

Seven creative economy trends from Saco Conference

The South African Cultural Observatory (Saco) Conference on 'Creative Economy and Development', held in Johannesburg 24-25 May 2017, has revealed seven emerging creative economy trends.



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These have been distilled from the 50 presentations by leading researchers, academics, practitioners, artists, officials and consultants who attended the conference.

1. Technology and the fourth industrial revolution will change everything

We are already living in the future – and technology has made it so. Manufacturing and industry is radically changing as automation becomes standard practice; leading to loss of jobs and work-related meaning. A recent report by consultancy, PricewaterhouseCoopers estimates that 38% of US jobs have a 'high risk' of being wiped out by automation by 2030. Stephen Hawking has also warned that artificial intelligence and increasing automation is going to decimate middle class jobs, worsening inequality and risking significant political upheaval.

Rosemary Mangope CEO of the National Arts Council, said, "In this scenario, we need to keep ourselves occupied. The creative industries can do this. They offer not only an 'occupation' – as in something to do; but a 'vocation' as in a passion pursuit and an opportunity for us to express what fundamentally makes us human – our creativity, ingenuity and expression."

Conference delegates also noted that the creative and cultural industries (CCIs) need to keep up with and leverage off the available technology to not only contribute to, but also co-create the future – using the design thinking, problem solving and experimentation so emblematic of the industry.

2. Prioritise and educate the youth for the future – it's all about skills

Echoing the sentiments of Mangope was Thobile Chittenden from arts organisation Room 13, who argued that Africa – and the rest of the world – would not suffer only on the jobs front under automation, but that it

was the lack of skills that was really hampering development.

“We need to prioritise youth education and training, especially on the African continent where over 60% of the people are under the age of 30. We need freethinking individuals who meet the skills set envisaged for 2020 – the three ‘C’s of complex, critical and creative thinking – to become the whole brained thinkers that can occupy and contribute to the future,” she said. Conference goers noted that the youth were an under-researched, but priority cohort and whose technological savvy and can-do-ism supported creative economic growth.

3. Big data can help the creative and cultural industries.

Prof Erez Aiden, from the Rice University Culturomics Observatory, showcased its epic 15m book digitisation project with Google, showing that it is possible to count culture. “It is terrific to have big data science to help predict the future. Our analysis has shown that you can track items such as who creates fame, mass short and long-term memory, the prevalence of certain words, the incidence of censorship, and how fast technology is moving and how culture is adapting – it’s incredible.”

A number of conference speakers highlighted the ‘data question’ saying that anxiety about being counted needs to be discarded and there is a need to bring coherence to the ‘uneven, inconsistent and incomplete data regarding the CCIs.

“Measuring and counting culture helps the industry realise the value of its contribution to important indicators such as jobs, employment, gross domestic product, and transformation,” said Prof Jen Snowball, Saco chief research strategist.

Others, such as Shukri Toefy, from creative content and production agency Fort, spoke about the decolonisation of the African creative economy showcasing a piece of work with MTV Base Africa, which spanned across the African continent, showcasing the skills, ability and amazing quality of local African content to the world.

4. We can – and should – count culture

The consensus is that counting culture is part of embracing the holistic CCIs, and arts, culture and heritage sectors. “The creative economy and the industries and sectors that feed into it need to be analysed or we will lose benchmarks and data that help us make strategic decisions about funding, supporting and developing the arts,” said Prof Richard Haines, Saco CEO.

5. A historical view of global, African and local policy will help us develop future orientated policy

The role, place and purpose of policy was hotly debated and contended at the conference – including its ability to keep up with technological change. Dr Lebogang Nawa asked, “Can you actually plan culture?” He noted the need to take an historical view of the policy process – from global to local – but also for South Africa to sync with other cultural policies in Africa.

“Cultural capital is the most internalised of all capitals and the distance between policies globally and in Africa is still wide. There are also many dimensions to consider - the political economy and the legal influence of policy. Culture is always bounded by time and place – and so cultural policy must always move with it, but with an historical view.”

6. Know your neighbour and learn from them

The conference drew experts from Argentina, Brazil, Jamaica, Poland, Spain, the US, Zimbabwe, Uganda Botswana, Cote d'Ivoire, among others. The insights into how others are making their creative economies survive, thrive and grow are critical to developing South Africa's creative economy.

In the words of Andres Gribnicow, Undersecretary of Creative Economy, Ministry of Culture in Argentina, “strongly believe in the creative ecosystem's ability to take advantage of the creative economy and break the disconnect between the two concepts/ experiences.”

7. Culture and creativity – the new oil?

“In the context of ‘crisis times’, the energy transition, and the tension between militarists and intellectuals at the state and the market, the lure of ideas is stronger than ever,” said Prof Geoff Wood from the University of Essex saying the CCIs are the ‘new oil’ for economies. “The world is uncertain and the economy will get worse before it gets better. We need, more than ever, to focus on developing our cultural resources to achieve growth. We need to promote the idea that the CCIs are not only necessary, but economically so.”

Saco is a leading national think tank focused on monitoring, mapping, measuring and valuing South Africa's cultural and creative economy. It is a project of the Department of Arts & Culture (DAC), launched in 2014 and hosted by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU) in partnership with Rhodes and Fort Hare Universities. For more information, click [here](#).

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