FCJ-094 Between Promise and Practice: Web 2.0, Intercultural Dialogue and Digital Scholarship

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Introduction

The Internet has been a popular method for communication and collaboration across far-flung sites for some time, and its potential for enhancing participatory democracy has been much commented on. With the emergence of so-called Web 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2005), the interactive and collaborative capabilities of the Internet have greatly increased, with still uncertain social, political and intellectual effects. This paper emerges out of an interest in exploring the possible implications of Web 2.0 for the practice of humanities research. Scholars in the humanities have traditionally been dependent on the written word—on the production of intellectually dense discourse—and, in this producerly mode, they tend to be individualist, sole researchers. How can they respond to the challenges posed by Web 2.0 and its seemingly irresistible promotion of a participatory, expressive, and highly visual mode of cultural production?

This article provides a critical (self-)analysis of *diverCities: A Global Collaboration Space for Intercultural Dialogue*, a digital humanities experiment. Sponsored by UNESCO, the project involved the conceptualisation and development of a customised Web 2.0 site to promote intercultural dialogue within and across major cities around the world. The project was a collaborative effort of an interdisciplinary team of cultural researchers from the Centre for Cultural Research at the University of Western Sydney, the Centre for Media and Cultural Studies at the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai, and the Department of Sociology at the National University of Singapore, together with e-research specialists from the Archaeological Computing Laboratory (ACL) at the University of Sydney, who applied *Heurist*, an Open Source Collaborative Knowledge Space (CKS) for humanities scholars, to create *diverCities*, a prototype website that was used as a practical tool for the exploration and trialling of new, web-mediated practices of intercultural dialogue.[1]

Although it was in the research team's mind to eventually launch diverCities in the public domain of the Internet, the project never reached beyond the prototype phase: this public launch will never happen because the project turned out to be inviable, and not just because of financial restrictions, as we will describe below. In this sense, the project can be described as a failure. However, the very process of developing the *diverCities* platform can be seen as a distributed, collaborative and interdisciplinary form of research which involved "getting inside" Web 2.0 to explore its possible workings and uses, without knowing in advance where this might lead us. In this sense, the project was a sharp departure from more conventional humanities research projects, which have more linear and cumulative protocols of knowledge production. For most of the cultural researchers in the team, it was their first foray into the so-called digital humanities (e.g. McCarty, 2005) enabling them to consider in a concentrated manner how Internet-based knowledge production might affect the practice of research. This proved an illuminating experience. In theory, the social participatory and interactive aspects of the digital facilities that were conceptualised as integral to, and thus built into the *diverCities* site should have allowed for a greater collaborative experience for the research team. In practice, however, the project demonstrated that becoming a "digital scholar" would require major adjustments in the established intellectual habitus of humanities scholarship. (For a discussion of these issues see the website *Digital Scholarship in the Humanties* (Spiro, 2009)).

David Beer and Roger Burrows argue, following Scott Lash, that research into the workings of Web 2.0 will have to 'come from inside the information itself' (Beer and Burrows, 2007: 4.3). They suggest that researchers need to be 'inside the networks, online communities, and collaborative movements to be able to see what is going on and describe it'. They further remark that once inside these networks, research could explore the use of Web 2.0 applications as research tools, for example by constructing virtual ethnographies of communities and practices of users of social

networking sites (Beer and Burrows, 2007: 4.4). The researcher would thus have to become a participant observer within such communities, to "get inside" them to explore the interactive potentials of such sites.

7 However, their suggestions are limited to the study of existing social networking sites, such as *Facebook* or *YouTube*. By contrast, our project involved the construction of a new, purpose-built Web 2.0 application, with the promotion of an explicit political and intellectual objective in mind (namely, "intercultural dialogue"). Through the process of developing the *diverCities* platform, then, we have an empirical case for examining not only the potentials, but also the problems and tensions emanating from the application of Web 2.0 digital technologies not only for a desired social and cultural purpose, but also for humanities scholarship more generally. In this sense, our project goes further than the research direction proposed by Beer and Burrows, in at least two ways.

8 First, our research does not focus only on the actual use of a Web 2.0 application, but also on the challenges and dilemmas associated with the customised construction of such an application, including issues related to its technological capabilities and its intended social uses. Indeed, one of the rationales of the project was the understanding that for a good Web 2.0 application to work, technology capability and social use need to be thought through together (Morley, 2007). The process of developing *diverCities* gives us a concrete case with which to illuminate this crucial interconnection of technology and use.

9 Secondly, the process of working on *diverCities* provides us with some practical evidence with which to explore the complicated contradictions associated with these changes, and reflect more broadly on their consequences for digital humanities research. *DiverCities* provides a site for exploring these issues. At the same time, the experience of *diverCities*, as a Web 2.0 application, also gives us an opportunity to assess the complex and contradictory discourse of "intercultural dialogue", the promotion of which has been the purpose of *diverCities* from the outset.

Intercultural Dialogue

10 The rise to prominence of 'intercultural dialogue' as an issue for public policy and governance is associated with the heightened recognition of the conflictive consequences of transnational migration and globalization, which has raised the degree of cultural diversity of societies to unprecedented levels, and the worsening global political climate after September 11, 2001.

11 On a global level, UNESCO has made 'intercultural dialogue' one of its key priorities since the adoption of its Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity in November 2001. As UNESCO puts it on their website, 'Equitable exchange and dialogue among civilizations, cultures and peoples, based on mutual understanding and respect and the equal dignity of all cultures is the essential prerequisite for constructing social cohesion, reconciliation among peoples and peace among nations.'[2]

12 The European Union declared 2008 the European Year for Intercultural Dialogue. The European Commission's *Agenda for Culture in A Globalizing World*, released in 2007, identified intercultural dialogue 'as a tool contributing to the governance of cultural diversity within European societies, trans-nationally across European countries and internationally with other world regions' (quoted in *European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research*, 2008: 4). The Council of Europe's *White Paper on Intercultural Dialogue: Living Together As Equals in Dignity* advanced the conviction that 'it is our common responsibility to achieve a society where we can live together as equals in dignity' (Council of Europe, 2008: 5). Intercultural dialogue has an important role to play in this regard, as 'it allows us to prevent ethnic, religious, linguistic and cultural divides' (Council of Europe, 2008: 4).

13 The recent salience of discourses of intercultural dialogue as a key recipe for peaceful global conviviality is interesting because it signals a recognition of the failure of older, more modernist approaches to global cultural diversity, which have tended to be guided by long-discredited (but still popular), static and homogenising concepts of identity, nation and culture (Erikson, 2001). By contrast intercultural dialogue, by emphasising the crucial importance of communication and exchange across lines of difference, foregrounds a more dynamic, open-ended, and processual landscape of living together-in-difference. It emphasises the positive potentials of hybridity, cultural polyvocality and dialogic engagement with the other as ingredients for cosmopolitan democracy in a global multicultural age, as suggested by theorists such as Beck (2006), Benhabib

(2002) and others. In this sense, the world of global cultural policy has woken up to the realities and requirements of the network society writ large, where cultural capital and social cohesion depend crucially on the degree of interconnectedness between people. In this context intercultural dialogue is seen as essential for the world today. As the Council of Europe's White Paper dramatically puts it, 'Only dialogue allows people to live in unity in diversity… The absence of dialogue deprives everyone of the benefit of new cultural openings, necessary for personal and social development in a globalised world' (Council of Europe, 2008: 16).

14 Nevertheless, the White Paper also admits that there is a notable lack of clarity about what intercultural dialogue might mean in practice. UNESCO observes that 'there are many open questions about the concept and practice of intercultural dialogue, what it means, the conditions which allow it to happen, the methods and tools developed in this regard and the policies to be put in place to foster such efforts' (UNESCO, 2007: 2). Moreover, as the White Paper admits, 'intercultural dialogue cannot be prescribed by law' (Council of Europe, 2008: 5). Instead, 'it must retain its character as an open invitation' (Council of Europe, 2008: 5) – an invitation which ideally everyone would take up. Thus, intercultural dialogue can be seen as a Foucauldian technology of freedom, a cultural tool for governance 'at a distance' (Rose, 1999: 49).

15 In other words, even though intercultural dialogue is envisaged as a universal practice to be conducted by all citizens, it has to be a process from below; governments cannot force it to happen, they can only educate or cajole people to engage in it. Behind governmental intercultural dialogue policies is the belief that 'while cross-fertilization of cultures is possible, it is not automatic' (UNESCO, 2007: 3). In this paradoxical situation intercultural dialogue remains a programmatic proposition for social engineering, with policy makers putting huge efforts and resources into strategies to turn principles and concepts into practice through concrete, experimental projects. *DiverCities* was one such project through which a practicable meaning of intercultural dialogue might be tested. In conceptualising the project, the research team was inspired by some of the interesting parallels that can be drawn between the discourse of intercultural dialogue and that of Web 2.0. Both instances involve an imagined world of large-scale, networked interrelationality where dispersed participants actively interconnect and join in an equal, open conversation with one another, engaging in information-sharing and mutual collaboration or understanding. Equally, both discursive realms are infused with a rhetoric of promise and perhaps excessive expectations. The *diverCities* project was a practical response to this promise.

Bringing Web 2.0 and Intercultural Dialogue Together: *diverCities* as a 'Dialogue Space'

16 In a formal sense, one can imagine the technological capabilities of Web 2.0 to be conducive to facilitating intercultural dialogue: Web 2.0 is able to create physically and socially dispersed, yet virtually interconnected sites, enabling 'new cross-border spaces for dialogue' (European Institute for Comparative Cultural Research, 2008: XIII). The *diverCities* project was designed to create such a web-based dialogue space.[3]

17 The project was exploratory in a strong sense of the word. It did not start out with a preconceived idea, or even consensus, of what the outcome might be. The only vision that guided the project was to bring participants living in a range of cities in the world together to engage in intercultural dialogue through active contribution to content creation and discussion. To enable the integration of local knowledge and transnational intercultural dialogue, participants would be recruited and content would be created and exchanged in the three cities where the researchers were located – Sydney, Mumbai and Singapore.

18 The research team reasoned that *diverCities* could enhance the capacity for people in different cities to be informed about and learn from each other. While there are obvious points of connection between Mumbai, Singapore and Sydney – for example, each city's history has been thoroughly, if variously, enmeshed with that of the British Empire – people living in these cities today do not usually have much knowledge about each other. A central assumption of the project was that while each city is different and has its own unique characteristics, most world cities have equivalent experiences and are commonly engaged in equivalent urban practices, which they share with human beings living in other cities. *DiverCities* would encourage people to think beyond the boundaries of their own cities and find resonances with the lives and experiences of people with whom they might not find much in common. In this way *diverCities* would enlarge people's

imaginations and increase the potential for global solidarity through the nurturing of new exchanges across geographical divides—intercultural dialogue on a large, transnational scale!

19 This, at least, was the grand and abstract vision behind the project. In the following we will describe some of the deliberations of the research team in the concrete process of conceiving *diverCities*. In these deliberations technological expertise and knowledge provided by the ACL digital humanities experts and programmers was brought into conversation with the combined broad cultural research expertise of cultural researchers from the three cities.

20 Extending out of Beer and Burrows' suggestions, cited earlier, that research into Web 2.0 practices would require researchers to 'get inside the information', the role of the research team was raised very early in the project. More specifically, the project took the team members beyond their comfort zone of individual writerly scholarship towards a collaborative and interactive process of knowledge production, whose outcomes were uncertain and open-ended. In this sense, the research team itself became what Ned Rossiter (2006) and Geert Lovink (2008) call an 'organised network', whose own practice of intercultural dialogue through the construction of the *diverCities* platform was subject to self-examination.

Building Content: Users and Contributors

21 The one defining characteristic of technologies, applications or practices classified as Web 2.0, in Michael Hardey's words, is the fact that 'users possess a new degree of agency in constructing their engagement with resources and other users so that it is easy to form and interact with social and technological networks' (Hardey, 2007, 869). *DiverCities* was designed to capitalise on this principle of user as agent. Simply by contributing to the site, the user would have the opportunity to engage in a process of intercultural dialogue, both within and across the cities – or at least, this was how the research team imagined the user. The idea was that the user would be both a producer and a consumer of the content, what Axel Bruns (2008) calls a 'produser'. As Bruns suggests, this model of user-led content generation, characteristic of Web 2.0, would harness 'the collected, collective intelligence of all participants, and manages…to direct their contributions to where they are best able to make a positive impact' (Bruns, 2008: 1). In the case of diverCities, that positive impact would have to do with the democratic enhancement of intercultural dialogue.

22 However, the conceptual dependence of the site on user-generated content created some problems for the project. How to get the site started? How can the user be initiated into the dialogue space? Where can s/he find their bearings once inside the dialogue space? In the first instance, the research team itself acted as a community of users; they themselves took on the responsibility to generate content.

23 The team debated long and hard about the best way to thematise "intercultural dialogue" for the site. To begin engaging with each other, users would first have to enunciate themselves. There needed to be a collective knowledge base on which grounds dialogue and exchange could take place. For this to happen, it was decided that *diverCities* would capture the evolving (multi)cultural dynamics of cities around the world—beginning with Sydney, Mumbai and Singapore—through the input of narratives that tell stories about the experience of living together in diversity in the participating cities: the 'hybrid' identities of their citizens and inhabitants, the different groups and communities they have formed, their memories and histories of living with diversity, relevant major events that have become key signposts in a city's historical record, people's personal and political responses (including policies) to the challenges of living together in diversity, and so on. Lines of difference and diversity, and hence the focal points of intercultural dialogue, would vary from city to city, depending on their distinctive historical, social and political contexts, and it was thought that building up collective intelligence on this variety of local circumstances and histories would facilitate cross-cultural knowledge and mutual understanding. As a Web 2.0 tool *diverCities* would operate as an open repository for all these stories, and enable users not only to add their own stories, but also enter into dialogue with other users by sharing and exchanging experiences both within and across the participating cities.

24 One of the challenges facing the research team's aim in teasing out the interconnections between the three cities, those shared urban experiences, was to ensure that the trajectories through which users would enter the dialogue space were not overly pre-determined, as this would obviously limit the possibilities for intercultural dialogue. It was also equally important that users

enter the dialogue space in ways that would facilitate engagement and dialogue across the cities. To use the cities themselves as points of entry into the dialogue space would therefore be inadequate, as it would simply reinforce the sense of separation the three cities have from each other. Making 'Sydney', 'Mumbai' and 'Singapore' the virtual gateways into the site would discourage users from exploring stories from cities other than the particular city they had chosen to enter. As an alternative, therefore, the research team decided to use generic entry-points into the site that would emphasise what people across different cities have in common rather than what separates them. These generic entry-points, labelled with verbs such as 'belonging', 'eating', 'believing', 'working', 'inhabiting', 'travelling' etc., refer to human practices that are universal but are usually expressed through specific cultural forms, rituals, and traditions in particular contexts. For example, wherever they live, people have to eat, but under which circumstances, where and what they eat, how they cook and present their food, and so on, has particular, city-specific peculiarities. These entry-points will lead users into lists of related stories (e.g. about 'eating'), and from there onto other stories, taking users deeper into the web of stories and virtually navigating them through any of the three cities. At any one point, users could comment on a story they read, or add their own story.

25 As a consequence, stories are not confined to a single entry-point; instead, they may be accessed through a number of different entry-points. For example, a story about the 2005 Cronulla race riots in Sydney might be found through the 'belonging' entry-point, but may also be found in 'believing' (given that it involved Muslim youth). Moreover, users do not have to go back to one of the generic entry-points to add a new story; they can do so from any point (i.e. story) in the network. Thus, the linking of stories to each other can be performed by all users of the dialogue space, not just the original author of the story. For example, a user from Mumbai may decide to link the Cronulla story with a story of the 1992 Hindu-Muslim riots in that city, allowing all users to reflect on intercultural conflict more generally. The list of generic entry-points is also open-ended; new ones can always be added. In this way, users can choose to enter the space and/or view the interconnected collection of stories through any number of different, non-linear, yet linked, pathways of their own choosing.

26 Stories, while the primary unit of content, were not envisaged to be the only unit of content in the *diverCities* dialogue space. In order to reflect the participatory logic so central to both Web 2.0 and intercultural dialogue, the *diverCities* platform would encourage the user to actively engage with the content and site in a number of different ways. Thus, each story can be supplemented with any number of images and other related resources which serve as illustrations or further information about the original story. Images may include photographs or film clips. Other resources could refer to bibliographic references, newspaper reports, websites, songs, and so on. Any user can add an image or other resource to a story – adding to and enlarging the pool of information and materials surrounding a story is simply one of a number of ways in which users can engage and enter into a dialogue with the content.

27 Users can also interact with the stories they read more directly by adding a comment or responding to a comment, as is common in the blogosphere. This function provides a space for user-generated discussion of a story, opening up the site to a greater level of user participation. Ideally, this would lead to a threaded discussion among users that might in itself be seen as intercultural dialogue in practice, especially when users from different backgrounds and different cities contribute. For example, a story on the notion of belonging within a Sydney context produced a comment from one of the Singaporean team members that it is not possible to translate 'belonging' into Malay. This generated a brief discussion on the formulation of belonging, if no direct translation into English exists. The issue of exclusion, or 'not belonging', set by the language limitations of the site might then be raised—does this mean that users are only able to discuss English-mediated experiences of belonging?

28 In this way, research team members participated in a form of intercultural dialogue directly within the site, as they made links between the stories either through contributing a story of their own, adding an additional resource or image, or by commenting on specific stories.

29 The discussion about the linguistic specificity of concepts such as 'belonging' led to a broader questioning of the text-based format of stories. When the research team started to envisage the *diverCities* platform as a collaborative dialogue space, it defined a story as a piece of text. Images

were secondary and could only be added as an extra or supplementary resource. The question asked was why couldn't stories be image-based particularly given the proliferation and success of user-generated image-based sites such as *YouTube* and *Flickr*.

30 The textual bias of *diverCities* reflects the dominant practice of scholarly communication within the humanities, where knowledge and understanding has traditionally been transmitted almost exclusively through the medium of writing. Obviously this sits uneasily with multimedia modes of digital story-telling (Arthur, 2008) that have emerged around the world as an engaging way for ordinary people to tell their own stories on the Web (e.g. the Australian Centre for the Moving Image's *Digital Storytelling* program.)[4] There's no reason why *diverCities* could not expand its concept of story to include different formats; in technological terms this would not be difficult. The reliance on text and writing, however, also has wider epistemological ramifications, with important implications for the meaning of "intercultural dialogue" as a cultural technology.

Regulating Content: Democratic Deficit?

31 This brings us to the rhetoric of democratisation that has emerged around Web 2.0 (Beer & Burrows, 2007) and, by extension, the much-touted rise of the "produser" (Bruns, 2008) or "the cult of the amateur" (Keen, 2007), and the removal of the professional gatekeeper. For the *diverCities*' research team, this situation posed a profound dilemma, which revealed some of the ambivalences and contradictions adhering to the governmental goal of democratic intercultural dialogue.

32 At one level, the dilemma posed itself as a matter of quality control. Research team members felt it was important that the intellectual integrity of the stories and of the dialogue space was maintained: the site should not be a free-for-all for all types of story and comment, which—so the research team feared—might lead to irrelevant or inappropriate content. If the site was to encourage intercultural dialogue, care should be taken that that purpose was not diluted and the seriousness of the site was safeguarded.

33 Apart from quality control however, research team members also raised the issues of user security and political responsibility. One of the concerns put forward was that while diverCities was all about utilizing and integrating the democratic possibilities of the Internet for the purpose of intercultural dialogue, the on-the-ground reality of cities such as Mumbai needs to be considered. In a place where there is a very real potential for inter-communal trouble, diverCities has the potential to exacerbate this, for example if inflammatory stories against a particular group (e.g. Muslims) were posted. How do we deal with such a risk?

34 In practical terms, establishing a procedure of user filtration/moderation for *diverCities* would have been an enormous resourcing issue – a common limitation faced by many digital projects – which was beyond the horizon of the research team. More important were the implications of these issues of content control for the notion of online democracy. Clearly, the democratic possibilities of Web 2.0, as touted by its supporters, can run up against complex political and intellectual barriers. For better or worse, the need for policing the process of content generation became an inevitable element in the research team's deliberations. The notion that everyone could, should or would simply participate proved to be a populist illusion: in this light, it wouldn't do to simply celebrate notions of participatory democracy as liberating or resistive of prevailing power structures, as is too often the case in debates about Web 2.0 networks. Instead, as Lovink has pointed out, 'internal power relations within networks' need to be 'placed on the agenda': not just their political legitimations, but also the way in which they might be organized (Lovink, 2008: 241). This insight has serious implications also for intercultural dialogue.

35 The felt need for regulating the content of *diverCities* is an indication of the limits of the potential for intercultural dialogue to be a spontaneous and free-flowing process. It transpires that an intrinsic paradox lies a the heart of intercultural dialogue as a governmental ideal: the goal is to enhance an inclusive, democratic, harmonious and cosmopolitan society, but the suspicion is that there will always be people (e.g. racists) who will derail that project, who should therefore be excluded from the process of intercultural dialogue itself. But aren't these people precisely the ones most in need of a dosage of learning to respect and accept the other?

36 Once again, the gap between ideal and practical application is brought to the fore. In a concrete way the project illuminated issues raised by political philosophers such as Iris Marion Young about

the problematic of multicultural democracy (Young: 2000): can there be a public sphere where everyone, especially those who are different, can raise their voice in an open and equal conversation, or is intercultural dialogue among dispersed and diverse constituencies only possible if orchestrated from above?

Engaging Content: Dynamism and Stagnation

37 In keeping with the idea of cities are porous, heterogeneous and constantly evolving places (Amin & Thrift, 2002), the research team felt that it was important to avoid a rigid structure for the organization of data and information in the *diverCities* repository of stories. The focus would be on the harvesting of stories from multiple perspectives and many different points of view, with maximum opportunity for users to upload their own stories. The dynamic capabilities of Web 2.0, especially the blurring of the boundaries of production and consumption of content, were perfectly suited to translate this open-ended and collaborative vision of the project into a digital 'dialogue space'.

38 In practice, however, this dynamism was not fully realised. Despite the best efforts of the research team, any sort of momentum was hard to sustain. Members of the research team had other commitments they needed to consider and return to. The team were also spread across three cities, and the absence of face-to-face contact was not offset by the opportunities afforded by digital technology for discussion and engagement (apart from email the research team also "met" through video conferencing facilities).

39 For example, a three-day workshop held in Sydney brought all team members together physically and provided them with the opportunity to further conceptualise and test the *diverCities* platform. This intense period of focused activity was a great success and it was at this stage, when the team was assembled together in time and space, that much of the site was populated with content and comments. This raises an interesting question for the use of Web 2.0 in public research. The technology being used is not site-specific, it can be accessed anywhere as long as users have access to the Internet. Similarly, in the case of the *diverCities* dialogue space, team members did not need to be in Sydney to access and navigate the site; this was possible in their home cities. However, the level of engagement significantly dropped off once team members returned to their own cities. Little content was added, and virtually no comments were made about other team members' stories. Even though the team was very enthusiastic about the project and its aims of using Web 2.0 technologies to create an interactive platform for collaborative knowledge production and exchange, engagement with the digital "dialogue space" was not sustained – dynamism made way for stagnation. At first glance then a fair assessment of the *diverCities* dialogue space might be that it has essentially failed.

40 Perhaps, however, a shift in thinking is required in the meaning of failure with regard to Web 2.0 applications. Within the wider context of social software, the experience of *diverCities* is not unusual. According to social media commentator, Clay Shirky, 'The normal case of social software is still failure; most of these experiments don't pan out'(Shirky, 2008). Rather than seeing failure as a definitive end-point, fellow social media commentator Suw Charman-Anderson (2008) extends Shirky's argument further and proposes:

41 > these failures – which are common, but largely unexamined and unpublished because no one likes to admit they failed – are part and parcel of the process of negotiating how we can use these new tools...Sadly, we don't often get a glimpse inside failed projects so we end up making the same mistakes over and over until someone, somewhere sees enough bits of the jigsaw to start putting them together...There is a lot of failure in the use of social software in business, on the web, in civic society, but we need to see this as a part of the cycle, a step along on the learning curve. (Charman-Anderson, 2008)

42 Failure then needs to be normalised for digital humanities initiatives, particularly those using Web 2.0 applications; it should be seen as a part of the research process. In this respect, Geert Lovink's (2008) reflection on the short-lived *Discordia* group blog revolving around art, media, activism and theory is relevant for the experience of diverCities.[5] The main reason for *Discordia*'s failure, according to Lovink, was 'the lack of coherence within the global new media arts community to have public debates in the World Wide Web, away from the safety of cozy, inward-looking lists. (...) There was not enough of an interest to join an equal, open dialogue between critics, artists, and programmers' (Lovink, 2008: xxii).

43

In the case of *diverCities*, which never even went onto the World Wide Web, it was clearly going to be extremely difficult to mobilise a critical mass of users to participate in the dynamic network of stories created by dense interactivity and active engagement, especially across the different cities. Even the research team itself did not manage to keep up its activity. Indeed, it is possible that a lack of coherence in the interests and outlooks of the international research team might be a main reason for the *diverCities*' failure: even though they did share some intellectual interests as cultural research academics, it seemed clear that they do not form a "community". However, the very purpose of *diverCities* as a transnational platform for intercultural dialogue was the establishment of networks of exchange where they did not yet exist. This, after all, is the very rationale of intercultural dialogue: it seeks to create new forms of communication across spatial and cultural divides and between people who generally know or understand little of each other. In other words, it seeks to encourage equal, open dialogue in the absence of a pre-given communal coherence.

44 Still, the lack of (inter)activity on diverCities does not seem inconsistent with participation patterns on Web 2.0 sites. In this regard, the diverCities experience to date is not so much "failure" but a normal reflection of the levels of participation on most social networking sites that rely on user-generated content. Most participants are content to "lurk", rather than actively contribute to a site. Only a small percentage of online community members tend to participate/contribute/edit.[6]

45 So, if the majority of users of Web 2.0 sites are lurkers, then an evaluation of *diverCities* as a digital humanities project perhaps should also be re-framed around this notion. That is, the *diverCities* experience is not so much a failure in definitive terms as simply reflective of the norm in online activity. It is interesting to surmise here that the challenges faced by the research team in generating content for the site as a platform for online intercultural dialogue might also be indicative for the broader social practice of intercultural dialogue. That is, a tiny percentage of people will tend to actively participate in the process. The rest will either indirectly engage or remain passive observers. This should put all too optimistic visions of universal participatory democracy into appropriate perspective.

A New Culture of Public Research?

46 Through the process of conceptualising and constructing the platform, the research team was faced with a number of dilemmas associated with the collaborative and public nature of knowledge production through *diverCities*. The contribution of stories can be seen as a "free" gift of the writer/contributor to the site – and by implication, to the cause of intercultural dialogue—but is this sustainable? Are there enough (if any) reward structures for participants not only to enter stories, but also to comment on stories put forward by others, which after all, was envisaged as essential to the inter-city intercultural dialogue? Is intercultural dialogue itself a sufficiently attractive practical objective for participants to engage in? The experience of the research team alone is enough to indicate that while enthusiasm for the ideal is great, in practice the objective remains elusive.

47 It is worth noting that when the dialogue space was properly used by the research team as a site for cross-cultural exchange and dialogue, it worked well and the overall objective of the project was met successfully. An instance of such a positive example of intercultural dialogue taking place on the site was in the "eating" strand and in response to a story on the Makansutra of Singapore. The Makansutra is a Singapore-based food company that does not sell food but promotes the joy of eating, celebrating 'Asian food culture and lifestyle' through a variety of media including the publication of food guides, food tours and safaris, and a TV show. The story on *diverCities*, written by Singaporean team member Daniel Goh, frames the Makansutra as an attempt to represent the multi-racial food culture of Singapore. It shows the mixing and "borrowing" that takes place in Singaporean cuisine, and as such it is a representation of the hybrid reality of everyday life and, thus, it transcends the official attempts at dividing and categorising the Singaporean population along strict racial lines. This story generated a brief online discussion around the notion of food taboos. Mumbai team member Shilpa Phadke reflected on the promiscuity of various Indian cuisines and what it might mean to mix cuisines on a single plate, to defy food puritanism and eat, as many do, Punjabi naan with Gobi Manchurian, a vegetarian nativised version of Indian Chinese cuisine: 'What does it mean to not respect culinary boundaries – to defy food puritanism by eating things that appear not to belong to each other – that might be seen to 'belong' to different categories?' Chua Beng Huat responded that in Singapore, while cuisines might be mixed on the

table (as a part of a single meal) they rarely were on the same plate. Indeed, respect for religious beliefs might be expressed through cuisine as in the case of ethnic Chinese Singaporeans who 'often accommodate Malay friends by eating Malay food exclusively or "halal foods". It was then suggested that perhaps food taboos acted as barriers to, rather than agents of, intercultural dialogue if culinary traditions are not compatible.

48 In this single example, one can see the ingredients for a culture of collaborative public research and a clear representation of intercultural dialogue in process. From a simple exposition about the socio-cultural basis of a Singaporean food company, a discussion on the significance of food as a method of intercultural engagement emerged. Here we get a glimpse of the power of "produsage" (Bruns, 2008): the iterative, collaborative and open-ended creation and extension of information and knowledge as enabled by Web 2.0. The example also shows us the potential productivity of intercultural dialogue itself, the enhanced collective understanding that emerges as people communicate and exchange knowledge and ideas across lines of difference. However, such instances of substantive intercultural dialogue have been rare in the *diverCities* experiment. Instead, most stories entered by participants have remained without comment. That is, perhaps reflecting the broader culture of humanities scholarship, team members preferred to write their own stories rather than responding to others. They preferred to be individual producers rather than collective "produsers".

49 This doesn't mean that Web 2.0 technologies cannot be an effective platform for facilitating intercultural dialogue. The issue however is not technological, but social and cultural, as well as economic. As Charman-Anderson suggests (2008),

50 > ...the biggest speed bump in social software projects is invariably going to be the social, not the software. The technology is improving every month, mainly because it's being developed by small, nimble vendors who use the software they create and want it to be the very best it can be. But the tech is only a fraction of the battle. The rest...is made of people.

51 In this regard, Lovink's insistent, but unanswered questions about the problems of scalability of online networks are worth quoting:

52 > Why is it so difficult for networks to scale up? There seems to be a tendency to split up in a thousand mini-conversations. (...) Can we imagine very large-scale conversations that do not only make sense but also have an impact? Which types of network cultures can become large transformative institutions?' (Lovink, 2008: 249).

53 The issues raised throughout this paper, and over the course of the *diverCities* project, are equally applicable to an evaluation of the online dialogue space as a site for public research and collaborative knowledge production in the digital humanities. One barrier to promoting initiatives such as diverCities as sites for public research is that the prevailing culture of the academy militates against any widespread embrace of "produsage", 'where knowledge remains always in the process of development, and where information remains always unfinished, extensible, and evolving' (Bruns, 2008: 6). In this era of official research assessment exercises, research outcomes need to be presented in the form of bounded publications (e.g.monographs or refereed journals.) In this context, named authorship and ownership of ideas and content are crucial, leaving limited room for academics to engage in exploratory, collaborative, dialogic knowledge production that might count for "nothing".

54 One way in which the research team has tried to overcome these problems is by using *diverCities* in an educational context, where the rewards for content generation are built in as the fulfillment of student tasks. As a teaching tool, the diverCities platform opened up the possibility for students in the participating cities to engage in intercultural dialogue with each other as part of the internationalisation of their university experience. However, this too requires effort and commitment on the part of the teaching academics. Would there still be a need for editorial management and content control? This has elicited two contrasting responses from research team members. In Sydney, an undergraduate class of design students were given the task of generating stories for the site, but only the stories which were considered good enough by the academic lecturer would be uploaded onto the site. Here then the process of selection was upheld rigorously, severely limiting the usage of *diverCities* as a dialogic Web 2.0 platform. In Singapore, on the other hand, one of the research team members finds the *diverCities* platform 'not Web 2.0 enough'. He collected 200+ short ethnographies written by students as part of their introduction to

sociology course. However, he found that it was impossible to simply upload these stories to the *diverCities* platform because many of the stories overlapped with each other, requiring some editorial revision and consolidation. Understandably, the academic does not have the time to do this. Instead, the best thing to have, in his view, would be a Wiki-type platform where students can log on and directly put up their stories and then they can then edit, revise each other's stories or add to them if they are working on the same topic, as well as engage with stories from co-students in the other cities.

55 Obviously, this proposal is most in the spirit of Web 2.0 "produsage" and collaborative intercultural dialogue, but it would mean giving up the editorial control that the research team had believed was so necessary to ensure quality and relevance. Does this expose the research team's incapacity or unwillingness to fully embrace the democratic possibilities of Web 2.0? And to what extent is that incapacity or unwillingness intrinsic to the practice of academic scholarship, which has to date sustained itself through gate-keeping procedures such as peer review? This dilemma illuminates some of the difficulties humanities researchers will encounter in the transition to a far more open-ended, dialogic, and democratic world of digital scholarship.

Conclusion

56 The 'failure' of *diverCities* was a useful case study in exploring the possibilities and limits of Web 2.0 forms of 'produsage' in enhancing scholarly engagement in serious intercultural dialogue. Instead, it emphasises the need for intellectual leadership and pro-active vision to create new knowledge and socially and politically useful forms of intercultural dialogue. Indeed, it suggests that intercultural dialogue itself, as a governmental project, must always struggle against the likelihood of failure because most people do not tend spontaneously to communicate across lines of difference.

57 Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the 'contact zone' (Pratt, 1999: 3) '...social spaces where cultures meet, clash and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical power relations' (Pratt, 1999:12), is an apt metaphor to point to the key challenges faced by the research team. Although people can come together in a contact zone, either voluntarily or by force, it does not follow that they will engage with one another. In short, "contact" does not necessarily equal "dialogue", it may just as well involve conflict, passing association, or sheer indifference. In conceiving *diverCities* the research team did not create a dialogue space but a contact zone, clarifying some of the paradoxes inherent to the goal of intercultural dialogue. While the idea (l) is for society to engage in intercultural dialogue as a universal form of civic engagement, the reality is that for ongoing exchange and collaboration across lines of difference to take place on a large scale it needs to be orchestrated and engineered. And perhaps academic researchers, with their of necessity (over)developed capacity for scholarly judgement, are much less well-equipped to participate in such intercultural dialogue than they think.

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Notes

[1] An international research team was recruited by Ien Ang, comprising academic researchers from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai (India), the National University of Singapore (Singapore), the University of Western Sydney and the University of Sydney (Australia). The team members were as follows: Professor Ien Ang (overall team leader) (UWS), Professor Kay Anderson (UWS), Dr Peter Dallow (UWS), André Frankovits (UWS), Dr Elaine Lally (UWS), Dr Cameron McAuliffe (UWS), Associate Professor Brett Neilson (UWS), Dr Nayantara Pothen (UWS), Dr Juan Salazar (UWS), Steven Hayes (Usyd), Dr Ian Johnson (Usyd), Andrew Wilson (Usyd), Professor Chua Beng Huat (NUS, Singapore), Dr Daniel Goh (NUS), Dr Eric Thompson (NUS), Professor Anjali

Monteiro (TISS, Mumbai), Professor K.P.Jayasankar (TISS), Shilpa Phadke (TISS). See also, https://heuristscholar.org/heurist

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[2] See UNESCO's website

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[3] See https://acl.arts.usyd.edu.au/threecities

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[4] See https://www.acmi.net.au/digitalstorytelling.aspx

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[5] See Discordia https://www.discordia.us/scoop/special/faq.html

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[6] On *Wikipedia*, for example, based on the statistics provided on the site itself, active contributors make up only 0.1 per cent of the total number of visitors (See Wikipedia 'About Us', accessed 20 August 2008; see also Shirky, 2008: 122-23). In a post dated 27 April 2007 on on Inspire Action, the Mind and Media Eric Primmer suggested that 99.8 per cent of visitors to YouTube and Flickr are lurkers. (See https://inspireaction.mindandmedia.com/2007/04/) Jakob Neilsen cites an overall less stark distribution of participation rates: 90 per cent of users lurk, nine per cent of users contribute a little, and one per cent of an online community accounts for most contributions (Neilsen, 2006); See also Shirky, 2008: 122-23; Marwick, 2006, Charman-Anderson, 2006; Hargittai & Walejko, 2008.

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