Defining Culture and Communication for the Purpose of National and International Statistics Program

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Abstract

Culture statistics need needs a stronger definition of its border and structure. It is a relatively new field that started as industrial data for the media. In search if a strict definition, it is proposed to include in Culture and Communications only the production of symbolic goods and services. Cultural labor can extend outside of the domain of Culture and Communication. The domain of Culture and Communications can be structured as a communication (sender- message- receiver) and the supply side can use the triad of creation- production- distribution as structure. A domain of regulation must be added to the model.

Keywords

Statistics, culture, communications.

Introduction

This paper is a theoretical essay on the conceptual framework of Culture and Communication statistics. It is based on a survey of the literature on the subject and on my work as media economist and consultant for the Observatoire de la culture et des communications of the Québec government. The Observatoire defines itself as responding to the needs of the culture and communication communities and industries in Québec.[1] Through this, theory faces a test of social acceptability. An example of this process was the production of the Québec classification of culture and communication activities (Bernier *et al.,* 2003). It started with a theoretical proposition along the lines of what I will present here, but it had to be adapted to the views of the culture and communication stakeholders (Martin, 2003).

A List or a Concept?

But lets start from the beginning. Is it "Culture", "Communication(s)", "Culture & Communication" or, maybe, "Information"? Also in for consideration are "Entertainment Industries", "Cultural Industries", "Heritage", "Knowledge Industries" and so on. This paper is presented in a "Cultural Policy" conference but my title is about "Culture and Communication". My titles stems from the mandate of the Québec Observatoire which includes both culture and communication probably because Québec has a "ministère de la Culture et des Communications" which encompasses the preceding *ministères des*

Affaires culturelles (i.e., books, music, visual arts, etc. – the poor? –) and *ministère des Communications*(newspapers, television, etc. – those selling advertising space and time, – the rich? –). At the Canadian federal level, we have Heritage Canada (*Patrimoine* in French), the new name for Communications Canada and probably a way of waving à cultural flag. But then, Heritage Canada is responsible for sports in Canada. Should we include sport in cultural statistics? Statistics Canada answer is "no" (Statistics Canada, 2000). So, for statistical purposes, designation for the domain of whatever we are now looking at varies with political structures, themselves varying over time and being different from one jurisdiction to the other. To do comparative analysis, one must be a real expert! More seriously, for an economist of whatever we are looking at, defining the borders is important because it can be misleading to include anything at hand that looks cultural.

Table 1 illustrates the problem. Please note here that this is not a negative statement about the very useful and competent work of the author of this table. Design (architects, industrial designers, etc.) is the most important sub-sector of Culture (as defined by the source) and telecommunications stands first in the Communications sector. These two sub-sectors can be challenged as to their inclusion in the domain of Culture and Communications. We will look at this problem later. The point here is to see that if we add design to the other branches of the Culture sub-sector, its economic impact is increased by 46%, not a small concern. The impact is stronger with telecommunications. But one must note here that the mandate of a government department is not carved on the basis of theoretical coherence. Sport or telecommunications must fall somewhere in the apparatus.

Table 1. Structure of the impact on the GDP of Culture & Communication (Québec, 1997-98)

Sector	Sub-sector	%	%
Culture	Design	9.3	31.5
	Film	5.3	17.8
	Book	6.0	20.2
	Education	2.6	8.8
	Heritage	2.2	7.3
	Recording	1.5	5.0
	Performing arts	1.0	3.5
	Government (culture)	0.7	2.5
	Events	0.6	2.2
	Visual arts & crafts	0.4	1.2
	Sub-total		100.0
Communications	Telecommunications	39.4	55.9
	Periodicals	9.3	13.3
	Advertising	6.4	9.1
	Television	5.4	7.7
	Cable, satellite *et al.*	3.5	4.9
	Government (communications)	2.9	4.1
	Radio	1.8	2.5
	Multimedia	1.7	2.4
	Sub-total		100.0
Total		100.0	

Source: Québec, 2003.

Looking at the way some jurisdictions were defining the domain of culture and communication, I was, at first, surprised to read more than once, that a "theoretical" definition of the domain was not considered as necessary to build a statistics program. The problem arises in part from the endless arguing around whom should be in and whom do we dare to leave outside of the frontiers. What is necessary is a precise list of the included domains. When we started to work on the Québec classification of culture and communication activities, the first reaction from peoples in the fields was rather distant. But then, they began to consider the uses and implications of a classification and discussion grew stronger. Why did we include actors in the "production" segment of television? They must be in the "creation" segment, were we told. And so on.

Early Cultural Statistics

Accounting for Culture is a relatively new venture. At one time, things could have been simple: the Arts were for the enlightenment of the mind and nobody cared about how many artifacts were produced. The development of the mass media or of the cultural industries created new accounting needs. These peoples began to count and compare data mainly for the use of advertisement, but also because of the industrial organization of the production. Data on newspaper circulation or best selling book lists go back to roughly one hundred years. These were the first culture statistics, as we would now define them. They were soon followed in the '30 by surveys on radio listening. Newspaper circulation figures and broadcasting ratings were produced using strict accounting or social sciences standards. Every single copy of an audited newspaper has to be accounted for while broadcasting rating were the result of the then new science of surveys by samples. Much later, newspaper circulation figures were supplemented by readership surveys (because one copy counted is not the same as one reader). This data was of very good statistical quality, but its circulation was quite restricted, mostly to professionals in the industries and in advertising trade.

If statistical quality was high, one can argue that the epistemological quality was not at par. Resources for the system came, and still come, from the media themselves. Data was tailored to the needs of advertising management, each set of data being isolated from the other. Definitions tended to be lenient for the media. Listening to television was defined as being in a room with a set turned on, not as giving attention to the program. So audience use of the media was pushed to its maximum value.

On the other hand, data or statistics for cultural branches not carrying advertising were of lower quality, as nobody was ready to pay much for it. No advertising means no resources for that use. Nevertheless, one can find data on best sellers (simple ordinal lists of books), records (radio play lists and retail lists) and on box-office (money spent on films and shows). Much was said about the shortcomings of these figures: distortions skewed samples, etc. The task was not easy, considering the lack of resources. Often, we see very diversified production not easily accountable for. In book for instance, thousands of titles are circulating in the retail system and it is only recently that electronic means were devised to account for them (with the UPC code). Moreover, knowing that a certain book is sold does not give a precise description of its buyer or, even more distant, its second hand reader. And also, who are the authors?

Meanwhile, at least in the rich countries, the audiences for media and cultural or symbolic goods were growing. Leisure society was coming! Sociology of the arts began to form its ranks. The need for culture statistics and the concept of the triadic suite of creation - production - distribution was put forward by Robert Escarpit in his *Sociologie de la littérature* (1958; see Heinich, 2001). Media economics also began in the '50

(Picard, 1989). In the '60, the well-known study of Baumol & Bowen (1966) was a milestone for cultural economics and the uses of statistics for the analysis of the arts.

In the rest of society, national accounts and industrials classifications were developed defining the primary industries, manufacturing industries, etc. Culture and communication activities happen to be separated as they were located first in manufacturing branches (newspapers, book publishing if combined with printing) and then in services (television, performing arts, book publishing without printing, etc.). But, from a communication or cultural industries viewpoint, this is not very logical. Newspaper and (private) radio both earn their revenues by producing content and selling advertising slots (selling audiences to advertisers, in other words). Meanwhile, during the '50, the idea of calculating the part of the GNP or of the labor force accruing to the "Knowledge" industries was developed.

In Canada, official commissions of inquiry on media or culture were part of the landscape since at least the '30. In the '60, the use of statistics was inevitable as the terms of reference included the concepts of industry. This was done in the specific context of having a very big and dynamic neighbor next door, the U.S. economy and its cultural industries[2]. The Canadian government took a very careful look at the media, as it was understood that the consumption of cultural products had an impact on the state of the country. In Québec, this view was emphasized by the very special linguistic situation of being a French speaking society in the mostly English speaking North America. Strong cultural policies were implemented and statistics were called upon the job of documenting the situation. Elsewhere, governments and international organizations also began to look at cultural statistics, with the option of using them for policy purpose.

Toward a Model

One can be tempted by the idea of calculating the economic weight of culture which means defining a domain for culture or communication industries. In could take the form of "satellite national account", i.e., calculation of the GDP for a subset of the economy (culture, "New Economy", etc.). But this means having finite borders to that subset and eliminating double counts. This goes contrarily to a quite natural tendency from the subsets sectors to include in their embrace as much as possible, including territories that could be placed in other industries or activities. Also, the task of eliminating double counts is a hard one. A third problem arises: is there a substitute for the primary - manufacturing - services triad that can serve as an organizing paradigm for the culture and communications sectors?

But before going into these questions, I would suggest first that it is not possible to talk only about culture statistics, unless one include in this the mass-media or the cultural industries (two different concepts to be discussed elsewhere). Looking back at media history, one can see that the division of labor and the distinctions between "high" and "popular" culture are always shifting ground. The same goes for the distinction between culture and communications activities, if one follows the distinction that we had in Québec. Today's journalists are yesterday (and today's) writers. The industrialization of cultural production has blurred the frontier between culture, meaning "arts", and communications, meaning journalism or even, entertainment.

I propose to define the culture and communication sector as the production of symbolic goods and services, excluding goods and services incorporating cultural labor but whose main social use is not symbolic. Symbolic goods and services have as first use the communication of ideas, information, performances, emotions, etc. It is what some in the cultural industries call "content" and what can generate copyright. On the other hand,

every good or service communicates something. Many beers offer the same taste, but differentiate themselves through image. But the main use of beer is not symbolic. Beer has a cultural dimension, but as statisticians we must not include it as a cultural product because then, every good is cultural, so it is of no use. This is not as far-fetched as it looks. The Observatoire had to decide if typical (sophisticated) regional food was a cultural production.

By these criteria, three sectors of the Table 1 would be put outside of the Culture and Communications domains. Telecommunication would be outside (but not cable, satellites, etc.). Content is simply not the product of the telecommunication networks, except for cable systems and the likes. Telecommunication networks are important for the cultural industries, but they are not part of them. Advertising is a special headache. It is clearly symbolic production, but in a very special way. Its products (the advertisements themselves) are (usually) not circulated like cultural goods or services. They are paid by advertisers and put in front of audiences without asking them permission. Their use value is for advertisers, not audiences (although, advertisements can be informative). I would include work in advertising organizations in cultural and communications labor, but exclude advertisements from being cultural products (except when shown in non advertising formats like festivals).

I would also argue that design, including architecture, could stand as a cultural profession, but that the products made or built by these designs are not mainly symbolic goods. Plans made by architects are (usually) not circulated the way painting or recording are. It must be noted that cultural industries have non-cultural workers on their payrolls as well as non-cultural industry hires cultural workers or professionals. It is the use value of the goods and services that should define the inclusion of an activity in the culture and communication sector.

Looking at Table 2, we now have defined a domain for activities related to symbolic goods and services and a domain for non (mainly) symbolic goods and services. The latter will be subjects for Culture and Communications statistics only when cultural and communication labor is at the root of the activity.

Table 2. A model for Culture & Communications statistics

Regulation (Governments, rights management, unions & associations, specialized schools)				
Supply & consumption of symbolic goods & services: =				
Supply (arts, crafts & industries) =			Characteristics of goods & services - - - * Successes * Genres * Origins of contents	Consumption & accumulation
Creation	Production	Distribution and broad or narrow casting		
Creation of other goods & services depending on cultural labor	(No statistics)			

* With special attention given to these variables.

Structure

The next step is the structure of the domain of symbolic goods and services. I propose to see it as a communication, replacing the canonical triad of communication

sender – message – receiver

by

supply – goods & services – consumption & accumulation.

This means, if resources are available, doing statistics with the three parts of the process, contrarily to the usual tendency to give far more resources to the supply side. Regular surveys of cultural practices are now quite familiar.[3]

Attention should also be given to the characteristics of goods and services available and to those that show success, especially success as measured by audience criteria (ratings, sales, box-office,[4] circulation…). This used to be left to industrial organizations, but I suggest that these figures be of public concern because they open the door to the analysis of market shares. When the figures are available from private sources, consideration should be given. Then, without going in the arts critics territory, a minimum of classification of the product genres should be done, using categories not too far from the one used in the daily circulation of the products. Finally, classification of product,

certainly of theses having audience success, according to their origins can be done. But this is a more complex task than it appears. The debates over the Canadian content definitions can be a proof of this complexity. Even more, the concept of identity is not easy to turn into a classification.

Furthermore, I propose to structure the supply by using only the three functions we saw emerging earlier: creation, production and distribution (be it physical or electronic). This is a simplification of the system in use in some statistical agencies that include a preservation function. I suggest that this function have no place in a general model as it the function of only one branch, that is Heritage. Instead, it is simpler to consider Heritage as a branch like the other, having its own creation and production functions, distribution being (usually) part of the production process.

So, we now have borders and a structure for statistical programs. But something else is very useful for the understanding of Culture and Communications. Government spending are part of culture statistics in many countries and should remain so. But we can have a larger view on the phenomenon of governance of this system. Other institutions and organizations are very active in this domain: copyrights and similar rights management organizations, labor unions, professional and industrial associations and specialized schools in the culture and communications. We should be interested in the spending and the labor force of these organizations, in the output of the specialized school and, especially, in the circulation of money in the rights management systems.

Acknowledgements

Notes

[1] See http://www.stat.gouv.qc.ca/observatoire/organis_obs/index_an.htm for the mission, mandate, etc. of the Observatoire.

[2] This view was not restricted to the culture and communications sector. The whole economy was then analyzed and later regulated for foreign investments.

[3] For Québec, see http://www.mcc.gouv.qc.ca/statistique/pratiques_culturelles.htm.

[4] For Québec, http://www.diffpls.stat.gouv.qc.ca/pls/hni/hni.

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