

MAKING IS CONNECTING

Preamble & first chapter from the second edition



This is the 'Preamble to the second edition', and the first 'Introduction' chapter, from *'Making is Connecting: The social power of creativity, from craft and knitting to digital everything – Second expanded edition,'* by David Gauntlett. The book was published by Polity Press in 2018.

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Preamble to the second edition

Hello, and welcome, or welcome back, to *Making is Connecting*. This tries to be a fundamentally positive book about a fundamentally positive thing – the power of making. Everyday creativity can give us a sense of potency, expressive ways to connect with other people, and a sense of meaningful engagement with the world. This has been true for many thousands of years, but has been boosted and amplified in recent times by the emergence of accessible networked technologies that enable us to connect, exchange things, and inspire each other.

The first edition of this book was written in 2009–10, and came out in 2011. Here I greet you at the start of the second edition, which I revised and wrote in 2016–17,

to come out in 2018. ‘Making is connecting’ is a timeless proposition, and should be a pretty time-proof book, but, you know, things happen, and the *context* changes even when the essence of creativity remains the same. So there are some things we need to deal with here.

New gloom

Frankly, when we think about the digitally-connected world, things do seem rather less bright and shiny than before. There are three striking and depressing elements, and each is huge. First, governments around the world turned out to be much more committed to 1984-style mass surveillance – recording *everyone’s* online interactions – than ever seemed either possible or likely. It was in 2013 that Edward Snowden bravely exposed the unexpectedly vast level of monitoring and storage of personal communications in the US, and by implication – or explicit extension – everywhere else. A few years on, this fundamental lack of personal privacy seems to be more-or-less accepted as normal.

Second, the corporations running online platforms were revealed as ruthless monopolies that suck vast amounts of money out of the creative ecosystem, while contributing nothing other than services to advertisers. Of course, it was well known that record companies and publishers in the twentieth century were ungenerous to artists, but new modes of distribution – especially for music – have counterintuitively decimated the opportunities for the majority of artists to make a living. (Jonathan Taplin’s 2017 book *Move Fast and Break Things* is especially persuasive on this topic¹). Online creativity isn’t all about making money. But, in the case of music, say, you would have thought that as we have incredible new technologies that enable people to make and distribute work – and now that so many people have a music-playing phone in their pocket, directly connected to this network – with more than two billion smartphone users in the world in 2017² – there should be much better opportunities for people to be paid for making music that people want to listen to.

Third, a noisy minority of ‘ordinary people’ online started spoiling it for everyone else with vile misogyny, racism, homophobia and other bigotry and threatening behaviour – enabled by the same platforms that in other contexts had seemed so useful for the exchange of creative ideas and practices. There have been ‘trolls’ and horribleness on the internet since its earliest days, but it seems to have exploded in a few years. In 2014 I remember feeling really sick and depressed when Emma Watson made an excellent speech at the UN about how feminism is for everyone, and was hit with a tide of rape threats and other misogyny. On Twitter, appalled and exasperated, and breaking with my old-fashioned polite tweeting style, I said: ‘Hey internet. I spend my professional life saying you people are fundamentally decent. You’ve really let me down with this Emma Watson shit’³.

The repulsive ‘Gamergate’ controversy⁴, the unbelievable racist and sexist noise from idiots around the 2016 *Ghostbusters* movie⁵, the treatment of female politicians and public figures daily, and many more examples make it *really hard* for hopeful optimists to not just give up in disgust. But you can’t leave everything to pessimists, you really can’t.

So is the internet all bad now?

This book is not all about the internet, but the internet certainly plays a valuable and central role in our story. The three strong reasons for despondency mentioned above offer no positives, except as things to work against and away from. It’s hard to discuss anything that happens online these days without being reminded of these dark clouds – and/or being considered stupid for not engaging with them. I guess there are people who look at books like *Making is Connecting*, and think: How can you *still* be optimistic about the power of the internet, when we know all this bad stuff?

And I get it: this is a good question, and not one to be ducked. But on the whole, the bad things are not really to do with the good things – except that they are enabled by the same technologies. They are *simply different issues*. The positive things can be positive, the negative things are negative, and then we have to work out what to do.

The internet enables people to connect with others, share creative projects, and be inspired by each other, in ways which were not possible before – because it is global and searchable. Previously you could connect and share and be inspired by local people, if you happened to have a way of identifying people in your area interested in the same kinds of stuff. This was difficult, but possible. Doing it quickly and on a potentially global scale was impossible. The fact that the internet enables us to design and make lovely ways to show off our creative abilities, exchange ideas, and build networks of like-minded people who can support and inspire each other, *is still amazing*. It was amazing 25 years ago, when the first webpages were being born, and it’s just as amazing today. And of course, we have much better infrastructure, hardware and software for doing this stuff, and with more than three billion people now online, there’s a good chance someone shares some of your creative passions⁶. Is this still amazing, and powerful? Yes it is.

At the same time, we cannot and should not ignore what we now know about the mass surveillance, the aggressive monopoly capitalism of the major online platforms, and the trolling and misogyny. This is all mind-bendingly dreadful. Whole excellent books have been written about each of those issues, but – just so you know – that’s not my job here. Those issues are really important, but they are just not what this book is about. We need to arrive at a much better situation in each of those areas. Meanwhile, I still want to talk about the good things we can still do, and the better world that it is important for us to imagine.

Internet = world

The thing is: the internet mirrors our world. That doesn't mean that everyone in the world is equally represented on the internet, because the internet mirrors the unfairness and inequalities of our world. The internet also mirrors some nice things in the world, because the world does still have some nice things in it.

The internet enables people to amplify dimensions of the world, making both good and bad things louder and more noticeable. So you can quickly get to inspiring communities, gorgeous designs, and wonderful ideas, or just as swiftly you can find offensive, awful and depressing material. It's a complex world, and one person's centre of inspiration might be someone else's epitome of repulsion. And this is not to be taken lightly. There are horrifically awful things on the internet. But they were put there by people. People in the world.

So, dismissing 'the internet' is like dismissing 'the world'. When people say 'How can you still be optimistic about the power or potential of the internet, now that we know all *this* about it?', it *really is* the same as asking how we can still feel optimistic about communities of human beings, considering what we know about various grim aspects of the behaviour of some people. The answer is – the answer has to be – that most people really aren't that bad; and that, even when some of them seem to have turned out really disagreeable, we still have to have hope for, and therefore make plans about, how to make things better.

And, I'm sorry, but it really is stupid to conclude that just because you know X or Y negative things about the internet that therefore there's no point being positive about *any* possibilities of online connection, conversation or inspiration. That's just such a binary way of looking at it.

I understand how the brain can get dragged in that way. If you spend time studying the details of some case of neglect, abuse or killing, it's easy and indeed quite normal to feel depressed and think 'Ugh, people are just horrible'. But, they are not. We may all recognise that feeling of revulsion – and the irrational temporary transfer of the feeling about a particular case to a feeling about everything – but it's still irrational. Similarly, people who spend much of their time studying the negative sides of online life will probably, understandably, consider the whole internet to be awful. But it's not. And it's straightforwardly irrational to think that it is. The internet mirrors the world. It's silly to say that everything on the internet, and everything that can be done on it, is wonderful, and it's equally daft to say that it's all bad or should be done away with.

I suppose if you're a proper nihilist, and you're actually signed up to the idea that everything and everyone actually is awful, then we have to allow you to say the same about online life too. But for the rest of us, we have to accept the complicated mix. As a wise person once noted, the typical human existence brings a pile of good things and a pile of bad things. 'The good things don't always soften the bad things,

but vice-versa, the bad things don't necessarily spoil the good things, or make them unimportant'⁷.

The piles sit side by side. Focusing all your attention on the pile of good things doesn't make the bad things go away – as people have enjoyed telling me – but equally, emphasising the negative side-effects (or even planned uses) of technologies doesn't change the positive reality of the good things that have also been done.

There are people who regard themselves as 'critical' theorists, writers or researchers, who think that being critical means pointing out the negative side of everything. But that's not what critical means. I think being critical means having a full understanding of negative threats, and the intended and unintended consequences of things in the world, and balancing this with an awareness of, and engagement with, ways in which we can make life better.

Second edition: What's the same and what's different

Some parts of this book are unapologetically the same as last time, but other parts have changed much more. In some places I have deleted or shortened things that were in the first edition, to make room for new things – generally parts that seemed longwinded or not so relevant today. In removing those things I have comforted myself with the thought that they are not expunged from the universe forever, because if you really want, you can still get hold of the first edition. Also I am aware that *Making is Connecting* is, to date, my best book, and has a few friends, so some people who already have the first one might get this second one too – and I want those people to be rewarded with a suitably renewed book with whole chunks of new stuff in it.

To make things easy for those of you who have the first edition and want to know what's new – here are the key new things in this edition:

- This 'Preamble' before chapter 1;
- The section 'Draining money from the creative economy' in chapter 7;
- All of chapter 8, 'Making connections and the creative process: From music to everything';
- All of chapter 9, 'Doing it yourself: More lessons from music making and connecting';
- All of chapter 10, 'Platforms for creativity';
- In chapter 11, items 6 and 7 in the previously 5-point conclusion list are new, as is the section on 'Developing and connecting creativity';
- Many other things have been amended, rewritten, added and updated throughout.

1. Introduction

This is a book about what happens when people make things. I hope it will add to the conversation about the power of the internet and digital technologies – a place where we have seen everyday creativity flourish over the past 25 years. But people have been making things – and thinking about the meaning of making things – for a very long time. And the power of making, and connecting through creating, extends well beyond the online world to all kinds of activities in everyday life.

I hope to pull some of these things together, in ways which are hopefully not too obvious as we start. You may reasonably wonder, for instance, how a commentary by Victorian art critic John Ruskin on medieval cathedrals can have affected my understanding of YouTube videos. And you may be surprised when the nineteenth-century socialist and tapestry-weaver William Morris dispenses a blueprint for the making and sharing ethos of social media in general, and Wikipedia in particular, 120 years early. We will note how the former Catholic priest and radical philosopher Ivan Illich outlined the necessary terms of human happiness, 40 years ago, see how it lines up with the latest studies by economists and social scientists today, and then connect it with knitting, guerrilla gardening, and creative social networks. But not necessarily in that order. We will encounter the 1970s feminist Rozsika Parker, explaining embroidery as a ‘weapon of resistance’, and several knitters, carpenters, musicians, and bloggers, and they will help us to think about how making things for ourselves gives us a sense of wonder, agency, and possibilities in the world.

Making is connecting

This brings us to the title of the book: ‘Making is connecting’. It’s a perfectly simple phrase, of course. But having spent some time thinking about people making things, and people connecting with others – making *and* connecting – I realised that it was meaningful, and more pleasing, to note that these are one and the same process: making *is* connecting.

I mean this in three principal ways:

- Making is connecting because you have to connect things together (materials, ideas, or both) to make something new;
- Making is connecting because acts of creativity usually involve, at some point, a social dimension and connect us with other people;
- And making is connecting because through making things and sharing them in the world, we increase our engagement and connection with our social and physical environments.

Of course, there will be objections and exceptions to each of these, which we may consider along the way. But that's my basic set of propositions.

Three reasons why I wanted to write this book

This book came about because of a number of things I had been thinking about, which I hope are worth listing briefly here.

First, I started out as a sociologist interested in the place of media in people's lives. That was ok for a while, but 20 and even 15 years ago, the main media that people were usually dealing with was produced by big professional organisations, and it seemed somewhat subservient to be exploring what people were doing with their products. Some of the activity was quite active, thoughtful and imaginative, some of it was mundane, and none of it could score very highly on a scale of creativity because it was all about creative works made by *other people*. Thankfully, the World Wide Web soared in popularity, becoming mainstream in itself, and opened up a world of diversity and imagination where the content itself is created by everyday users (as well as a growing number of professionals). This opportunity to make media and, in particular, share it easily, making connections with others, was unprecedented in both character and scale, and therefore a much more exciting thing to study.

Secondly, this exciting world of participation was, therefore, an exciting thing to participate in *myself*. I've always liked making things, but they didn't have an audience. With the Web, making writings, photographs, drawings – and indeed websites themselves – available to the world was so easy. It was also rewarding, as people would see your stuff and then send nice comments and links to their own. So I experienced the feeling that making is connecting for myself.

Third, and stemming from the academic interests mentioned in the first point, I was meant to be doing research about what people did, and why, but had always been uncomfortable with the idea of just speaking to them, taking them through an 'interview' for my own purposes, without giving them anything very interesting to *do*. Therefore, over the past 20 years, I have been developing 'creative research methods' where people are asked to *make* something as part of the process. The idea is that going through the thoughtful, physical process of making something – such as a video, a drawing, a decorated box, or a LEGO model – an individual is given the opportunity to reflect, and to make their thoughts, feelings or experiences manifest and tangible. This unusual experience gets the brain firing in different ways, and can generate insights which would most likely not have emerged through directed conversation. I have found that the process is especially revealing and effective when people are asked to express themselves using metaphors. All of this was discussed in my earlier book *Creative Explorations*⁸. In these studies it was clear that thinking and making are aspects of the same process. Typically, people mess around with materials, select things, experimentally put parts

together, rearrange, play, throw bits away, and generally manipulate the thing in question until it approaches something that seems to communicate meanings in a satisfying manner. This rarely seems to be a matter of ‘making what I thought at the start,’ but rather a process of discovery and having ideas *through* the process of making. In particular, taking *time* to make something, using the hands, gave people the opportunity to clarify thoughts or feelings, and to see the subject-matter in a new light. And having an image or physical object to present and discuss enabled them to communicate and connect with other people more directly.

Maybe in the end that’s more than three, but for all these reasons I wanted to explore the idea that making is connecting.

Social media as an idea and a metaphor

This book does not suppose that creative activities have suddenly appeared in the story of human life because someone invented the internet. However, the internet – in particular through the World Wide Web which emerged in early 1990s, and the mobile apps which burst into people’s lives in the late 2000s – has certainly made a huge difference. The internet made it massively easier for everyday people to share the fruits of their creativity with others, and to collaboratively make interesting, informative and entertaining cultural spaces. This process has been boosted by the emergence of social media. In the first edition of this book, I talked about ‘Web 2.0’, which was what we called it then, although I had to explain that ‘Web 2.0’ was not a particular kind of technology, nor a business model, and was definitely not a sequel to the Web as previously known.

Nowadays we say ‘social media’ to mean basically the same thing, and it’s all around us, a lot – even if you don’t use social media, you hear about it all the time in the news – but it’s worth taking a moment to consider the distinctive approach of social media platforms compared to, say, traditional websites.

I used to explain the difference between the older and newer models with a Powerpoint slide showing gardens and an allotment, that I made using LEGO (fig. 1). In the first decade or so of the Web’s existence (from the 1990s to the early to mid 2000s), websites tended to be like separate gardens. So for example the NASA website was one garden, and my Theory.org.uk website was another garden, and a little-known poet had made her own poetry website, which was another garden. You could visit them, and each of them might be complex plots of creative and beautiful content, but basically they were separate, with a fence between each one. There’s nothing *wrong* with this model, as such; it works perfectly well as a platform for all kinds of individuals, groups, or organisations, big and small, to make stuff available online. But this model is what we could now call ‘Web 1.0’. By contrast, the newer model, whether we call it Web 2.0 or social media, is like a collective allotment. Instead of individuals tending their own gardens, they come together to work collaboratively in a shared space.

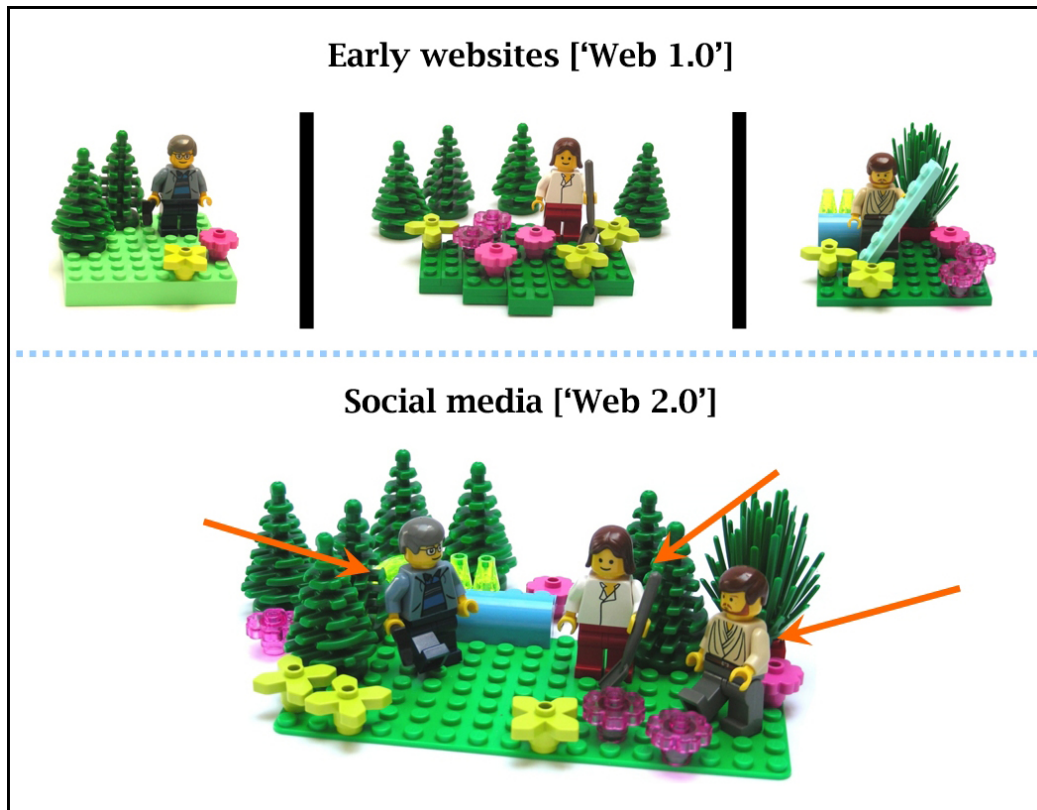


Figure 1: Social media as a communal allotment

This is actually what Tim Berners-Lee had meant his World Wide Web to be like, when he invented it in 1990. He imagined that browsing the Web would be a matter of writing and editing, not just searching and reading. The first years of the Web, then, were an aberration, and it has only more recently blossomed in the way its creator intended.

I clearly remember that when I read about this read/write model in Berners-Lee's book, *Weaving the Web*, when it was published in 1999, it seemed like a nice idea, but naïve, and bonkers. How could it possibly work? I didn't want to spend hours crafting my lovely webpages only for some visitor to come along and mess them up. But of course, my problem – shared with most other people at the time – was that I had not learned to recognise the power of the network. We still thought of everybody 'out there' as basically 'audience'.

At the heart of social media is the idea that online sites and services become more powerful the more that they *embrace* this network of potential collaborators. Rather than just seeing the internet as a broadcast channel, which brings an audience to a website (the '1.0' model), social media invite users in to play. Sites and apps such as YouTube, Twitter, and Wikipedia, only exist and have value because people use and contribute to them, and they are clearly *better* the more people are using and contributing to them. This is the essence of social media.

So social media is about harnessing the collective abilities of the members of an online network, to make an especially powerful resource or service. But, thinking beyond the internet, it may also be valuable to consider social media as a kind of metaphor, for any collective activity which is enabled by people's passions and becomes something greater than the sum of its parts.

In the books *We Think* by Charles Leadbeater, and both *Here Comes Everybody* and *Cognitive Surplus* by Clay Shirky, the authors discuss the example of Wikipedia, noting the impressive way in which it has brought together enthusiasts and experts, online, to collaboratively produce a vast encyclopedia which simply would not exist without their millions of contributions⁹. These contributions, of course, are given freely, and without any reward (apart, of course, from the warm glow of participation, and the very minor recognition of having your username listed somewhere in an article's history logs). Both authors then go on to consider whether the Wikipedia model of encyclopedia-making can be translated across to – well, everything else. In these cases, Wikipedia becomes a metaphor for highly participatory and industrious collaboration. However, most of the time they're not *really* thinking of 'everything else' – it's 'everything else online'. Wikipedia becomes a model of highly participatory and industrious *online* collaboration. But the really powerful metaphorical leap would be to go from digital media to real life – the social world and all its complexities, not just from Wikipedia to other internet services¹⁰.

So, in this book we will, in part, be taking the message of making, sharing, and collaboration, which has become familiar to the people who enthuse about social media, and seeing if it works in a broader context – in relation to both offline and online activities – and with bigger issues: real social problems rather than virtual online socialising. This connects with the argument – or the hope – that we are seeing a shift away from a 'sit back and be told' culture towards more of a 'making and doing' culture. The 'sit back and be told' position is forcefully introduced in schools, and then gently reinforced by television and the magic of the glossy, shiny, and new in consumer culture; the 'making and doing' is what this book is all about.

The 'sit back and be told' culture

Since the historical point at which education became institutionalised in a system of schools, learning has become a process directed by a teacher, whose task it is to transfer nuggets of knowledge into young peoples' minds. It has not always been this formulaic, of course, and some teachers have always sought to inspire their students to produce their own perspectives on art, poetry, or science. Nevertheless, and in spite of some innovative pedagogical thinking in the 1960s and 70s, school education since the 1980s has tended to settle around a model where a body of knowledge is input into students, who are tested on their grasp of it at a later point. Over time, the tests have become increasingly formalised, and have been

used to assemble league tables of schools, which in turn mean that each school has a vested interest in getting children to do well in the tests. Governments around the world seem to feel obliged to commit to the notion of ‘testing and accountability’ even though all the evidence suggests that quality learning is destroyed by an over-emphasis on testing¹¹.

Meanwhile, the twentieth century was emphatically the era of ‘sit back and be told’ media: especially in the second half of that century, leisure time became about staying in, not going out, and remaining pretty much in the same spot for long chunks of time, looking at a screen. This remains the case: in 2017, Americans watched on average more than four and a half hours of television per day, much as they had done for several decades, even though this viewing is now joined by the use of other digital devices¹². In the UK, it’s just under four hours per day¹³. This is, of course, a lot, and since it’s an average, you know that for everybody watching less than this, there are as many other people watching more. (The good news is that the twentieth-century technology is primarily popular with those rooted in the twentieth-century. The steady *average* television viewing figures hide the fact that younger people are watching TV much less – although they are using a much wider range of screen-based services. The Nielsen 2017 data for the US, for instance, shows that the average TV viewing of those aged 37 and under is less than *half* that of those aged over 38 and older).

Marshall McLuhan’s famous statement that ‘the medium is the message’ can be taken in various ways, but fundamentally it points to the way in which the arrival of a medium, such as television, in our lives, can affect the way we live – not really because of the content of the messages it carries, but from the generally less noticed ways in which it causes us to rearrange our everyday lives. This is a very good insight. Media ‘effects’, when we are talking about media *content*, are notoriously hard to measure, generally inconsequential, and mixed up with other influences¹⁴. But the overall ‘effect’ of the introduction of television – assuming that the broadcasters offer some reasonably enjoyable or informative programmes – was clearly *massive* in terms of how people spent their lives.

Four hours of viewing, as an *average*, and *every day*, was an astonishing transformation in how human beings spent time, compared with the pre-television era. This is not to say that television is full of rubbish or that people are idiots for watching it. It’s not impossible to find four hours of informative and entertaining things on telly. But it would be difficult to argue that this was a highly creative or sociable way for people to spend their time, or that this was not an extraordinary change in the way that human beings spent their non-working hours, compared with the preceding few thousand years.

In addition, this relatively passive orientation to time outside work was further reinforced, as mentioned above, by consumer culture. As Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer observed in the 1940s, and as many critics have noted since, modern capitalism succeeds not by menacing us, or dramatically crushing our will on the industrial wheel, but by encouraging us to enjoy a flow of convenient, cheerful

stuff, purchased from shops, which gives us a feeling of satisfaction, if not happiness¹⁵. Few of us are immune from the appeal of attractively packaged items, with the sheen and smell of newness, which help us to forget our troubles, at least for a moment.

The notion of the *fetish* might be useful in understanding this. The fetish has sexual connotations, but these are not (necessarily) crucial here. In Freud, a fetish is basically about unconsciously overcoming anxiety through attachment to particular objects¹⁶. In Marx, the fetish describes the way in which we forget that the value of a commodity is a social value, and come to think of it as independent and real¹⁷. Somewhere between these two related ideas, we might see the fetish as the common, everyday way in which we find pleasure in the purchase of consumer goods, and acknowledge that it may be silly or irrational, but still a pleasure; and then consistently forget how temporary this diversion is. Between them, television and consumerism can draw people into a dully ‘satisfied’ reverie in which – as we will see later – it may not be especially surprising that environmental pollution and other societal problems are generally seen as troubling, but distant, and basically ‘somebody else’s problem’.

Towards a ‘making and doing’ culture

More optimistically, however, we can see a growing engagement with a ‘making and doing’ culture. This orientation rejects the passivity of the ‘sit back’ model, and seeks opportunities for creativity, social connections, and personal growth. In the education sphere, this approach is promoted globally by the LEGO Foundation and its various alliances – which has included some work with me – and is well captured by Guy Claxton’s book, *What’s the Point of School*, which highlights ways in which some teachers are rejecting the ‘sit back and be told’ school culture described above, and instead are setting their students challenges which are much more about making and doing¹⁸. Students are encouraged to work together to ask questions, explore different strategies of investigation, and create their own solutions. This approach is open about the fact that learning is an ongoing process that everyone is engaged in – teachers themselves might show that they are engaged in a learning project, such as starting to keep bees, or learn a musical instrument. Rather than displaying laminated examples of the ‘best answer’ on the walls, these classrooms show works in progress, experiments, even things that have gone wrong. They encourage a ‘hands on’ approach to learning, and a spirit of enquiry and questioning.

In terms of the media and technologies that we use in everyday life, there has of course been a huge shift towards more interactive, internet-based tools and services. The launch of social media platforms such as Facebook (in 2004), YouTube (2005), Twitter (2006), Instagram (in 2010), and Snapchat (in 2011), to name just a few, have led to huge amounts of interactive and – to varying degrees – creative

engagement between people online. In 2017, YouTube had over one billion users, watching 5 billion videos every day, and uploading 300 hours of video every minute¹⁹. Instagram had 700 million users, uploading more than 100 million videos and photos every day²⁰. And Facebook had reached more than two billion users²¹. Easy-to-use networked tools which enable people to learn about, and from, each other, and to collaborate and share resources, have made a real difference to what people do with, and can get from, their electronic media. The *range* of information-sharing, self-expressive and collaborative things that people do online is extraordinary. Academics, to some extent, have tended to focus on the more ‘serious’ uses, such as in politics and activism, but of course there are online communities about absolutely everything.

In the non-virtual world, there is a resurgence of interest in craft activities, clubs and fairs²², and their DIY technology equivalents involving machines and robotics²³, as celebrated in the mainstream *Make* magazine and at Maker Faires²⁴. Environmental concerns have encouraged people to reduce the amount of stuff they consume, and to find new ways to re-use and recycle. The Transition Towns movement has encouraged communities to work together to find sustainable ways of living²⁵. And as we will see, the internet has played an important role in offline real-world activities, as a tool for communication, networks and organisation.

Defining creativity

I will use the word ‘creativity’ – and the phrase ‘everyday creativity’ – quite freely in this book, in relation to the activities of making which are rewarding to oneself and to others. Attempting to produce a clear-cut and simple definition of creativity can be a diverting and sometimes frustrating task, but we’ll start thinking about it here and then come back to it later.

Let’s start by looking at how other people define ‘creativity’. Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is perhaps the best-known creativity researcher today. His *Creativity* study was based on interviews with people who were at the highest end of observed creativity – famous creative names, several of whom had won Nobel prizes for their inventions or creations. This seems to put him at the old-fashioned, or at least the elite, end of the scale, but there are perfectly good reasons for this. Csikszentmihalyi has pioneered a sociological approach to creativity, which is actually not at all old-fashioned or traditional: it rejects the classical notion of the creative ‘genius’ and instead observes how the thing we call creativity emerges from a particular supportive environment. Rather than being a lightning-bolt of unexpected inspiration, he argues, creative outputs appear from individuals who have worked hard over many years to master a particular ‘symbolic domain’ (physics, poetry, architecture, or whatever) and are encouraged by other supportive individuals, groups and organisations. Csikszentmihalyi is interested in the

sociological question of how these things come about – surges of creativity which make a difference to culture, science, or society. He writes:

Creativity, at least as I define it in this book, is a process by which a symbolic domain in the culture is changed. New songs, new ideas, new machines are what creativity is all about.²⁶

This is high-impact creativity, and importantly, it is creativity which is noticed and appreciated by other people:

According to this view, creativity results from the interaction of a system composed of three elements: a culture that contains symbolic rules, a person who brings novelty into the symbolic domain, and a field of experts who recognise and validate the innovation.²⁷

So the inventive individual is only one part of this triad. Creativity in Csikszentmihalyi's formulation needs a particular established context in which to happen, and also needs to be recognised as something significant by other key people working in that domain. As he puts it:

Just as the sound of a tree crashing in the forest is unheard if nobody is there to hear it, so creative ideas vanish unless there is a receptive audience to record and implement them.²⁸

This approach to creativity sets the bar very high, of course. First you have to produce something brilliantly original, that has never been seen before in the world. Then, as if that wasn't hard enough already, it has to be recognised as a brilliantly original thing by other people. Furthermore, they can't be just *any* people, but have to be the movers and shakers, the well-known thought leaders, in the field where you hope to make an impact. (This makes life especially difficult since the established people in any particular area are typically attached to their own high status, and are not necessarily likely to give a warm reception to promising newcomers).

That's one way of looking at creativity, and it is the right lens for Csikszentmihalyi's analysis of the social conditions which enable recognised, significant innovations to emerge. Other writers on creativity have also followed Csikszentmihalyi's definitions and approach, sometimes in a bid to illuminate 'lower level' creativity. But the lens which is helpful for asking 'How do major cultural or scientific innovations emerge?' is not necessarily the right lens for studying the much more everyday instances of creativity which concern us in this book.

After all, we do typically think of creativity as something which can happen quite routinely, whenever any of us does something in an unexpected but striking and inventive way. We don't *only* say that something is 'creative' when it has been recognised with a Nobel prize, nor do we limit the label to the kind of thing that each of us only does once or twice in a lifetime. Because we are inventive human beings, creativity is something we do rather a lot, and understood in this broad

sense it includes everyday ideas we have about how to do things, many of the things we write and produce, acts of management or self-presentation, and even, of course, witty or insightful speech.

When taken down to this everyday level, the edges of what we might call creativity become rather fuzzy, of course. If I managed to bake and decorate a birthday cake which looked like a dinosaur, for instance, I would feel really ‘creative’. And you might agree. But if you had been told that I was a professional birthday cake-maker who had been producing the same dinosaur cake for 20 years, you definitely wouldn’t. Between these two poles, my creativity rating might also be affected by, say, whether or not you thought it was ‘cheating’ to use shop-bought sweets to represent the eyes and scales, and whether or not you suspected I’d looked at pictures of other dinosaur cakes on the internet. It’s easy to get bogged down in this kind of thing. But as I said in *Creative Explorations*:

You could argue endlessly, if you wanted to be rather trivial, about whether one thing ‘is’ and another thing ‘is not’ creative. But that’s not really the point. The point is that creativity is widely dispersed and, more importantly, is one of the most central aspects of being human.²⁹

Most of the research literature *about* creativity, however, does not really take this view. A reasonable summary is provided by Charles Lumsden, who considered a range of definitions from leading figures, and found that ‘the “definitions” of creativity I have seen in the literature... carry the unique imprint of their progenitors while suggesting some mild degree of consensus: creativity as a kind of capacity to think up something new that people find significant’³⁰.

The trouble with this approach, though – as I’ll go on to say in chapter 3 – is the strong emphasis on the end product, and the judgement of others. Creativity might be better understood as a *process*, and a *feeling*. In this way of looking at it, creativity is about breaking new ground, but internally: the sense of going somewhere, doing something, that you’ve not done before. This might lead to fruits which others can appreciate, but those may be secondary to the process of creativity itself, which is best identified from within.

Hold onto these thoughts for now. In a section at the end of chapter 3 I’ll be wheeling out a gleaming new definition of creativity which hopefully overcomes these problems.

What this book is and what it is not

This book is a discussion about the value of everyday creativity, taking in handmade physical objects and real-life experiences as well as the recent explosion of online creativity. Indeed, it seeks to make connections from one sphere to the other, in the hope that we can learn about recent creativity in social media by looking at what people have said about the values, ethics and benefits of more

traditional craft and DIY activities, and perhaps also vice versa. This is generally done through the use of some relevant theories and philosophies – quite grounded and earthy ones, nothing very abstract – and knitted, I hope, into the reality and experience of particular creative activities.

This is *not*, though, a set of case studies about particular craftspeople, artisans, bloggers and YouTube-makers. That wasn't meant to be the point of this book – you can get such material elsewhere, and I didn't want the discussion to be based around a sequence of meetings and anecdotes. Nor is it one of those books which weaves together autobiography with more general insight – although if you want that kind of thing, I can recommend three good books, all published since 2010: *The Case for Working with Your Hands: or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good* by the philosopher and motorcycle mechanic Matthew Crawford (published in the US with the slightly shorter title, *Shop Class as Soulcraft: An Inquiry Into the Value of Work*); *Made by Hand: Searching for Meaning in a Throwaway World* by Mark Frauenfelder, the Editor-in-Chief of *Make* magazine; and *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters: The Education of a Craftsman* by woodworker Peter Korn³¹. Those three books, along with Richard Sennett's excellent *The Craftsman* – which I also recommend – primarily concern the values, applied intelligence, and feelings associated with making things *by hand*, as well as the need to understand how our material world works so that we can engage with it, fix it, or transform it³².

This book is about those things too, to some extent, and includes a few autobiographical bits, but it's more about the value of making stuff more generally. In particular, it includes an emphasis on making and sharing our own *media* culture – I mean, via low-fi YouTube videos, eccentric blogs, quirky music, and homemade websites, rather than by having to take over the traditional media of television stations and printing presses – which isn't quite 'by hand' in the literal pottery-making, woodcarving sense, but which I feel is still basically a handicraft which connects us with others through its characterful, personality-imprinted, individual nature, as well as because it's a form of communication.

And the *real* point of the book is —

The other reason why the book mostly doesn't pick over lots of examples of creativity, one by one, is because I wanted to address the broader question of 'Why is everyday creativity important?'. Because I feel that it's incredibly important – important for society – and therefore *political*. And, to be frank about my motives, people don't seem to get this. Presenting this kind of thing in front of academics who see themselves as 'critical' and 'political' scholars, I get the definite feeling that they think I'm doing, at best, a sweet kind of sideshow. Whilst they struggle with 'real' issues such as government regulation of broadcasting, or something to do with political parties, I am enthusing about everyday people making nice objects or

clever little videos, which may be pleasant but is an irrelevance in terms of political or social concerns. If it's any kind of issue at all, it's a 'cultural' one: and who cares really if people watch silly entertainment on television or if they make their own silly entertainment; if they grow their own flowers, make their own toys or gloves, or buy them from a supermarket; or if people write their own songs, or buy someone else's.

But I think it's absolutely *crucial*. Even if each of the things made seems, to a grumpy observer, rather trivial. You may note that my examples just above are not the absolute essentials of life – people can survive without silly entertainment, flowers, gloves, or songs, if they have to. But it is the fact that people have made a *choice* – to make something themselves rather than just consume what's given by the big suppliers – that is significant. Amplified slightly, it leads to a whole new way of looking at things, and potentially to a real political shift in how we deal with the world.

One example of how the idea of everyday creativity can be scaled up into something significant, political, and vitally important, is the Transition movement. The Transition movement stems from the idea that – although we are likely to face really huge challenges as climate change grows, and as the oil that we rely on so much runs out – human beings are *creative* and can work well together to do great things. And therefore, if we think imaginatively together, and make plans and ideas for a new enjoyable way of living which doesn't rely so much on the environmentally damaging things, or things we're running out of, then we might be OK. This is an approach based on optimism and creativity, and it could actually work. The movement is taking off, and you can read about it in the books, *The Transition Handbook* and *The Power of Just Doing Stuff* by Rob Hopkins, and *The Transition Timeline* by Shaun Chamberlin, or at the website, www.transitionnetwork.org³³.

The Transition movement is a great illustration of what I'm talking about, then, but so is the less obviously 'political' content of online video and craft sites, and everyday homemade events, untrained attempts at art, humble efforts to make a knitted owl with solar-powered eyes, and anything else where people are rejecting the givens and are making their world anew. This helps us to build *resilience* – one of the key Transition words – and the *creative capacity* to deal with significant challenges.

Outline of the book

The book begins by forgetting about the internet at first, and exploring some philosophical, political and practical explanations of the human drive to make things. In chapter 2 this is mostly centred around two Victorian makers and thinkers, John Ruskin and William Morris. In chapter 3, we look at more recent craft and DIY ideas, activities, and motivations. By chapter 4, we arrive at the

internet again, and consider ‘making is connecting’ in online environments. In chapter 5 we turn to the value of having social connections, and collaborative projects, in everyday life, and chapter 6 is about having tools for creative expression and making a difference, and features quite a bit of the philosopher Ivan Illich. Chapter 7 considers some of the critiques of social media systems, and finds reason to disagree with some, but concur with others. Chapter 8 is about the creative process, taking music as a starting-point, and chapter 9 also starts with music as a way to look at do-it-yourself processes and ways to get creative work out there. In chapter 10 we consider the principles that underpin effective ‘platforms for creativity’. Finally, chapter 11 pulls things together in a conclusion, where we set out seven key principles of ‘making is connecting’, and offer some positive ideas about developing and connecting creativity.

**For other material, videos, links and more, see:
www.makingisconnecting.org**

NOTES

¹ Jonathan Taplin, *Move Fast and Break Things* (London: Macmillan, 2017).

² GSMA, ‘The Mobile Economy 2017’, 27 February 2017, <https://www.gsma.com/newsroom/press-release/number-of-global-mobile-subscribers-to-surpass-five-billion-this-year/>

³ On 24 September 2014: <https://twitter.com/davidgauntlett/status/514729040364986368>

⁴ Detailed at length in the Wikipedia article ‘Gamergate controversy’, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gamergate_controversy

⁵ Wikipedia again has a summary: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghostbusters_\(2016_film\)#Controversy](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghostbusters_(2016_film)#Controversy)

⁶ Such statistics are compiled, for instance, by Internet Live Stats, which in July 2016 stated that there are 3.4 billion internet users in the world, where a user is ‘an individual who can access the Internet, via computer or mobile device, within the home where the individual lives’. See <http://www.internetlivestats.com/internet-users/>

⁷ This is from near the end of the *Doctor Who* episode, ‘Vincent and the Doctor’, spoken by Matt Smith as the Doctor, written by Richard Curtis, first broadcast on BBC One in the UK on 5 June 2010. I realise it sounds like something corny – like ‘life is like a box of chocolates’ – but life *isn’t* like a box of chocolates. It *is* like a pile of good things and a pile of bad things, which don’t actually cancel each other out.

⁸ David Gauntlett, *Creative Explorations: New approaches to identities and audiences* (London: Routledge, 2007).

⁹ Charles Leadbeater, *We Think: Mass Innovation not Mass Production* (London: Profile Books, 2008). Clay Shirky, *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organising Without Organisations* (London: Allen Lane, 2008). Clay Shirky, *Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age* (London: Allen Lane, 2010).

¹⁰ I expect Charles Leadbeater is doing some of this, implicitly if not explicitly, in some of his other work, such as his ideas on education reform – see www.charlesleadbeater.net.

¹¹ A powerful critique of this situation is: Guy Claxton, *What's the Point of School?* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008); and see Guy Claxton and Bill Lucas, *Educating Ruby: What Our Children Really Need to Learn* (Bancroft: Crown House, 2015).

¹² For the latest data, see www.nielsen.com. Summaries of television viewing appear in the 'Insights' section.

¹³ For the latest, see www.barb.co.uk. Summaries of television viewing appear under 'Viewing data'.

¹⁴ David Gauntlett, *Moving Experiences, 2nd edition: Media effects and beyond* (London: John Libbey, 2005).

¹⁵ Max Horkheimer & Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (London: Verso, 1979).

¹⁶ Sigmund Freud, 'A Case of Hysteria', *Three Essays on Sexuality and Other Works* (London: Vintage, 2001).

¹⁷ Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1* (London: Penguin, 2004).

¹⁸ Guy Claxton, *What's the Point of School?* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

¹⁹ YouTube statistics: <https://www.youtube.com/yt/about/press/>

²⁰ Instagram statistics: <https://instagram-press.com/our-story/>

²¹ Josh Constine, 'Facebook now has 2 billion monthly users – and responsibility', Techcrunch, 27 June 2017, <https://techcrunch.com/2017/06/27/facebook-2-billion-users/>

²² For instance, the resurgence of interest in craft activities is one of the key findings of the 'Living Britain' report, an independent study by The Future Laboratory, commissioned by Zurich, published 2007. Although commercially funded, the study draws on a wide range of data and expertise, and Zurich has no apparent vested interests in this kind of finding. <http://www.zurich.co.uk/home/Welcome/livingbritain/>. Similarly, Joanne Turney cites a number of statistics which suggest that significantly increased numbers of people are taking up knitting, in *The Culture of Knitting* (Oxford: Berg, 2009), p. 1.

²³ The various manifestations of these shifts were, in part, documented in the EU-funded project that I was a part of, 'Digital DIY', 2015-17: <http://www.didiy.eu>

²⁴ *Make* is a physical magazine, but also has a comprehensive website at <http://www.makezine.com>.

²⁵ See note 33.

²⁶ Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity: Flow and the Psychology of Discovery and Invention* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1997), p. 8.

²⁷ Csikszentmihalyi, *Creativity*, p. 6.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Charles J. Lumsden, 'Evolving Creative Minds: Stories and Mechanisms', in Robert J. Sternberg, ed., *Handbook of Creativity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 153.

³¹ Matthew Crawford, *The Case for Working With Your Hands: or Why Office Work is Bad for Us and Fixing Things Feels Good* (London: Viking, 2010). Mark Frauenfelder, *Made by Hand: Searching for Meaning in a Throwaway World* (New York: Portfolio, 2010). Peter Korn, *Why We Make Things and Why it Matters: The Education of a Craftsman* (Vintage: London, 2017).

³² Richard Sennett, *The Craftsman* (London: Allen Lane, 2008). And for a particular focus on doing things by hand, see Frank R. Wilson, *The Hand: How its Use Shapes the Brain, Language, and Human Culture* (New York: Vintage, 1999).

³³ Rob Hopkins, *The Transition Handbook: From Oil Dependency to Local Resilience* (Totnes: Green Books, 2008). Rob Hopkins, *The Power of Just Doing Stuff: How Local Action Can Change the World* (Totnes: Green Books, 2013). Shaun Chamberlin, *The Transition Timeline: for a local, resilient future* (Totnes: Green Books, 2010). For an introduction, see Rob Hopkins' TED talk: http://www.ted.com/talks/rob_hopkins_transition_to_a_world_without_oil.html