Special Issue: Creative Citizen Conference September 2014

Introduction

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This special issue of Cultural Science Journal brings together a range of material that was presented at the Creative Citizens conference at the Royal College of Art in London on September 17th and 18th 2014. The event marked the culmination of the 30-month UK Research Council funded investigation into the nature of creative citizenship during which researchers from six UK universities and a range of community and policy partners undertook original empirical research and produced co-created creative media products. The conference was more than the usual run through of academic papers and instead had lively workshops, an exhibition, policy and theoretical debates and much more. This special issue therefore tries to capture a little of that wider experience in its choice of contents and, like the conference itself, offers up critical examples of creative citizenship in action and also some reflection and problematising of the concept itself.

We begin unapologetically with what is in effect a cast of characters. Sara Lyndsey’s photographs capture our subject, the creative citizen, in their places of work and within their communities. They make for a striking set of images that bring our subject to life. They ask: “Are these creative citizens? What makes them so?” At the conference these images sat within a wider exhibition of material co-created between the research team and many of those featured in the photographs. Material included: a set of digital stories, community newspapers, immersive 3d digital environments, a comic book amongst other artifacts. The paper by Alexiou et al. offers detail on the process of co-creation that the research team undertook, in this instance with communities who are seeking to influence local planning decisions. In these examples, digital and social networking

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1 An archive of the conference programme and some material is at: http://creativecitizens.co.uk/conference/. A call for papers for this special edition was issued to confirmed speakers ahead of the conference.
technologies aren’t a magic wand for improving social capital or ensuring the citizen voice is heard. Instead, to be effective they need to be: “embedded in the particular context and purposes of each group” argue the authors.

Three papers from PhD candidates who presented at the conference are useful insights into the value of creative media production and the activism of citizens both on and offline. Rachel-Ann Charles has a critical case study of a community media project in Trinidad and Tobago whereby young men “at risk” (of offending and suchlike) involve themselves in a variety of creative media forms that resulted in opportunities for self-expression but ultimately failed to realise the potential for enterprise that might have resulted in the social change hoped for.

The artist Samantha Jones describes how a community in Liverpool worked with an artist to use culture “as a new form of co-produced urban regeneration and model of local economics,” whilst the University of Helsinki’s Kinga Polynczuk-Alenius offers a study of an online community, centred around an environmental brand, that examines some of the assumptions around consumer choice being a useful political tool. She finds instead a “depoliticised alternative hedonism” that is more about self-expression than direct digital activism.

At the conference there were some key challenges put forward about the value and potential of creative citizenship. In a paper from the think-tank CentreForum, Stephen Lee makes the case that the worst thing that might happen to such a concept is that politicians run with it as the latest policy cure-all. It’s a little too “fuzzy” for Lee’s taste, although he recognises its potential should it be more targeted to specific policy areas.

Such fuzziness is also a concern of James Milner from Hampshire College in Massachusetts, USA. He examines the Media, Community and the Creative Citizen project plan and although like Lee he wants creative citizenship to be a viable prospect, he sets out three obstacles to that happening. He asks a question pertinent to future research in this area: “What is the nature of emerging new media, and how might their nature obstruct or enhance the realization of creative citizens?”

Finally we have an edited version of one of the keynote conference talks. Beyond the enjoyable autobiographical journey (amply illustrated) that they take us through, Ian Hargreaves and John Hartley\(^2\) make a plea for researchers to work across disciplines to help shed light on the complexity of a new media environment that situates us all as potential creative producers.

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\(^2\) Respectively, the Principal Investigator and the academic mentor for the ‘Media, Community and the Creative Citizen’ project.
Whilst this collection offers the reader just a slice of the work presented at the Creative Citizens conference,\(^3\) it does touch on the broadness of the stories, debates and theorisation that were part of a vibrant two days. The full range of papers and other material are available at www.creativecitizens.co.uk/conference.

\(^3\) The formal outcomes of the research project, authored by team members, will be published as a book, Creative Citizens Unbound, edited by Ian Hargreaves and John Hartley, published in 2015 by Policy Press (Bristol UK).