

Research proposal

A comparative study of the legal and economic frameworks of cultural production, and the policy implications of market- and free-culture-based models for English-language and vernacular cultures.

The erosion of technical, political and cultural barriers to the flow of cultural products (in case of audiovisual content see: FOCUS 2005, Yearbook 2005) has reorganized local cultural markets. European countries – especially those from behind the old Iron Curtain that had tightly controlled cultural markets – have to cope with the supplanting effect of imported cultural goods, which have marginalized local equivalents.

An examination of the responses to this increase in competition reveals approaches that (1) try to limit competition in cultural markets, such as in France under UNESCO's "cultural exception" clause; or (2) use non-market solutions, such as public funding or the redistribution models deployed by collecting societies (Galperin, 1999). The effectiveness of these methods is highly contested, especially when it comes to identifying their beneficiaries, as well as the range of cultural products such methods make accessible.

Partly in response to the inadequacies of the above approaches, a new group of "consumers" of culture has emerged. This group is developing its own answers to the problems of cultural accessibility and diversity beyond the traditional national and transnational actors of cultural production and (re)distribution. Many consumers on the Internet not only participate in collaborative cultural production projects to create a trans-cultural commons (for example, Wikipedia), but they also happily engage in "piracy", either through personal greed, pride or negligence. These practices, which are a challenge to traditional American and European models of cultural production and distribution, are giving rise to unprecedented cultural diversity and accessibility, particularly through the Internet.

In my home country of Hungary, there are problems maintaining the production and distribution of a diverse and high-level Hungarian-language culture, which is necessary for the preservation of our cultural identity in a global, digital, networked environment. With only slightly more than fifteen million Hungarian speakers, a third of whom are scattered around the globe, the task of migrating Hungary's cultural heritage to the digital and global realm, as well as maintaining and enhancing it beyond highly competitive cultural markets dominated by imported cultural products, will require choosing the correct combination of fundamentally different policy approaches. The stakes are high: the Hungarian market is very small (average book circulation is 2000 copies), foreign competition is seemingly overwhelming, state redistribution mechanisms are weak and inefficient, thus local cultural production and reproduction is rapidly losing ground. Commons-based peer production (Benkler, 2004) across digital networks, and the legal and economic frameworks that emerge from them, is a promising potential solution to the above problems, and one that must be explored.

My proposed research focuses on the following questions:

1. What is the validity of networked commons-based peer-production models in a small and secluded cultural environment, as opposed to a global English-speaking community?

I wish to examine factors (for example the number of people in the network, the cost of sharing, the opportunity cost of not sharing, the cost of the alternatives to sharing, informational and transaction costs in the sharing network and in its alternatives, more on these factors: Benkler, 2004; Blackburn, 2004; Brynjolfsson, Smith, Hu, 2003) in cases of successful Hungarian and globally networked commons-based peer production. I am currently conducting empirical research on several Hungarian peer-production networks, and I wish to compare the results with global networks during my study period.

2. Do commons-based peer-production approaches provide a possible alternative or supplement to market-based and redistribution-based approaches to cultural production and preservation?

Are these approaches capable of providing and maintaining the non-marketable parts of Hungarian-language culture? Which systems (traditional redistribution mechanisms or commons-based approaches) should be the beneficiaries of redistribution? Which of these systems would yield higher levels of diversity and accessibility?

To answer these questions I must analyze cultural transactions in a wider context. I wish to develop an economic analysis of the Hungarian markets for books and music to identify those fields that are not covered by traditional distribution mechanisms. I would like to compare the Hungarian findings with similar research conducted in the United States.

3. How do arguments supporting free-culture initiatives translate into cultural preservation and maintenance in such an environment?

The final goal of this research is to pave the way for future policies on intellectual property, access, and digital preservation that would foster commons-based online cultural production and distribution, if indeed there is a commons-based peer-production model for cultural preservation in the Hungarian case.

Throughout my career I have dealt with similar issues: I am the leader of the Creative Commons Hungary team, and I work on the Hungarian National Audiovisual Archives and with government organizations (the Ministry of Culture, The John von Neumann Digital Library) in the field of cultural preservation. I am committed to research on this topic in order to build an empirical and conceptual framework for future policy decisions on these issues.

Bibliography:

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