Imagining Transnational Cultural Policy

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Abstract
This article explores the potential offered by the internet for a transnational cultural policy in the context of the development of a national cultural policy in Australia in the period 2010 to 2013. An examination of submissions made to the National Cultural Policy Review by arts and cultural organisations reveals that only a small number of organisations thought transnationally. This, we suggest, resulted from a form of ‘methodological nationalism’: a framework for the review that encouraged an emphasis on the production of a national culture. In this context, it is significant that a number of organisations did imagine policy frameworks that exceeded national boundaries. Of particular interest is the way in which regional communities look beyond the nation’s cultural centres and engage internationally.

Biographies
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**Introduction**

The concept of transnational cultural policy has received little attention in Australia in spite of widespread acceptance that the internet has fundamentally altered the potentialities of global cultural consumption and production. The National Cultural Policy Review that produced *Creative Australia* (Australian Government, 2013), provided an opportunity to assess current attitudes in the arts and cultural sector to issues of internationalisation. A reference to ‘new technologies’ in the discussion paper ensured that many submissions addressed the role of the internet in cultural policy. Based on an analysis of the main themes that emerged from the National Cultural Policy Review, this article discusses the pervasiveness of a parochial approach to internet content and explores the possibility of greater transnational engagement.

A transnational cultural policy would view the unmediated opportunity that the internet offers as a potential driver of cultural activity and international engagement. In the article we identify the ways in which a number of submissions to the review embraced this potential. In spite of the constraints placed on the consultation process by the framing of the terms of reference, some organisations imagined cultural activities through the medium of the internet as an international mode of communication. The framework of the review, a national policy review, functioned as an instance of methodological nationalism, and this discursive framing of the policy consultation inevitably influenced the nature of the contributions. This makes those submissions that exceeded the national framing of the terms of reference all the more interesting as a study of potential transnationalism.

We argue that the a number of submissions that think outside the national imperative can be thought of as advocating a form of Robins’ cultural practices ‘from below’, which refers to the way migrants and, we suggest, non-migrants, ‘make a living and a new life space for themselves’ (2007: 155) outside the dominant national cultural narratives. We then examine a range of submissions that truly embrace a two-way international exchange through the internet, arguing that these examples move away from conceiving of a cultural policy as being an instrument for enhancing the distribution networks of existing artistic product and imagine the possibility of collaborative coproduction.

**Dominant Themes**

The National Cultural Policy Review was undertaken over a three-year period by the Australian Government, culminating in the release of the policy document *Creative Australia* (Australian Government, 2013). The review process represented a much-anticipated opportunity to revitalise government policy in the area of arts and culture. An extensive public consultation process called for responses to a discussion paper (Australian Government, 2011). This produced a wealth of information about the attitudes and aspirations of a wide range of arts organisations and individuals in the form of over 450 submissions (Australian Government, 2013: 123). The vast majority of these were made public on the National Cultural Policy Review website. While limited by the terms of reference of the initial discussion paper, the submissions nonetheless range widely in their ambition and scope. For the purposes of this paper, which seeks to examine technology and the possibility it might present to think transnationally in relation to cultural production, we examined those submissions that engaged with the potential of the internet. This involved an initial reading of 397 submissions to locate...
those that conceived of the internet as a technology for internationalisation of cultural production. A close reading was then undertaken of the data set of 70 submissions that were identified through this initial analysis.

In the context of the National Cultural Policy Review, the internet was most often seen as an instrument for internal domestic communication. Of the 397 submissions analysed, 202 referred to the internet and its domestic applications. However, only 70 made reference to the internet's relevance in an international context. Approaches to the potential of technology contained in most of the submissions focused on concerns regarding access and threats. The internet was seen as the means whereby groups ‘disadvantaged’ by virtue of physical attributes and/or distance could gain access to the national centres of cultural production and activity. It was also seen as enabling digitisation, thereby making national collections available to a wider, but largely passive, audience.

Within the nation, enhanced access was seen as overwhelmingly positive: representing new audiences for national cultures; and there was acknowledgement of the National Broadband Network’s potential to increase access on the part of minority communities either remotely located or with special needs. These included remote and rural communities, regions, indigenous communities, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, older people and people with disabilities. While submissions recognised the potential for using the internet to develop audiences, there was also concern about the persistence of the digital divide, which would leave the very same groups behind if they did not have adequate internet access.

It was not surprising, then, that the corollary of this enthusiasm for the potential for enhanced distribution of local material within Australia was the concern that a tide of global content would swamp Australian content. Many arts organisations regarded the internet as a means whereby content currently being produced could potentially gain wider domestic audiences. Most of the responses embracing this potential were from collecting institutions and focused on the development of more ‘Australian’ digital content, with much support for the digitisation of museum and gallery collections. Numerous submissions from collecting institutions said that the digitisation of collections was a current or planned area of activity, and one that needed increased support. Collecting institutions seem to have embraced the internet’s potential and acknowledged the possibility that the enhanced knowledge of the collections obtained online may in fact be resulting in increased visitor numbers.

This enthusiasm was not so evident in the performing arts, with a substantial number of submissions expressing concern, or indeed asserting that online delivery should not be seen as replacing the live experience. This anxiety is perhaps understandable, but it would appear to be restraining innovation in this sector if online delivery is seen as competing with the live experience rather than augmenting it. A crucial factor to the live performing arts is the need to assist in the creation of new modes to capture live performance which is conducive to remote online consumption. Some submissions recognised the need for specific types of creativity more suited to the online environment. For example, one dance company made the particularly pertinent observation that a different type of choreography emerges in response to digital programming.

**Methodological Nationalism**

These responses expressing concern about online delivery are consistent with the framing of the review's discussion paper, the introduction of which asserted the importance of renewing Australia’s cultural policy goals within an explicit project of nation (re)building:

> Without a renewed National Cultural Policy to guide and inspire us, we are missing important opportunities when it comes to telling our stories, educating and skilling our workforce and enabling our culture to connect with the rest of the world (Australian Government, 2013: 5).
This most recent review of national cultural policy represents the latest in a series of discussions and debates about the Australian identity. Stuart Ward describes Australia’s ‘post-imperialist predicament [as a] scramble for a national culture’ (Ward, 2005). In 1966, the Sydney Morning Herald called for a ‘national cultural policy’, describing it as ‘our most urgent cultural need’ (Curran & Ward, 2010: 112). The contribution of culture to the establishment of a nation was made explicit by Ian Allan, a Liberal member of parliament, at the time of the creation of the Australian Council for the Arts in the late 1960s: ‘We have reached the stage in our career as a nation when we can go ahead and develop a degree of sophistication in our affairs and become more truly a nation than we have ever been in the past’ (Curran & Ward, 2010: 112). At the same time, the Australian film community asserted that ‘in a modern society, a country which does not show it has a culture and mind of its own and does not seek to express its image through film and television is considered to be nationally illiterate’ (Ward, 2005: 55).

These observations were made some fifty years ago, yet the notion of nation building remains part of the cultural policy discourse. Migration appears in this narrative as a source of diversity within the nation. Whereas previously migration was conceived of as a one-way journey, it is increasingly associated with being in a state of continual flux, and we see both physical and virtual links with ‘home’ countries and with wider diaspora. Past policies have recognised, indeed celebrated, Australia’s multicultural characteristics, yet cultural policies have not embraced the potential multilateralism of cultural relationships between migrants and their countries of origin, of residency and of employment. Globalisation of education has created a diaspora of international students who may seek to maintain cultural connections with the country in which they have studied and world citizens who, without physically relocating, are eager consumers of global cultural content. It seems timely, then, to question the role that a ‘national’ cultural policy process could play in the context of international cultural production and consumption.

In the academic literature, there has been a focus on how Europe has dealt with the limitations of national cultural policies, as dynamic flows of population co-exist with the forging of a European identity through both formal and symbolic processes. As Karsten Xuereb (2009: 31) notes in the context of this transcultural diversity in contemporary Europe, when one talks of common cultures ‘one needs to ask “common to whom”?’. More particularly, the discourse of multiculturalism within nations or regions is being replaced by terms such as ‘diversity’. Diversity tends to operate across boundaries, with migrant cultures increasingly transnational rather than being cultures contained within a dominant national characteristic. As Robins (2007: 149) observes, ‘minority issues – which increasingly come to be cast as diversity issues – can no longer be easily contained within the national frame of reference’. The focus of much of this research has been on the experiences of migrants. However, the sense of shared cultural reference points that extend beyond national boundaries is equally applicable to subcultures of many different forms. With the opportunities for global communication created by the internet, we see transnational communities of people who share belief systems, sexualities, experiences of being ‘first nation people’, the condition of postcoloniality and common languages. It is these aspects of transnational cultural experience that one might hope to see evidenced in cultural policies, particularly of nations that openly acknowledge the diversity of their ‘own’ culture.

However, the task of framing a national cultural policy arguably reinforced static notions of Australian culture through the familiar reference to the telling of ‘Australian stories’ to ourselves and to the rest of the world, highlighting diversity within and at the same time acknowledging the importance of an indigenous culture which requires ‘protection’. We suggest that this represents a form of methodological nationalism: a term associated with Herminio Martins’ (1974) critique of the social sciences whereby the national community had in practice become ‘the terminal unit and boundary condition for the demarcation of problems and phenomena for social science’. The phenomenon is now more widely observed as being when ‘the argument or the research presupposes that
the unit of analysis is the national society or the national state or the combination of both’ (Beck & Szneider, 2006: 3).

We see this national focus in the four goals for the policy around which the consultation was organised and which tended to dictate the format of submissions. These goals were:

**Goal 1:** To ensure that what the Government supports — and how this support is provided — reflects the diversity of a 21st century Australia, and protects and supports Indigenous culture.

**Goal 2:** To encourage the use of emerging technologies and new ideas that support the development of new artworks and the creative industries, and that enable more people to access and participate in arts and culture.

**Goal 3:** To support excellence and world class endeavour, and strengthen the role that the arts play in telling Australian stories both here and overseas.

**Goal 4:** To increase and strengthen the capacity of the arts to contribute to our society and economy.

The first goal largely invited responses that argued for the maintenance of and increased support for minority cultures – diversity resonating for many as the new multiculturalism, but with the additional emphasis on indigenous culture. This familiar formulation of difference within functioned as a form of methodological nationalism which asserted the primacy of the nation as the unit of cultural analysis. This was reinforced by the reference in goal three to ‘telling Australian stories’. While this may seem an obvious point to make when a government is framing a ‘national’ cultural policy, the impact of this explicit framing is that the opportunity to think transnationally is mediated and, we suggest, constrained by the imperative to think nationally. It is for this reason that those submissions that exceeded this implicit boundary on our global imaginary are particularly profound.

In the following section we focus on the submissions that addressed both goals 2 and 3. These open up the space in which new technology can be utilised as part of the development and distribution of cultural content. In some of the submissions that explicitly addressed new technologies and their international collaborative potential, we see the smallest imaginings of a transnational policy.

**Beyond the Nation: Thinking Transnationally**

While 70 submissions approached the internet as a way of looking beyond the national boundary, they did not all transcend nationalism; for some, their ambition extended only to gaining international recognition of Australian culture. However, a number of submissions did express transnational ambitions. Table 1 summarises the six broad themes that emerged in these submissions.

**Table 1: International Aspirations for Internet**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>National content</th>
<th>47</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Take Australian art/culture to the world</td>
<td>33</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need to develop Australian content for internet</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Threat to audiences for Australian content</td>
<td>6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Transnational</td>
<td>23</td>
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<tr>
<td>Enables overseas artistic collaborations</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enables access to international content</td>
<td>8</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requires Australia to develop global content</td>
<td>1</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

By far the most common response to the potential of the internet was that it would facilitate the ‘telling of Australian stories to the world’. This coalesced in a number of shared expressions of support for a fund that would support the production of Australian
content for the digital environment so as to address an anxiety that the internet represented a threat to audiences for Australian culture: Australian culture itself might be 'swamped' by international culture. The pervasiveness of this cultural anxiety can be traced through many policy discourses in Australia, not the least the fraught history of immigration policy and the contemporary politics of asylum seekers. More productive possibilities are to be found among the submissions that imagined the possibilities of transnational cultural activity enabled by the internet.

An analysis of the organisations and individuals who made submissions imagining the possibility of transnational cultural engagement was illuminating. They fell into a number of clusters around the themes of location, art form and those that had a pre-existing international outlook, such as multicultural organisations (see Table 2). However, not all multicultural groups imagined transnationally, with some focusing on maintaining difference within the nation.

### Table 2: Looking Outward

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outside Melbourne Sydney axis</th>
<th>Art Form Specific/Gaming</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Western Australian Museum</td>
<td>Freeplay Independent Games Festival</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queensland Design Council</td>
<td>Game Developers’ Association of Australia</td>
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<tr>
<td>Queensland Art Gallery</td>
<td>Jazz Queensland Incorporated</td>
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<tr>
<td>Art Industry Council of South Australia</td>
<td>Music in Communities Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>Adelaide Festival Centre</td>
<td>Music Victoria</td>
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<tr>
<td>Arts Mid North Coast</td>
<td>Internationally Engaged</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Baw Baw Shire Council</td>
<td>Multicultural Arts Victoria</td>
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<tr>
<td>City of Greater Bendigo</td>
<td>The South Project</td>
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<td>Regional Arts Victoria</td>
<td>Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne &amp; Victoria</td>
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<td>Regional Arts Australia</td>
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<td>60sox</td>
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<td>Victorian Association of Performing Arts Centres</td>
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<tr>
<td>Southern Cross University</td>
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<td>Country Arts Western Australia</td>
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It was notable that those organisations whose outlook extended beyond national boundaries tended to be located outside the most populated cultural centres of Australia. For largely historical reasons, Sydney and Melbourne are home to a number of national arts companies whose focus is directed at ensuring national coverage. However, a number of organisations located in less-populated states and regions tended to be more international in their aspirations for the internet. This coincided with a sense of the internet as enabling a two-way engagement – not merely a more powerful mechanism for dispersing information but enabling interactions between people on an international scale.

At the local-council level, Baw Baw Shire Council and the City of Greater Bendigo expressed the view that technology opens up the possibility of creative dialogues and exposure to difference, most notably a difference extending beyond the diversity within national boundaries:

> Emerging technologies offer the residents of Baw Baw Shire a much greater range of opportunities to be creative, to share their ideas and vision of the world and they will provide them with access to many more viewpoints from others.
  
  (Baw Baw Shire Council)

> Increased access to new and emerging technologies increases opportunities for the exchange of ideas and dialogue at a local, regional, national and international level, thereby increasing social and cultural connectedness across boundaries making collaboration and the sharing of ideas more possible (City of Greater Bendigo).
Others saw the potential for active collaboration with international peers:

Use new platforms to inform Australian artists and audiences about our international peers and connect us to them. A cultural policy should encourage Australians to interact with art and culture from all over the world (Arts Industry Council of South Australia).

For younger people in particular, it is often connections made at a global level that drive artistic output and activity on a local level (Arts Mid North Coast).

[The internet] provides for Arts and Creative Industries practitioners an ability to engage with peers around the planet to obtain even further inspiration, to hone their craft, to collaborate with individuals more effectively locally, nationally and internationally and to open up vast new markets for the commercialisation of their works (60sox).

The Southern Cross University made explicit what was otherwise implicit in other submissions, namely that the regions do not see themselves as passive recipients of content from the (Australian) metropolitan centres but as active producers and collaborators with arts practitioners in regional locations around the world:

The development of NBN is an ideal opportunity for decentring arts practice by screening work transregionally and internationally and not from metropolitan centres to the regions (Southern Cross University).

The region as a site of transnationalism is a productive illustration of the role that the internet has had in shifting the vectors of cultural transmission. Identifications beyond the metropolitan centres may at first be a necessity of remote location, but once open to different modes of engagement with national cultural hubs it is not such a shift in thinking to engage with international cultural production. However, unlike the relationships created by Australian arts companies through ‘outreach’ and audience development programs with regional populations, the international interaction is borne out of real curiosity and is likely to be reciprocal.

Diasporic and Multicultural

As noted in the introduction, conceptions of migration have shifted from one-way, once-and-for-all migration to a state of multiple identifications with a ‘home’ country, a new country and a wider diaspora. Arguably the Australian Greek community is an exemplar of this tendency. It has a strong cultural presence in Australia, ongoing engagement with the ‘home’ country and a sense of an international community. The submission by the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne & Victoria articulated an aversion to methodological nationalism, asserting that a ‘national culture can no longer be defined in terms of isolation or its absolute distinctiveness from the rest of the world’. It argues for a cosmopolitan consciousness and acknowledges the broadband network as a key component of ‘both national understanding and global orientation’. Similar views were expressed in submissions by Multicultural Arts Victoria and The South Project, with both organisations highlighting the role that the internet can play as an enabler of connection and creativity among diasporic communities and those in a wider regional context who may share similar experiences.

Specific Cultural Forms: Music and Gaming

Music is an industry that has been at the forefront of digital distribution and, now, creation and collaboration. Perhaps it is no surprise that proponents of music would see the transnational and creative potential of the internet. It is also a medium that relies less on language and is therefore more able to transcend linguistic boundaries. This is not to ignore the powerful presence of the multinational music conglomerates, which seek to maintain a hegemonic position in the face of widespread file sharing. While illegal downloading has captured a significant amount of attention and push back by the industry, the internet has enabled much greater access to the industry and encouraged more independent modes of global distribution. Music Victoria’s submission highlighted the potential for niche musical genres to operate outside the control of major record
companies. It argued that traditional notions of success, such as market dominance and major recording company contracts, are less significant in a globalised music industry which enables large audience bases to be drawn from the widest possible range of locations. Jazz Queensland identified the creative opportunities of the internet, arguing that ‘new aesthetic paradigms’ have emerged from new technology and that this extends beyond the consumption of creative product by wider audiences and enables interactive music performance, citing examples of Eric Whitacre’s Virtual Choir and e-jamming. Other submissions highlighted the collapse of the production and consumption divide, emphasising the very different way in which young people are active participants in cultural production and drive innovation through more interactive engagement with cultural consumption.

Nowhere is this more profound than among the online gaming community, which was born in the digital environment and was an internationally distributed product before the emergence of centres of local production expertise. The Freeplay Independent Games Festival identified the essential role that the National Broadband Network will play in enabling geographically disparate teams of creators to work together ‘to collaborate in real-time and for regional areas to connect with traditionally metropolitan centres of development’. The Game Developers Association of Australia is distinctive in its approach to international content, refusing to see it as a threat to a national industry. Rather, it identifies the enhanced access to international content that will be enabled by the National Broadband Network as competition which ‘will encourage, inspire, and perhaps force, Australian creatives to improve their content offering’.

Cultural Practices From Below

The summary of transnational perspectives on cultural activity outlined above resonates with Kevin Robins’ (2007) concept of strategic non-assimilation. Robins proposes that minorities within national cultural discourses tend to maintain their ‘cultural practices from below’ in response to those practices that are embedded in the mainstream policy paradigms (Robins, 2007: 155). Our analysis shows that this extends beyond migrant identities to cultural interests, art forms and distinct communities. In particular, what is evident is that once we acknowledge diversity within, and commonalities beyond, national boundaries we start to see shared lived experiences among groupings other than nationality. Those living beyond the metropolis appear to be most likely to look beyond the national boundary in ways that we might more usually associate with minority (ethnic) cultures. While the metropolitan centres of Australia see the internet as enabling Australian cultural product to be delivered to regional and remote areas of the country, those living in those areas do not see themselves as the passive receivers of someone else’s culture, but as active creators of culture in situ and in collaboration with others, unbounded by geopolitical boundaries.

Common to the regional organisations, art-form specific and multicultural submissions was the recognition that the internet is a two-way technology. This is in contrast to the aspirations for the technology as summarised in the submissions as a whole, namely digitisation of collections, increased access to content and concerns regarding ensuring equality of access and the internet as a threat to local content. When the internet is conceptualised as more than a sophisticated distribution mechanism, its potential as a facilitator of artistic collaboration and interaction is much more pronounced. This distinction echoes the connection that Terry Flew (2005) makes between cultural production and open-source software. On the one hand he identifies proprietorial models of cultural production, which see culture as national property, while on the other hand he identifies culture as emerging through multi-authored interactive and collaborative practices – practices that invariably transcend national boundaries (Flew, 2005: 253). This is a shift from cultural product to cultural processes and practices, a shift from conceiving of the internet as a means of pushing cultural product onto the global ‘digital stage’ and perceiving the internet more as an enabler of two-way or networked modes of cultural exchange and creativity.

Once more we can see that the submissions that embraced the two-way potential of the internet, without exception, reflected a regional agenda. The Arts Industry Council of
South Australia acknowledged the benefits for people living outside a major city, enabling them to access artworks, and also giving that regional resident the ability to put their creative content out there to the world. Baw Baw Shire Council emphatically asserted the two-way capacities:

It is crucial that the emerging technologies not be used to simply increase the amount of passive reception of ideas, but they should open up opportunities for active engagement, art making, and participation (Baw Baw Shire Council).

Similar views were expressed by Country Arts Western Australia, when they argued that policy makers:

Need to ensure regional communities do not simply become consumers of product from metropolitan based artists – this should not be a one-way street – regional communities and artists need to be supported to deliver their product as distributors too (Country Arts Western Australia).

Music in Communities Network urged the government not to regard the National Broadband Network as simply an ‘opportunity to deliver cultural content more effectively, but rather the provision of a platform that empowers and encourages technical and artistic innovation to create or co-create cultural content’. Music Victoria also reinforced the importance of two-way cultural exchange between countries, regions and indigenous platforms.

While framed as a cultural policy review, the vast majority of submissions related to the arts, perhaps bearing out Jennifer Craik’s observation that ‘the persistence of an artistic hierarchy underpinning the policy sector has meant that at times of crisis and change “Culture” has reverted to “Art” at each phase’ (Craik, 2007: 29). While the consultation process was identified as a review of cultural policy the vast majority of submissions referred specifically to the production and distribution of art and artistic productions. This was no doubt influenced by the framing of the goals, which tended to refer to ‘arts’ and the fact that organisations form around the production of specific art forms. However, close attention needs to be paid to the implications of this reductive response to talk of ‘culture’ and the circumstances which reinforce this approach. No doubt Craik’s explanation will account for much of this: art is far more tangible than culture and if culture is what people do, then perhaps there is no need for government financial support. But in reality, the focus on art conveniently sidesteps any consideration of more inclusive debates about culture and ignores the fact that physical infrastructure and regulatory frameworks can both enhance and constrain cultural collaboration and innovation. Culture as a two-way activity itself, doing is being, may provide a more fruitful framework for transnational engagements and truly dynamic interactions. It is notable that the term ‘culture’ is used specifically in relation to indigenous practices: the implications of this distinction require further consideration.

Conclusion

Viewing the submissions to the National Cultural Policy Review through the lens of technology and its influence on transnational aspirations has provided a picture strikingly similar to the conditions that Robins (2007) has described in terms of the challenges facing the development of cultural policy in Europe. The analysis has its limitations, drawing on submissions made to a review the terms of which were constrained by the explicit framing of policy goals. The fact that a number of submissions exceeded the brief makes them all the more significant. In addition to the now contingent migrant community that features in the literature on transnationalism and cosmopolitanism, we have identified other communities of interest that transcend static and bounded notions of national cultures. Most notably, we suggest that Robins’ observations are equally applicable to the practices of regional cultural communities. There is also evidence of communities of interest around specific cultural practices. Both these groupings are encompassed by Robins’ observation of ‘forms of diversity and complexity [that] are transnational and transcultural in their nature – functioning, that is to say, across national frontiers and operating across different cultural spaces’ (Robins, 2007: 149).
What then might be the implications for future approaches to cultural policy once we acknowledge that cultural aspirations transcend nation? Robins makes two recommendations, both relevant to any future review of cultural policy that has aspirations beyond the framing of national cultures. Firstly, he argues that in formulating cultural policy its makers must shift beyond the language of minority and majority culture, and in particular away from the notion of national minorities. Secondly, Robins argues that the concept of national minorities or minority culture needs to be approached from a transnational perspective. Such an approach would require that consultations be framed in ways that encourage respondents to think transnationally by avoiding the use of terminology such as the National Cultural Policy Review’s goal of ‘telling Australian stories both here and overseas’, but instead might describe cultural experiences and engagements, international travel and internet communication.

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