

STATE OF THE ART

How the Internet Is Saving Culture, Not Killing It

By Farhad Manjoo

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One secret to longevity as a pundit is to issue predictions that can't be easily checked. So here's one for the time capsule: Two hundred years from now, give or take, the robot-people of Earth will look back on the early years of the 21st century as the beginning of a remarkable renaissance in art and culture.

That may sound unlikely to many of us in the present. In the past few decades, we've seen how technology has threatened the old order in cultural businesses, including the decimation of the music industry, the death of the cable subscription, the annihilation of newspapers and the laying to waste of independent bookstores.

But things are turning around; for people of the future, our time may be remembered as a period not of death, but of rejuvenation and rebirth.

Part of the story is in the art itself. In just about every cultural medium, whether movies or music or books or the visual arts, digital technology is letting in new voices, creating new formats for exploration, and allowing fans and other creators to participate in a glorious remixing of the work. This isn't new; from blogs to podcasts to YouTube, the last 20 years have been marked by a succession of formats that have led to ever-lower barriers for new and off-the-wall creators.

Yet for much of that time, the business side of culture looked under assault. The internet taught a whole generation that content was not something you really had to pay for. So for years, digital content companies — especially those in the online news business — looked doomed to pursue a scale-only, ad-based business model. They tried to reach tens of millions of readers, viewers or listeners in the hopes of getting pennies in ads per user. Not only was that unsustainable, it was also ruining culture: It left no room for small acts and subtle niches, and it turned everything into overheated clickbait. Things looked gloomy.

But now something surprising has happened.

In the last few years, and with greater intensity in the last 12 months, people started paying for online content. They are doing so at an accelerating pace, and on a dependable, recurring schedule, often through subscriptions. And they're paying for everything.

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You've already heard about the rise of subscription-based media platforms — things like Amazon Prime, Netflix, Hulu, HBO, Spotify and Apple Music. But people are also paying for smaller-audience and less-mainstream-friendly content. They are subscribing to podcasters, comedians, zany YouTube stars, novelists and comic book artists. They are even paying for news.

It's difficult to overstate how big a deal this is. More than 20 years after it first caught mainstream attention and began to destroy everything about how we finance culture, the digital economy is finally beginning to coalesce around a sustainable way of supporting content. If subscriptions keep taking off, it won't just mean that some of your favorite creators will survive the internet. It could also make for a profound shift in the way we find and support new cultural talent. It could lead to a wider variety of artists and art, and forge closer connections between the people who make art and those who enjoy it.

"The macro trends are so encouraging and so exciting," said Jack Conte, the founder of Patreon, one of the companies leading the subscription revolution. Patreon allows you to subscribe to artists — but instead of funding specific, one-time projects, as on Kickstarter, you fund people on a recurring basis.

"What we want to do is change the entire financing mechanism that drives the production of content online," Mr. Conte said. "We want to change how things are paid for and how the web runs. For us, it's a very, very big problem."

Mr. Conte founded Patreon in 2013 and has since funded \$100 million in art, with creators on the platform doubling their income every year. Top creators can make tens of thousands of dollars a month. In 2016, more than 35 artists reaped more than \$150,000 each on the platform.

"I do think something has changed culturally," Mr. Conte said. "This new generation is more concerned with social impact. There's a desire to vote with your dollars and your time and attention."

Some of that is happening in the news business, too. The New York Times and many other newspapers reported a surge in subscriptions after Donald J. Trump won the presidency last year.

The trend hasn't abated: The Times reported last week that in the last few months, a program to collect "sponsorships" for students amassed enough money to grant more than 1.3 million students access to NYTimes.com. The money came from more than 15,500 people, including one anonymous donor who gave \$1 million. In its earnings report last month, The Times also said that it now has more than three million print and digital subscribers.

Other subscriptions are also rising across the board. Apple users spent \$2.7 billion on subscriptions in the App Store in 2016, an increase of 74 percent over 2015. Last week, the music service Spotify announced that its subscriber base increased by two-thirds in the last year, to 50 million from 30 million. Apple Music has signed on 20 million subscribers in about a year and a half. In the final quarter of 2016, Netflix added seven million new subscribers — a number that exceeded its expectations and broke a company record. It now has nearly 94 million subscribers.

Huge content platforms have been criticized for the way they treat artists. Even if lots of people are paying for services like Spotify, critics say that it can be difficult for musicians, especially smaller and less-well-known ones, to make a sustainable living from the platform.

Yet many artists are finding ways around these difficulties. Thanks to Facebook, Instagram and Twitter, artists can now establish close relationships with their fans. They can sell merchandise and offer special fan-only promotions and content. And after finding an audience, they can use sites like Patreon to get a dependable paycheck from their most loyal followers.

This sort of alternative arrangement isn't easy to pursue; it can take time, effort and skills in unusual dark arts (such as how social-media marketing works). But there are signs it is catching on: At the Grammys last year, the award for best new artist went to Chance the Rapper, who has famously, proudly rejected every offer to sign with a record label and even to sell any of his music.

If there are difficulties in navigating the modern cultural business, there are upsides, too.

“I can have a normal life now,” said Peter Hollens, an a cappella singer who creates cover videos on YouTube. Mr. Hollens, who lives in Eugene, Ore., now makes about \$20,000 a month from his Patreon page. The money has allowed him to hire production help and to increase his productivity, but it has also brought him something else: a feeling of security in being an artist.

“I don’t have to go out on the road and play in bars,” he said. “I can be a father and I can be a husband. This normalizes my career. It normalizes the career of being an artist, which has never been normalized.”

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The internet, however, provides a very quick and effective distraction. We can be looking at something enjoyable within seconds, which is a problem, given that much work in the modern world is done on the same device we use to access the internet. It is such a concern that apps and companies have sprung up specifically to address this. Does music really help you concentrate? Read more. But it would be unfair to say that the internet is responsible for distracting us from work. The brain's attention system and preference for novel experiences existed long before the internet did, the internet i... Similarly, many predicted that the internet would spur an analogous coup. Unfortunately, one has yet to emerge, and there are many reasons to believe that the web is actually hurting the arts. The Digital Revolution Has Created Numerous Challenges for the Creative Economy; There's no denying that the proliferation of the internet has spawned numerous advantages for society - it's led to an unprecedented sharing of knowledge, connected billions of people and revolutionized dozens of industries. It's also been a boon to the media consumer, allowing users to watch what they want, when they want a The internet is made up of essentially interconnecting routers and cables. Your home router goes to the ISP (Internet Service Provider i.e. Comcast, AT&T, TalkTalk etc), and they forward your data, or packets, on to the next ISP and so on and so forth. Sometimes it crosses countries, until it reaches its target and the ISP forwards it to the relevant person reversing the process. 99% of communication connected across the world is done via cabling called "submarine communications cables" run under the sea. These can be hundreds of thousands of miles long and can be as deep as Everest is tall