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A Pedagogy of “Black Mirroring” the Delights and the Horrors of Emerging Tech

INTRODUCTION

As technology is becoming embedded in everything, including us, what are we, as teachers, as students...becoming? In this article I draw on experiences from the Creathon project to ponder upon this. I suggest a ‘pedagogy’ that examines the future, that looks like a future that we might actually inhabit, but know enough about, so that we might think twice about which devices we buy and which services we use. I call this pedagogy “black mirroring”, inspired by the TV series ‘Black Mirror’. Black Mirror highlights topics related to humanity’s relationship with technology, creating stories that feature “the way we live now – and the way we might be living in 10 minutes’ time if we’re clumsy. (Crace, 2011)”

Advancing thinking on technology competence in the creative industries is the motivation for this. According to a recent report by Sitra, there will be a greater emphasis on the importance of understanding technology. With more and more activities moving online to digital platforms, it is according to Sitra “important for individuals as well as nation states to acquire new technological competences. These can include, for example, issues related to data use and rights over data, understanding the impact of algorithms on behavior, topics related to decision-making or being prepared for cybercrime. (Dufva, 2020)” So how could we better understand emerging technology?

EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES

In general, emerging technologies tend to be considered as an opportunity, where courses and training focuses on the potential impacts of technology on the structures of society. The learning outcome often seems to be to learn to appreciate technology, since if you do not, you and your organization, industry, might perish. This rimes well with the idea of disrupti-

on as well as accounts from the tech industry and business depicting late adopters in terms of irrationality (Lounsbury & Crumley, 2007). The discourse of disruption and creative destruction has already existed for over a hundred years. It was a significant element in the European Zeitgeist of the early twentieth century that was first introduced to economics by Werner Sombart, and later conceptualized by Joseph Schumpeter (1947). The fact that such accounts still prevail in business and tech, especially in the innovation context, is hardly surprising. However, deciding on technology is hardly a matter for only corporations. Thus, we need to educate people with competence to also decide on the development of technology. But how do you do that?

In one attempt to do so, a group of students and I approached technology by starting from familiar territory, i.e. environments where a lot of us are already firmly embedded: Gaming and Gangsta Rap. Thus, we started from Art.

ON TOP OF CURRENT DEBATE: EMPATHY

A core competence for cultural managers as well as art professionals, as identified by both the creative industry and education is to be on top of current debate. Ignoring #Meetoo or debate on algorithms that, for example, curate “an aspirational air” (Sam Biddle, 2020) by suppressing videos from users who appear too ugly, poor or disabled, as in the case of Tiktok, is considered unprofessional and negligent. For the educator, this implies that one has to find case studies that are somehow relevant in a general sense or current. Preferably both (Hanan, 2015).

In an assignment spanning three different stages the students started examining if combinations of art and technology can create empathy. You can find a number of both academic and popular sources that suggest that art, or the combination of art and technology generates empathy. For example, Jan Nåls (who works at Arcada UAS) has done a dissertation on documentary and empathy: “Making the Strange Familiar: The Functions of Empathy in Intercultural Film Narrative“. He writes that empathy “makes the strange familiar, allowing us to experience the subjectivity of others. Such experiences will, in turn, expand and alter our inner worlds.” More popular sources include the Finnish initiative who state that: “In a more complex world, empathy is a civic skill that no one should live without.” (Pulkkinen, 2017) The name of the initiative is ‘Made in Empatia’ and it wants to make Finland the most empathetic country in the world.

Accounts that link empathy with emerging tech, include Ted Talks, and documentaries. Thus the students study sources like the “immersive storyteller” Chris Milk and a WIRED film called “Machine Learning: Living in the Age of AI”. The film examines the “extraordinary ways in which people are interacting with AI” today. Showing how “Hobbyists and teenagers are developing tech powered by machine learning”, as well as looking at the implications that rapidly accelerating technology can have (WIRED, 2019). Thus, the students are learning to understand how technology is applied, both in art and in society at large.

BLACK MIRRORING

Next step in the process is to apply “Black Mirroring” in order to question assumptions. To create conditions where students identify assumptions that can be scrutinized is essential for them to develop an ability to problematize (Alvesson & Sandberg, 2011).

Thus, the students are introduced to theory that questions some of the assumptions about empathy. Fritz Breithaupt has written a book “The Dark Sides of Empathy”. In the book he examines the consideration that empathy to be the basis of moral action. However, according to Breithaupt, the ability to empathize with others is also a prerequisite for deliberate acts of humiliation and cruelty. In *The Dark Sides of Empathy*, he contends “that people often commit atrocities not out of a failure of empathy but rather as a direct consequence of over-identification and a desire to increase empathy.” Instead of reading the book, the students are introduced to a podcast where the author talks about “The Dark sides of Empathy.” With this new critical and hopefully productive lens they examine a case, where they can choose to delve deeper either into Gangster Rap or Gaming.

These two cases were chosen since both have sparked enormous debate in Sweden, which in turn means that there is lots of information to draw on. In addition to this, students can link their mother tongue to the broader context of the Nordic Countries.

The “Gangster Rap” debate started in the beginning of 2020 and involves different views on the depictions of violence, drug use and sex in the lyrics and videos. The genre is both a way for a group of “outsiders” to tell about their reality, and a way of earning since different technologies make it possible to disseminate the videos easily. The lyrics directly stem from reality which has led to situations where the police have investigated crimes with the lyrics as “evidence”.

The Gaming debate connects to similar phenomena where gamers toxic culture on platforms such as Discord is examined. A fascinating series of PodCasts produced by Sveriges Radio digs deep into the phenomenon and approaches it from different angles. “En 12-årig pojke planerar att döda andra barn och skriver om det i en chattgrupp för datorspelare. Ingen försöker stoppa honom, istället börjar flera heja på och ge råd (Rosén, 2020)”. The line between a toxic, but “joking” culture and a truly violent culture proves thin as some gamers have openly planned and then committed crimes like murders, openly, and by the “blessing” of the gamer community. The students document this whole process, their reflections and analysis in a series of chapters and a final essay. The result is an astonishing collection of mind trips into questions of responsibility (who are we to hold to account for...art, technology, society), control (should tech such as platforms be monitored and by whom), and questions of loss of proportion, morality, self. As a teacher, I have seldom encountered such quality in terms of learning outcomes as well as pondering and problematization of both art, technology, psychology, society at large and their complex relationships.

The students seem satisfied too, and using podcasts proves a nice move, since they can take a walk, or even jog, while studying.

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