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Cultural Renaissance or Cultural Divide?

By BILL IVEY and STEVEN J. TEPPER

America is on the threshold of a significant transformation in cultural life. There have been many cultural shifts in recorded history: Gutenberg's invention of the printing press and the rise of the reading public; the growth of a mercantile class and the birth of private art markets independent of the church and the king; the invention of gas streetlights and the beginning of urban nighttime entertainment. The most recent cultural transformation, still with us today, was set in motion on the threshold of the 20th century.

To fully grasp this change, consider the substance of cultural life in the late 19th century. Imagine that you live in Amherst, Mass.; Brooklyn, N.Y.; or Durham, N.C. You wake up every day and read your local newspaper — typically one connected to your local political party. Your values are shaped primarily by local experiences. Your opinion of Italian immigrants is formed by buying meat from a vendor at the farmer's market. You head to Main Street to enjoy live concerts, plays, or vaudeville shows put on by local artists and, occasionally, traveling actors and musicians. If you want to hear that Sousa march again, however, you'll have to bring the orchestra back. Much of the rest of your entertainment happens at home, reading novels that bring you the outside world, but just as often sitting around the piano in the parlor or playing the guitar on the porch.

Accompanying all your activity is a constant refrain of storytelling. In your world, stories are told — by you, your family, your neighbors, local elites. The content of the stories is familiar. Your everyday experiences are reflected in most forms of culture that you consume and enjoy.
Beginning in the early 20th century, with advancements in recorded sound and broadcasting, the growth of the moving-picture industry, and the rise of national record companies, our local and vernacular world was transformed. As it became possible to mass-produce culture, national corporations and then big media conglomerates emerged to package it and distribute it widely. Families hovered around their new music boxes and listened to emerging national stars — professionals like John McCormack, the Irish tenor, and Nora Bayes, the vaudeville singer turned celebrity. Indeed, professionals were becoming responsible for making our culture, entertaining us, and telling us our stories: stories produced by people we had never met, about people we had never met. Our knowledge of poor people, rich people, white people, black people, urban life, rural life, art, and culture was increasingly colored by what we heard on the radio, saw in newsreels and movies, and encountered through other forms of national news and entertainment media.

The professionalization and nationalization of culture in the United States was reinforced by the flowering of the nonprofit arts, first in major cities and later in smaller ones. The Metropolitan Opera and the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston had been founded by the late 19th century, and similar institutions became increasingly popular as the 20th century wore on. In the second half of that century, investments by the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Foundation, and the National Endowment for the Arts created an explosion of nonprofit, professional arts organizations that brought, for the most part, elite European art forms to citizens in every corner of the country. In the early 1960s, there were only a few thousand nonprofit arts organizations; today there are close to 50,000, and virtually every small to midsize city can boast a symphony orchestra, a museum, several professional theaters, and a professional dance company. By the end of the 20th century, the arts in America had become highly institutionalized and professionalized. Much of the support for the growing nonprofit sector was directed toward organizations that employed skilled professional artists, reinforcing the emphasis on well-established institutions and stars. Training, repertoires, and artistic styles were heavily influenced by national standards; while venues remained local, the art was decidedly not.

Thus three interrelated trends underlay the last big transformation in American culture. First, technology allowed previously fleeting art and entertainment to be "captured" and thereby produced and distributed on a mass scale. Second, local and vernacular art and entertainment were eclipsed by a culture that was increasingly defined by the tastes of a national elite at Columbia Records, or Universal Studios, or nonprofit arts organizations. Third, the amateurs at home were overshadowed by the new class of creative "professionals," and audiences were increasingly socialized to be passive consumers, awaiting their favorite radio broadcasts or sitting in darkened theaters and concert halls, applauding on cue.

What is the next great cultural transformation? And how does it compare with that earlier transformation? The 21st century represents what Henry Jenkins, a media scholar at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, calls "a revitalization of folk culture" in an upcoming book we are editing. The new art and art making are participatory: Much of the art can be produced and consumed in the home; many people contribute and learn from
each other (without necessarily considering themselves professional artists); and much of what is made is considered community property. Jenkins argues that the 20th century's effort to industrialize and professionalize artistic production, which today we view as normal, may, in fact, represent a strange chapter in the history of creativity — an aberration. What sets the new participatory culture aside from the older local participatory culture of the 19th century is that amateur art making is taking place in the shadow of giant media. Moreover, there is now an explosion of cultural choice made possible by new technologies and a renewed mingling of high and popular art.

What are the drivers of this new cultural transformation?

First, there is evidence of a rise in amateur art making. Charles Leadbeater, a well-known British social critic, has argued that the 21st century will be shaped by the "Pro-Am Revolution": professional amateurs. From rap musicians who got their start by making homemade tape recordings, to thousands of amateur astronomers whose careful observations that employ relatively cheap but high-powered telescopes contribute to scientific breakthroughs, to the hundreds and thousands of bloggers emerging as a shadow news-media corps, citizens are increasingly spending significant amounts of their leisure time engaged in serious, creative pursuits. Those pro-ams are people who have acquired high-level skills at particular crafts, hobbies, sports, or art forms; they are not professionals but are often good enough to present their work publicly or to contribute seriously to a community of like-minded artists or creators. Pro-ams typically make their livings in other work but are sufficiently committed to their creative pursuits to view them as a possible second career later in life. The International Music Products Association refers to such amateurs as "weekend warriors" — people who play music seriously in their free time as part of bands, chamber groups, ensembles, etc. The association estimates that, fueled by the pro-am revolution, the sale of guitars in the last 10 years has increased threefold.

In part, amateur art making is on the rise because technology has both reduced the high costs of artistic production and met the challenges of finding an audience. Amateur filmmakers can purchase sophisticated cameras and editing software for a few thousand dollars and distribute their films online, sometimes to a broad public, but often just to other filmmakers seeking a community where they can share work in progress, offer and receive advice, and develop networks to help them with future film projects. Many of those films are now showing up on Al Gore's television station, Current, where about a third of the programming is contributed by viewers. The same trend can be seen in recorded music, with the rise of do-it-yourself independent music, the growth of pro-am record labels, and the advent of affordable home studios. What is happening in today's world of music production makes the 1970s garage-band phenomenon look like a prequake tremor. The same trends are evident in publishing, home design, gardening, and other cultural pursuits.

With the exception of manufacturers of musical instruments and production gear, no one has bothered tracking the exact dimensions of pro-am activity, but it is fair to say that serious and talented amateurs, many of them producing high-quality innovative work,
dwarf the number of professional artists in this country. It is not just music and movies —
knitting clubs are becoming hip; open-source software attracts thousands of programmers
and millions of users; kids are redesigning video games with the support of the gaming
companies. Even new religious movements — like the "emergent church" movement —
are largely run by committed amateurs who provide ministry, lead prayer groups, and
teach about religious subjects on a part-time, volunteer basis.

In tandem with the democratization of cultural production and the establishment of a
pervasive do-it-yourself creative ethos, we are witnessing the emergence of the
"curatorial me." Handed the capacity to reorganize cultural offerings at will through new
devices like the iPod or TiVo, citizens are increasingly capable of curating their own
cultural experiences — exploring new types of culture; choosing when and how they
want to experience art and entertainment; searching out communities of like-minded fans
with whom to dig deeper into the substance of what they see and hear. The "curatorial
me" is another emerging form of active engagement with art and culture. Although not
producing art themselves, citizens have developed the skills and expertise to be
connoisseurs and mavens — seeking out new experiences, learning about them, and
sharing that knowledge with friends.

The invention of a "curatorial me" is made possible by an explosion of cultural choice. A
new work of fiction is published in the United States every 30 seconds. Most cable
packages offer more than 100 television stations, and satellite provides hundreds of radio
stations as well. Through online music services like Rhapsody or iTunes, we have access
to millions of songs. We can read newspapers from around the world online while
drinking our morning coffee; we can browse paintings and drawings from world-
renowned museums without leaving our computer. Such cultural offerings have little
need for the mass audiences demanded by global media, flourishing instead by linking up
with small groups of committed fans.

For today, as Chris Anderson, Wired's editor in chief, has written in the magazine, more
and more consumers and audiences will travel down the right side of the distribution
curve, finding art and culture that is off the beaten track. Industry analysts predict that
record labels will increasingly earn revenues not only from megahits but from songs and
artists that are deep in their catalogs — songs and artists that would likely not find their
way onto a shelf at Wal-Mart but that, nonetheless, might find a small fan base scattered
across the world. The combination of the rise of serious amateur art making, the
explosion of choice, and the sophistication of Internet-savvy consumers will create new
micromarkets, challenging the dominance of 20th-century mass markets.

Feeding that trend is a deep change in the way we connect culture with status. In the late
19th century, refined art began to separate from popular art — claiming for itself a higher
ground. Highbrow snobbery was often explicitly promoted as the antidote to lowbrow
tastes. Listening to classical music, for example, carried a badge of social and intellectual
distinction. According to an article in the American Sociological Review by Richard A.
Peterson, an emeritus professor of sociology at Vanderbilt University, hierarchical
markers of taste have eroded. Today people define their status by consuming as
omnivores rather than as snobs. A new kind of cosmopolitanism underlies the mixing and matching of different cultural forms.

As an illustration, imagine an encounter between two people on the street: a classical-music lover and a lover of rock music. If you are asked to predict which of them is likely to listen to Latin music, ethnic music, jazz, and blues, who would it be? It turns out that the classical-music fan is much more likely to enjoy those nonelite art forms, according to data from the National Endowment for the Arts' national survey of public participation in the arts. If fact, when you analyze the NEA statistics, the classical-music fan is more likely to listen to just about every genre of music. Today's cosmopolitan consumer culture is not bound by old hierarchies.

The rise of what Richard Florida, best-selling author and public-policy analyst at George Mason University, calls the "creative class" is part of the 21st century's emerging patterns of cultural consumption and participation. Florida identifies a new generation of students and workers who define themselves in terms of a creative ethos: They want to be creative in their lives, both at work and in their leisure time. "Creatives" want to make things, to work jobs where they can solve puzzles and use their expressive and creative skills, to forge and convey their identity through their cultural consumption — their music, books, and clothing. Further, they want to live in interesting cities filled with street-level culture. Florida argues that the creative ethos dovetails with the new economy — an economy largely based on intellectual property rather than traditional raw materials. No doubt Florida exaggerates the extent to which creativity defines our age: After all, most of his creative-class workers eventually grow up and move to the suburbs and start families. But he is onto something, and it meshes with the idea of a pro-am revolution.

A creative energy is animating a new generation of young people. In a survey of incoming college freshmen, significantly more students today than a decade ago report a life's ambition of producing an original piece of art or becoming accomplished in a performing art or writing. Granted unprecedented access to the means of making art, today's youth want, in the words of Lynne Conner, who teaches theater arts at the University of Pittsburgh, to "co-author" meaning. As she writes in an upcoming essay in our book, "they don't want the arts; they want the arts experience."

Inexpensive digital technology, Internet communication, and a new enthusiasm for hands-on art making hold out the promise of a rich, postconsumerist expressive life. But some pundits and scholars see a more ominous trend. Rather than a democratization of culture, they track a growing monopolization of culture brought about by the convergence and consolidation of media and entertainment industries. Since 1996 local radio stations have been bought up by major conglomerates like Clear Channel; media giants like Viacom, Disney, and Time Warner control more than 75 percent of all cable and broadcast viewing; local newspapers have been bought up by Gannett, Knight Ridder, and the Tribune Company. Google increases its share of the search-engine market and Internet use every day. Consolidated ownership, centralized control of content, and bottom-line pressures in public companies, critics argue, are leading us toward less diversity, less risk, and fewer opportunities for new or emerging artists or art forms to
find audiences. Such trends are crowding out local and independent voices. Citizens are increasingly confronting a homogenized culture that does not speak to their unique expressive needs. Thus critics see a growing cultural deficit, not cultural democracy, in the United States.

Bolstering their concerns, strong anecdotal evidence in many art forms suggests that the gates are too narrow — many artists and works of art find it difficult to connect with potential audiences. For example, most contemporary radio stations program only a few recordings, generally playing no more than two dozen titles in a given week, half of what they played 10 years ago. Of those cuts, only 12 are "recurrents" — hits that are still moving up the charts; the remainder of the playlist is made up of older, established favorites. For a record industry that places more than 30,000 compact discs in distribution each year and that is dependent on radio to present new work to audiences, tight playlists keep far too many recording artists out of the system and limit consumer choice. Constraints are just as pronounced in retail. Old-style record stores carried copies of many titles; today most of the recordings sold are sold by three big-box outlets, Target, Best Buy, and Wal-Mart. Those chains stock only a few thousand titles, primarily featuring the very CD's that provided hit songs featured on the radio. Given the narrow gates of radio and retail, few recordings find their way through the system to achieve success. And the Internet doesn't yet provide a way around established media: Digital-music downloads, for example, account for only 4 percent of music sales. Consolidation has produced similar constraints in book publishing and film.

Simultaneously, many critics contend, nonprofit museums and performing-arts organizations have also narrowed the gates, attempting to maximize attendance and contributions by advancing conservative, repetitious programming choices. And small and medium-size organizations are facing competitive pressures from the growing number of big performing-arts centers — cathedrals of cultural consumption that might bolster a city's image, but that bring with them some of the same constraints endemic in the consolidated media industries.

And, of course, there are the related issues of intellectual property. Today consumers must navigate an increasingly complex network of payments for arts products. Moreover cultural consumption is quietly making the transition from a "purchase" to a "rental" model. A few decades ago, cultural consumption required a small number of pieces of equipment — a television set and antenna, an AM/FM radio, and a record turntable. Now cable television, high-speed Internet connections, DVD-rental services, satellite radio, and streaming-audio services all require hefty monthly fees. Even consumption that feels like a purchase, like an iTune download, is often really a rental, as digital-rights-management technology limits our ability to copy or transmit our download. And in the future, renting songs, television shows, films, or perhaps even online pages of books will become a bigger proportion of our entertainment budgets.

Finally, the much-ballyhooed growth of Florida's creative class is outstripped by the growth of the service sector — people who take care of our kids, mow our yards, serve us
breakfast, make our beds at the hotel, and install our cable and Internet connections. They often hold two or three jobs, have less access to technology, and less time for leisure.

Who is right? The cultural optimists (a thousand flowers are blooming, we are drowning in a sea of possibility, and we are surrounded by a new creative ethos) or the cultural pessimists (the market is too restricted, people are suffering from a dearth of cultural opportunities, and demands of the new service economy are leaving many workers with little time or energy to engage with art and culture)?

Both sides are right; each sees a separate side of the cultural coin. They are both right because America is facing a growing cultural divide, a divide separating an expressive life that exudes promise and opportunity from one manifesting limited choice and constraint. It is not a gap marked by the common signposts — red versus blue states, conservatives versus liberals, secularists versus orthodox. And it is more embedded than the digital divide that separates citizens from technology. It is a divide based on how and where citizens get information and culture.

Increasingly, those who have the education, skills, financial resources, and time required to navigate the sea of cultural choice will gain access to new cultural opportunities. They will be the ones who can invest in their creative hobbies, writing songs, knitting, acting, singing in a choir, gardening. They will be the pro-ams who network with other serious amateurs and find audiences for their work. They will discover new forms of cultural expression that engage their passions and help them forge their own identities, and will be the curators of their own expressive lives and the mavens who enrich the lives of others; they will be among Florida's creative class.

At the same time, those citizens who have fewer resources — less time, less money, and less knowledge about how to navigate the cultural system — will increasingly rely on the cultural fare offered to them by consolidated media and entertainment conglomerates. They will engage with arts and culture through large portals like Wal-Mart or Clear Channel radio. They will consume hit films, television reality shows, and blockbuster novels, their cultural choices directed to limited options through the narrow gates defined by the synergistic marketing that is the hallmark of cross-owned media and entertainment. Finding it increasingly difficult to take advantage of the pro-am revolution, such citizens will be trapped on the wrong side of the cultural divide.

So technology and economic change are conspiring to create a new cultural elite — and a new cultural underclass. It is not yet clear what such a cultural divide portends: what its consequences will be for democracy, civility, community, and quality of life. But the emerging picture is deeply troubling. Can America prosper if its citizens experience such different and unequal cultural lives?

Thomas Bender, a historian at New York University, has tracked "the thinning of American political culture" in a book of that title. Bender argues that, in the 19th century, there was a "thick" interdependence between social life and politics. People participated in political parties, they engaged in political debate with neighbors, and they attended
rallies and campaign gatherings. In short, political culture had a "thick texture" — politics was embedded in social life and helped form and narrate everyday experience. Today, by contrast, the rise of national media, public polling, consumerism, celebrity politicians, expensive media-driven political campaigns, and weak political parties have created a thin political culture; citizens have become passive political consumers. The exact same trend can be detected in our artistic and cultural lives.

In the 20th century, as new media industries emerged, the United States moved away from thick cultural engagement. As art and art making were integrated less into everyday life, we experienced a type of thin participation, defined more by national celebrities, professionals, experts, spectacle, big media, and passive participation. In the 21st century, we can observe encouraging signs of renewed thickening — but not for everyone. Our challenge today — as educators, artists, and arts leaders — is to figure out a way to thicken our cultural life for all Americans.

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