

# Cultural Leadership community generated

Captivating tales of co-creating new and remembering past cultures

*By Ruth Cherrington and Petya Koleva*

Currently, a strong focus is placed on the economic and political aspects of cultural leadership to transform societies whereby cultural life is calculated through the formula of the ingredients of a 'creative city' or 'a capital of culture'. This notion comes with some problematic implications. The obvious one being that an individual or a group of people is authorised to 'lead' others who do not seem able to lead themselves. In this process, the leaders perhaps get to dominate aspects of the culture and set a different agenda that comprises different cultural values, disregarding practices and understanding at grassroots level. Related to this is the possible appropriation of cultural practices, which then might be altered, or sanitised for wider consumption, and also issues of cultural censorship, domination and exploitation. Such dangers have to be considered when setting out to collect information about cultural practices.

Over the years, we have attempted to document forms of culture considering people's own stories, memories and practices. These have led us to research and interact with the public who cares for the writer and with creators who care for their public. Two forms of cultural leadership are demonstrated in the two examples presented here which are very local and yet manifest new trends we believe you will recognise.

## 1. Letting the audience lead the story – Ruth Cherrington

The methodology I have developed encourages and facilitates people to tell their own stories of ordinary, everyday culture from previous decades in these current times of rapid social change and the accelerating loss of me-

mories. This was the case when researching for two books about the cultural life of the English city of Coventry in the 1970s and the 1980s, respectively. These cultural communities had little or no documentation, let alone appreciation, which triggered the need for a method ‘salvaging culture’, (partially anthropological, partially creative). It necessitated that I became the instigator, a leader with a small ‘I’ who recognises the importance of documenting these shared experiences and stories before they are lost for good. It also required the mobilisation of a wider community of witnesses and participants working towards the goal of facilitating the awareness of cultural value and a wider dissemination of cultural memory.

*“People themselves are wonderful stores of cultural archives, often shared with humour, pain, laughter, regret and joy.”*

Doing the research for each book, a Facebook group ([The Dirty Stop Outs Guide to 1970s Coventry](#)) was created devoted to sharing memories of the past that grew rapidly into becoming both an online and offline community. Online numbers grew to around 300 members, but other people were reading and ‘liking’ the posts and attending events as well even if not joining the group. This is an indication that people often want, probably need to have some form of validation of their culture and how they lived their lives. The increasing ‘like and share’ of memories and photos facilitated by questions I posed to the community through social media platforms is evidence of their strong desire to document culture in a convenient way and share it with like-minded members of a similar generation. People themselves are wonderful stores of cultural archives, often shared with humour, pain, laughter, regret and joy.

Our discussions led by my ‘research questions’ became important items of social and cultural history and offered authentic materials. These stories have become a cultural archive in themselves, which if curated sensitively and with agreement of the contributors should be available at a local level and shared more widely. My role was to prepare the ground for the ‘bigger picture’ - thus facilitate co-creation.

The use of social media rather than face-to-face interviews or focus groups added many exciting possibilities to the gathering and documenting process. But problems arose too. If a person posts something in a Facebook

group, does it mean they are willing to be in a book or another form of publication? Yet, without their contributions, we could be missing parts of the cultural experience of a whole period.

Some of it was not documented by cultural leaders at the time or would have been considered unacceptable or questionable, such as images of punks or of young people going out drinking who were not legally old enough to do so. Today the cultural significance of Coventry's past is sanitized by a dominant cultural leadership focusing on a shining vision of what should be the 'vibrant culture' of the UK City of Culture for 2021.

My method of engagement involved making the destination of stories and pictures clear from the beginning, if agreed by contributors. I communicated clearly that I was writing a retro-style, non-academic book about Coventry integrating visuals and posts that needed accuracy and would be supported by the context of the period. Over time contributors were aware that whatever they posted could be used if it added a new dimension to the 'cultural experience' of Coventry in the 1970s or the 80s.

The experience of writing about cultural life in Coventry in the 1970s was not my first attempt to engage a community in the narration. I had done so in my earlier work on working men's clubs through a [dedicated website](#). The Coventry books took this further with the Facebook group and the methodology of content curation evolved over a period of months. The result was a wonderful range of experiences the contributors had to offer and their support for what I was doing. Some commented, both on and offline, that 'being part of this' meant a lot to them, they felt that their 'ordinary lives' actually mattered, that their experiences were of historical value. They also came to feel a sense of community with the online group and some even



*Liz Smith aged 17 – complete with fashionable 70s platform shoes, courtesy of Liz Smith (left).*

*Gathering of Punks, early 1980s, in Coventry's Shopping Precinct © Rich Mulligan (right).*

re-established friendships from 30 years earlier. Some were so keen to keep sharing and chatting even after the 1970s had been published that they asked me to write about the 1980s. And so I did ([The Dirty Stop Outs Guide to 1980s Coventry 2018](#))! Regarding the topic of Cultural Leadership, this example from my point of view shows that a cultural researcher can also be a leader by triggering the manifestation of cultural practices, the revisiting of cultural life or the revaluation of a community especially for those who tend to be excluded for some reason from the mapping of culture and its vibrancy.

## 2. Letting the public lead the narrative – Petya Koleva

Over the last five years my engagement with cultural policy-makers and creators who innovate business models and creative processes led me to observe a shift in the gameplay of cultural leadership in post-transitional societies. Two years ago, I discussed the way participatory processes helped to develop the first strategy for Sofia's free arts scene (Koleva 2016). I am proud to share the result that in 2018 it has been endorsed and now offers a legitimate base for further creative and entrepreneurial ambitions to thrive freely. At the same time, the strategy backs a bottom-up vision of strategic priorities because 'freedom' implies a level at which creators and the public depend on each other.

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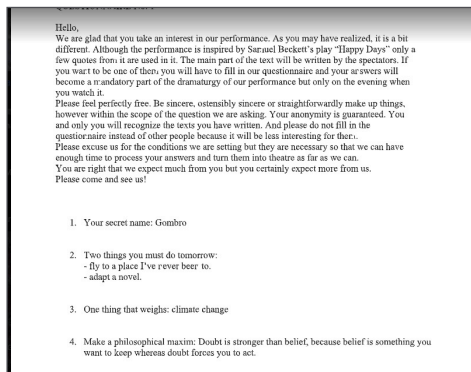
Slowly but surely, post-transitional societies like Bulgaria's are populated by artists and creators who are versed in negotiating boundaries with political, economic and social allies. These ephemeral practices, whereby shared narratives define 'needs' and 'values', are typically what constitutes cultural leadership – developing a vision that partners and co-creators embrace. Creators are now able to 'design' policy because of their symbiotic interaction with the public. In economically adverse contexts, artists demonstrate again and again that they can bypass traditional gatekeepers such as the 'state' and 'big' producers or distributors only if they manage to establish their public. An example are Brazil's techno brega artists who saturated the market with CDs free of copy right until the public came to know them and their talent. Well known are also digital platforms where people co-fund

<sup>1</sup> Recently, the European Commission proposed a regulation to improve access to crowdfunding tools: [https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/growth-and-investment/financing-investment/crowdfunding\\_en](https://ec.europa.eu/info/business-economy-euro/growth-and-investment/financing-investment/crowdfunding_en).

cultural products and scrutinise their success by monitoring processes that cultural funders at local or national levels would envy.

Public accountability will be a positive effect of the EU directive facilitating the entry of co-financing platforms.<sup>1</sup> An example of how ‘monitoring’ is translated into cultural practices are comments accompanying the making and the recent release of the ‘Golden Apple’ pilot episode. This animation was born through a [crowdfunding campaign](#) which allows the public to follow the creators’ process. It is built partially on reinterpreting legends, myths and aesthetics from Bulgaria and the Balkans. Discussions around cultural ‘authenticity’ generated side ripples among the audiences but there are questions posed around ‘should the Bulgarian National television co-produce this’ and ‘why is the schedule not kept’ etc. The ‘behind the scenes’ videos and various digital accounts of the co-funders alter the role of the public, who become a cultural leader and may offer support as well as critique.

Perhaps the most impressive cultural leaders, regarding societal change, are those artists who curate public participation in the narration of a performance. They invite the audience to add grains of ‘truth’ to the communal creation of the story. The concept behind ‘[The Happy Bekket](#)’ performance is one such achievement. It is based on the original form of the play ‘Happy Days’ by Samuel Beckett, yet strikingly different. The creative process depends on each member of its public who are kindly invited to share parts of their personal experiences and memory through an online questionnaire before booking a ticket. Evidently, the process is successful and has worked with publics in various cities and internationally, which can be seen as an indication that more people would appreciate cultural leadership of this type.



*'The Happy Bekket', © Yana Lozeva, courtesy Petya Boyukova (left).*

*'The Happy Bekket', questionnaires filled by members of the public, courtesy of Petya Boykova (right).*

Director Marij Rossen initially wanted to stage 'Happy Days', however copyright imposed the original vision not only on each word of the text but also on aspects of the direction of the piece. This provoked a radical experiment which led to a performance built around 'the same' 'scenes' and 'issues', yet narrated through the contributions of the public. Each performance is unique and emotionally charged because it is co-created with the visitors. The actors, the creative team and the public add elements to the performative interface which shapes a totality. The creative team has already been asked to share this method with colleagues in Greece and Poland. A dozen performances later, the audience did not need additional prompts to fill the questionnaire, the story of how the performance is being made has toured around Bulgaria as well.

## Conclusion

We are only beginning to witness a future in which authorities, institutions and technologies are transformed into support structures, facilitating the communication among artist, arts managers and the public. We have tried to revisit here the essence of cultural leadership which is 'local and horizontal', not a copy and paste model or story. Cultivating the assets of the creators and bearers of cultural value is what we consider the responsibility of cultural leaders.

One common element of the two examples is that we witness the readiness of the public to engage with cultural leadership in diverse social and economic contexts. This is probably a trend applicable globally, there is a need for re(al) connection to others near us and to the memories and emotions of our time.

Also, we see that the immediate dialogue with the public diversifies support which leads to cultural products and experiences that are possibly more sustainable and transformative for those engaged and interest towards them increases. This is intriguing because the 'stories' and the 'models' redefine for the participating public what is meant by both leadership and culture.

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