issue for their success in the near future. Small institutions, connected within several networks, are gaining much more importance (in terms of funding and further development). In addition, institutes dealing with culture and new technologies (mostly Western ones – *ZKM* in Karlsruhe, *Ars Electronica* in Linz, the *ICC* in Tokyo, *BANFF* in Canada, but also *C3* in Budapest, etc.) should be encouraged to develop links with smaller organizations, in order to avoid the creation of exclusivist high-end cultural consortium networks. This should create flexible communication architectures for cultural institutions and artists without any boundaries.

5. Wider discussion. Last but not least, non-state organizations and activists should force an establishment of a wider base for discussion on media and cultural development.

### *Conclusion*

Numerous collaborative projects show that the use of new technologies in post-communist countries has given rise to the international success of many Eastern artists and promoted the necessary know-how for people of these regions working within the field of culture. The 'new media culture' phenomenon indicates practical opportunities that the Internet offers in building international local and international communities and insuring circulation of information regardless of geographic borders. Everyone is allowed to create and manage his/her own cultural project in an inexpensive way, whether it is an artistic work or an Internet server with many sections. Yet, the main question still remains and it concerns the further existence of such projects and institutions in terms of their long-term sustainability. This problem has become even more obvious after the declaration of George Soros to change the policy of his foundations and focus more on the former Soviet countries. The only possibility for the long-term sustainable projects is in convincing the local authorities to support independent cultural activities and to create an appropriate legislative framework for private sponsorship. It follows that the third sector is apparently better and far more effective at promoting culture and contemporary art than the state itself; that is why the importance of NGOs is growing in the cultural sphere. As for the situation in Eastern European countries, I would argue that the state should remain active only in preserving cultural heritage, archiving artistic works and similar fields (perhaps by using new and efficient technologies when doing this), but in the first place it should provide for appropriate funding of non-state activities. I believe that one of the main aims of cultural transformation should be establishing a vital culture without (or with very limited) state influence, by increasing the importance and sustainability of the third sector.