

Professional Amateur Artists and Cultural Management

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Abstract

When dilettantism rose in the 18th century, it was an expression of investigative curiosity and creative passion beyond the existing scientific canon. The innovative drive of dilettantes was soon afterwards belittled by the establishment and disappeared into the equation dilettante = charlatan, used until today.

The pioneering spirit of dilettantism, however, re-materialized in the professional amateur (pro-am), a societal character that turns ideas and hobbies into activities of quasi-professional standard. Especially in the arts, pro-ams are numerous and carry a significant potential for social participation and innovation. This essay reflects on how cultural managers could take a role in recognizing, promoting and fostering the pro-am potential in the arts and in society.

Keywords

Diversity, International, civil society, artists, management

1. Background

The boundary between professionals and amateurs simultaneously drives and divides the world of knowledge and artistic expression in modern society, while hybrid forms of expert and dilettante knowledge both accompany and challenge this boundary.

The Society of Dilettanti in 18th century England, for example, a loose association of noblemen, celebrated a modern and non-professional approach to various aspects of the arts and sciences. They expressed themselves and performed in fields they were interested in, rather than just in those of their original professional expertise. Dilettantism was at that time a term for the joyful, generalist interest and the opportunity to learn and master disciplines without the traditional expert's path of education and experience. It captured an anti-establishment mentality and reflected the spirit in which dilettantes like Johannes Kepler had interwoven astrology and physics, Mark Twain had self-published his later best-sellers and Richard Wagner had invented the hype of music festivals (STRAUSS 1996: 27). It was difficult to separate dilettantes into

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genres or categories because they lacked fixed standards and created in a style that a German scholar's article on Wagner calls "naiv-dilettantisch" (LANDKAMMER 2013: 53). Their lack of standardization and this inclination to naiveté in an otherwise largely defined and measured age made the dilettantes free of constraint. They were able to point at blind spots in the social development by finding their own solutions, going beyond disciplines and qualifications and sowing the seeds of innovation (ENGELHARDT 2010: 72).

It was soon after this that professionals and "gatekeepers", especially those of the cultural establishment such as Goethe and Schiller, demonized dilettante endeavours as ridiculous and unworthy of any attention. Established professionals claimed back their status as experts and their right to watch over the quality of expression, and dilettantism became the synonym for charlatanism that it still is today (ALTHAUS/BERKING/EVERS: 32).

The passion for innovation that survived in the original concept of 'dilettare' (delight), as well as the added frustration of being rejected by the establishment, also characterize contemporary forms of dilettantism like the professional amateur (pro-am). The pro-am concept, originally used in sports to label competition between amateurs and professionals, was introduced into a new socio-economic context by the United Kingdom think tank *DEMOS* in the last decade. In a paper on social innovation¹, *DEMOS* describes the contemporary pro-am as an interdisciplinary hybrid that "challenges and renegotiates current criteria regarding social change" (LEADBEATER/MILLER 2004: 56). Pro-ams are amateurs who work to professional standards. They can be found in large numbers in the arts, since this is a sector that moves on the edge of traditional professionalism by taking in alternative (non-monetary) forms of value-added production and questioning conventional socio-economic roles and objectives (VOSSE/HASELBACH 2012: 145).

1 The concept of social innovation used in this article is that of a sum of creative ideas and drivers that aim to change, update and improve interaction in society. Those changes can refer to schemes of social participation, production, dissemination and learning as they appear in working, private and cultural life, without a necessary distinction between those life areas. The article thus follows the social innovation concepts of Pierre-Michel Menger or Frithjof Bergmann.

2. The contribution of cultural management

This article argues that the potential for change and development that today's dilettantes can bring forward in culture and the arts (and thus in society as a whole) is worthy of being addressed and furthered by cultural management. In particular, it asks what cultural managers can do to realize the innovative potential of pro-ams.

(Future) cultural managers are themselves moving in an interdisciplinary hybrid setting (DEVERAUX 2009: 155), and are therefore in a good position to reach out, develop and empower pro-am artists in their drive for social innovation. This article also emphasizes the need for scholarly attention to this drive, since there has been little specific research on pro-am innovation following the DEMOS initiative. Furthermore, the profile of the pro-am is not yet clear enough and is being blurred by today's negative connotations of the terms 'amateur' and 'dilettante.'

This work specifically intends to (re-)launch the discussion of pro-ams in the arts. For this, it addresses four areas that could serve as pointers for future work on this topic: First, who are pro-ams in the arts? Second, how do they contribute to innovation? Third, how can cultural managers help pro-ams to use their innovative potential better? Fourth, what do pro-ams expect from cultural managers?

A combination of literature on cultural management, social innovation and the history of dilettantism sets a framework of how an initial exploration of the topic can be approached, since there is a lack of targeted literature on professional amateurs.

Three 'pro-am cultural managers' and 18 pro-am artists were interviewed in the preparation of this paper in order to obtain empirical data. The semi-structured interviews contained three question leads, on how the pro-ams see themselves, how they organize their work in networks, and what they expect of any leadership or coordination of those networks.

All interviewees either were talking about their pro-am status for the first time or, if they had talked about it before, had done so in a less structured manner, thus allowing for a genuine self-reflection on their identity.²

2 The interview sample included pro-ams who performed in different defined disciplines such as theatre, writing, singing, dancing, curating, film, painting, photography, visual design, and graffiti arts, but who also performed in crossover modes between these disciplines. The range of how "pro" or how "am" the artists or cultural managers perceived

The responses gave insight into the current, self-assessed role and position of pro-am artists in the arts world, as well as their willingness to participate and innovate in society, and they made the case for cultural management to support this development.

In order to unlock the pro-am/dilettante potential and mainstream it within contemporary cultural production, cultural managers first need to recognize the drive for innovation and participation that is basic to many pro-am endeavours. Secondly, it is advisable to address the resistance of the expert establishment that might oppose and obstruct pro-am innovation and participation. Finally, there needs to be a sustainable structure to overcome this resistance and to display and develop the potential.

3. Self-perception of pro-ams

The interviewed pro-am artists had a determination to overcome fixed arts disciplines or established ways of delivering art. Over half of the respondents had a clear focus on blending their artistic work either with other arts disciplines or with another, not primarily cultural, field such as politics or natural science. One interviewee, who organized home arts performances in her free time, said that she did not care which artist was performing in her living room, as long as they were courageous enough to surprise the audience. Another interviewee curated exhibitions of students of natural science subjects like chemistry who wanted to allow an alternative view on their lab work.

On the other hand, in 13 out of 18 interviews, the pro-am artists reflecting on their status, professionalism and delivery expressed understatement ('I just do it as a hobby') or apologized ('I know I got an award for this, but I never actually learned how to do it'). A recurring theme within the interviews was also that the work pro-ams do, be it as moonlighting writers, hobby curators, or performers in amateur theatre groups, is not recognized by professionals. Remarkably, the pro-ams interviewed did not necessarily expect to be recognized either. Comple-

themselves to be, (or believed themselves to be perceived by others based on external feedback), was also varied throughout the sample. The majority of interviewees had an international background: they were either expatriates/migrants or worked in international (pro-am) projects. Their residence at the time of the interviews was in metropolitan areas of Spain, Belgium, Germany and the United Kingdom.

mentary online research on *Facebook* groups³ of pro-am writers showed that the main topic discussed in those groups is the pro-am identity and the lack of sufficient self-confidence to call themselves 'writers'. Some threads revealed that even participants with several self-published novels, achieving critical acclaim and sales figures in the top 100 leading online bookshops, still did not consider themselves to be authors, because they had not managed to publish with a traditional publishing house.

Cultural managers, who as mentioned, are themselves moving between different disciplines and who do not always act conform with traditional expert profiles, can work with these two aspects of pro-am identity: they can motivate people to try something new and help to overcome the lowered self-confidence due to the (presumed) disapprobation of the arts establishment, thus enhancing pro-am participation in cultural production and social innovation.

4. Pro-am participation and the potential for social innovation

Literature on social innovation notes that professional amateurs can be found in many other fields, not only in the arts.⁴ Pro-ams of recent decades have invented and sustained volunteer nursing, mountain biking and independent archeology. Cultural manifestations of everyday life like the DIY furniture of *IKEA* or the food supply in some organic groceries rely on the pro-am participation of the customer. Bloggers and DJs, both pro-am offshoots of traditional literature and musical composition, build opinions and set trends in contemporary arts and social innovation. Even ambivalent pro-ams like computer hackers or graffiti artists have a strong impact on the development and accessibility of information technology in the dawn of 'big data' and the 'internet of things' in the one case, and on the urban image of revitalizing cities in the other. Innovative initiatives for research and development, for example the

3 On Facebook, three open writers' groups, two painters'/graphic artists' groups and one arts group without fixed discipline were observed over the period of three months for this paper. The majority of members of these groups either classified themselves as 'hobby artists' or as having attributes associated with pro-am level, or they were communicating in a way that suggested they were not professional artists.

4 Based on case studies in different social environments, the 'Open Book of Social Innovation', a volume in a series of publications on social innovation by the British NGO *Young Foundation*, for example gives a recent overview and suggestions on how to design, develop and grow social innovation.

upcoming 'Haus der Zukunft'⁵ (House of the Future) in Berlin, a forum for science, economy and politics, are already planned with a pro-am involvement from the beginning. According to a conversation with the head of communication, the house will invite citizens to participate actively in designing possible future paths in the so-called 'real lab', where technologies and concepts are tested for their suitability and sustainability. Projects like this already show recognition of the pro-am potential for innovation and try to structure and utilise the dynamism that comes from it.

On top of that potential, the pro-ams themselves nowadays seem eager to participate in social and cultural processes, rather than just consuming them. Ten out of the 18 pro-am artists interviewed for this article expressed the wish to have an impact of some kind with their artistic work. One pro-am who produces music and film in the rough outskirts of Madrid saw his work as a long-term contribution to driving Spain out of the economic crisis by giving poor and socially challenged people an opportunity to act creatively, instead of continuing the downward spiral of social misery. Another pro-am stated that she wanted her writing to be read by as many people as possible, also without payment. She said she was convinced that other artists would reward her in non-monetary ways.

In this context, economic theorist Jeremy Rifkin introduces another hybrid term when talking about the 'internet of things' and the newly empowered position of the audience: the 'prosumer'.

We have 3 billion consumers, internet users, who now are actually prosumers. They are still selling and buying and they are still owners and workers, but they are prosumers because every one of them at one time or another has produced and shared something in the virtual world with others at near zero marginal cost, sharing videos, e-books, open source, no copyright, bypassing television, magazines and newspapers (RIFKIN 2015: Spectrum website 3).

Here, the customer is someone who does not simply take ready-made products and services for granted, but also wants to have a say in the process. This aspect of pro-am has been gaining an additional foothold in the arts world, where bridging between artist and audience is becoming a standard means of delivery. Engaging the spectator in the performance, for example in interactive theatre, is now prevalent, as is a social-network response to music concerts such as the uploading of private concert clips onto *youtube* with the encouragement of the artists (KAUL 2012: 296).

5 <<http://www.hausderzukunft-deutschland.de>> (12.08.2015).

Through an approach that includes these two pro-am/prosumer instincts: the innovative drive and the will to participate, cultural managers can introduce a significant number of additional skills into the production of arts and, as a consequence, into society as a whole.

5. Resistance to pro-am endeavours

One of the interviews with a pro-am cultural manager illustrated a pattern of pro-am endeavours being rejected by the established arts world. His several attempts to achieve a “job-rotation” of theatre actors in the chronically understaffed local theatre with his experienced pro-am group of performers led to mockery from, and rejection by, the professionals. This prompts two observations: the first being that pro-am’s access to the recognized world of professional artists seems difficult. Another observation is that this ‘access lock’ might create an artificial shortage of (professional) skills, where there would otherwise presumably be enough skills if the gates to professionalism were less strictly guarded.

The ‘anti-dilettante movement’ of the 18th and 19th centuries summoned gatekeepers to protect the quality that they claimed only experts could achieve. Skills in general are still more often than not formalised and professionalised through documented qualifications and (gatekeeper-)recognised experience (PFADENHAUER 2010: 102). While it seems sensible that knowledge and experience in expert fields is quality-controlled, standardized and protected from amateurish dilution, professional gatekeeping can also create and foster a distribution bottleneck in all knowledge-intensive areas. The shortage of skills on the labour market in general is caused by the concentration of work in the hands of highly trained experts. According to Benjamin Kline Hunnicutt, an American scholar researching on current schemes of work and leisure time, there seems to be no “consensus for sharing labour tasks or distributing knowledge among more workers” (HUNNICUTT 2013: 32). This appears regrettable, since pro-am production could provide a rich supply of ideas and competencies that would be in demand and would be used more if an expert-minded society did not generally reject products and services originating from a “dilettante milieu” (ENGELHARDT 2010: 79).

Social innovation coming from pro-ams seems to be at its best when it comes through creative blending from multiple sources open to different skill levels and without access locks. One example of this is the

Occupy movement in the United States. It calls to mind the image of a powerful dilettantism including people across diverse professional spectra and levels of expertise and using the arts as a means of appealing to a wider audience.

Coverage of *Occupy* has been mixed. At first it was dismissive, making fun of the people involved as if they were just silly kids playing games. But coverage changed. In fact, one of the really remarkable and almost spectacular successes of the *Occupy* movement is that it has simply changed the entire framework of discussion of many issues. (CHOMSKY 2012: 69).

The function of pro-ams as agents of change can have further effects. Karl Marx recognized the community-creating potential emerging from a society that overcomes its classes and standards and creates a sense of belonging through common activities rather than through qualifications (GRAEBER 2011: 114).

Cultural managers could aim to enhance the integration of pro-am skills in the arts, defend them against expert claims of exclusivity and contribute to a broader concept of social participation and innovation.

6. Pro-am networks

The interviewed pro-ams considered networks to be an effective and engaging way of developing and delivering their work. From the interview responses, three reasons can be deduced for adopting a network structure for pro-am ventures.

First, professional-amateur settings seem to allow for a more open learning-by-doing experience and, through that, invite new approaches without fear of punishment for failure. The interviews and research on *Facebook* groups pointed out that, even if pro-ams might be generally less self-confident, their fear of making mistakes or of not conforming properly to the existing artistic guidelines was lower in networks than when they worked alone. A network may become a learning environment that can facilitate mutual training efforts as well as an atmosphere of creative trial-and-error. One of the interviewees had been a professional photographer and changed to become a pro-am photographer because she considered the connection between professional pressures and the composition of photographic art to have been too destructive of her ideas. This example also shows a canny combination of pro-ams and (former) professionals within an arts network that could further boost learning. Another interview showcased a former professional singer in

a choir, who was now the leader of a pro-am group of musicians and helped them in hybrid disciplines. The interviewee had introduced the idea of trying classical voices with jazz instrumentation to achieve a unique musical experience. Her ensemble of pro-am musicians has become a popular act on the Berlin hipster scene. This example illustrates both a combination of 'pro' and 'am' experiences that cross borders and innovate and a former expert – now cultural manager – using the power of networks.

The second reason that was stated in the interviews for the preference of pro-ams to form in networks, was that by so doing they could better use their 'intangible resources'. Those are the skills that are not necessarily bound to a discipline, but can nonetheless enable a good performance or make it easier to cross borders (examples for those skills are: flexibility, courage, inter-cultural competence and empathy). Crossing the borders between the recognized and the as yet undefined can be seen as a precondition for innovation and a pluralist way of expression (WRIGHT 2011: 60). One graffiti artist who was interviewed stated that only in the underground networks of graffiti could he reach out to many people who were not artists themselves but supported and inspired artistic work. Another interview with a pro-am graphic artist, who illustrated and visualized music, came to the conclusion that networks in the arts are there to bring about interdisciplinary creation. She considered this basic function to be possible within certain frameworks if the artists were not overly protective of their arts, something less likely in pro-ams than in professionals who have won and secured their status over years.

A third reason for supporting a network structure in pro-am activities seems to be that the very existence of a network can serve as a seedbed for a larger project. In one of the interviews, the manager of a network remembered the beginnings of an international movie project that started as a screenplay idea on a blog. It then grew bigger through crowdfunding, attracting a mixture of movie professionals, while remaining in essence a pro-am project. The resulting series, a parody of the EU institutions, went viral and has been pitched for larger productions at international film festivals. According to the project manager, who is also the pro-am producer/screenwriter/actor, the original blog structure served to prepare the project, allowing for more professional decisions based on target audience response. Furthermore, everybody who got involved in the project at that early stage has become a vital part of it.

Networks, both online and offline, can help to bring pro-am strengths (in the arts) to the fore, to highlight their 'unique selling points' and to

compensate for the shortcomings of the pro-am environment. They create a common identity, allow for crossover artistic work and pave the way for professionalism. Thus, networks can be an important communication tool for cultural managers in reaching out to pro-ams, helping them to bypass gatekeepers where reasonable, and finally setting free their potential to innovate.

7. Pro-am expectations regarding cultural managers

The interviews underlined the need of pro-ams and pro-am networks to be managed. If cultural managers want to utilize the pro-am advantage for innovation and new ways of social participation, it might be important for them to take good care of the networks pro-ams flourish in. In light of the interview answers on pro-am expectations, the role of a cultural manager would thus be to find the networks, foster them, and advise them in management methods that are 'pro-am friendly'. The cultural manager ought to address every single artist in a pro-am network, know his/her skills and how best to get them involved. In order to do so, there are four main management aspects reflected in the interviews that cultural managers could follow.

First, there is the network management as such: Apart from the standard ingredients that need to be taken into account to manage a network efficiently, such as regular meetings, common goals and follow-up on results, there are specific needs for networks of pro-am artists. One aspect would be that the core of the network, being the people that sustain it, should have clear objectives regarding what the network wants to achieve and a good idea of which target groups the activities and products of the network are addressing. This needs to be matched to the different kinds of arts involved in the project and to consider the non-hierarchical structure of networks, which the expert on cultural management Lidia Varbanova calls "horizontal relationships between members" (VARBANOVA 2013: 130).

The pro-am interviews showed that cultural production in teams has a wide range of differences, which suggests that there is no generic managerial theory that can be blindly applied to any network of arts disciplines. According to interviewees, French chansons sung in a choir, for example, prioritize simplicity and empathy. Improvised jam music, on the other hand, in spite of all the ad-hoc elements it contains, requires

a complex structure with clear direction of the strong creative energy. In a network they can exist alongside each other, and this variety needs to be reflected in the way the network is organized and managed. This freedom and support allows for the different creative and interpretative potential to unfold, or as one interviewee put it: 'The inner powers of the soul will not be switched off only because you start working in a group. The group needs to know that'. Cultural managers will be well advised to make these "inner powers of the soul" the spirit of the network they are coordinating.

While respecting the individual approaches of every single artist in a network, it should also be a platform for identification if that is not yet the case. In the interviews with pro-ams engaged in theatre groups, the notion was expressed several times that they did not necessarily perceive themselves as networks. Even if they worked within an international context or were linked to similar amateur groups in other cities or countries, the pro-ams saw themselves rather as temporary ensembles. One cause given for this was that directors of plays, even on the pro-am level, were uncompromising and authoritative in their direction and did not create a feeling of cooperative social bonding, even though theatre might be by default a team activity. The two interviewees perceived this lack of network identity as a drawback that stimulated rivalry and a noticeable turn-over of artists (and skills). On the other hand, an interviewed pro-am cultural manager who supports writers during readings for theatrical and hyper-textual interpretation of their stories argued that the longer and closer the writers in his collective worked together the better quality they had in both the stand-alone stories and the hypertext performances.⁶

A second management aspect that cultural managers of pro-am networks might want to follow is their own personal engagement in the arts, as 17 out of 18 interviewed pro-am artists mentioned. They expected their 'managers' to be really involved in particular arts disciplines, rather than showing a diffuse enthusiasm for the arts in general. To become involved with pro-am networks, cultural managers may be required to adopt an individual orientation towards one or more specific arts and stand their ground in creative discussions, even if they are not artists themselves.

6 Hypertext fiction refers to literature that does not predefine the plot of a story e.g. by chronology, but allows the reader/consumer to choose which storyline or character development to follow. Classical examples of this alternative reading can be found in magic realism (e.g. José Luis Borges) and contemporary ones mainly on the digital market (e.g. Paul La Farge).

John Tusa, British arts manager and journalist talks about the ‘cultural leader’ who is allowed to thrive and to facilitate identification (TUSA 2014: 74). Among the nine qualities of leadership in arts, Tusa quotes this personal engagement as the top skill, followed by creativity, authenticity and passion. Strategic thinking and organization are also crucial, but appear at the bottom of his skills list. Competence in commercial matters and handling of capital he puts on an altogether different list of administrative management skills.

Third, management seems to indeed include responsibility for administrative tasks too. Nobody should underestimate the administrative burden that comes with artistic work, also in a pro-am setting – as one interviewee put it: ‘Sending e-mails and making flyers is a thousand times more exhausting than singing and dancing.’ Many artists seem ready to try out complex artistic concepts, including blending disciplines and breaking arts rules, but they regard themselves as unable to deal with any basic network tasks like internal communication, marketing or even sustaining the network. This is a phenomenon that can be found among professional artists as well, but the pro-am setting seems to provide an even less stable framework for tackling this attitude. Cultural managers can help to prevent these deficiencies becoming an integral characteristic of pro-am identity and performance (LEADBEATER/MILLER 2004: 42). On the other hand, the burden of administration should not detach cultural managers from the core task of empowering pro-am potential.

Lastly and perhaps most importantly, cultural managers of pro-am artists are expected to point out any blind spots of the artist group/network and get to know the strengths and weaknesses of the network members. In fact, one could say that cultural managers in pro-am networks have an important role in developing pro-am skills too. This also takes into account that members of a pro-am network have different levels of ability and experience.

Cultural managers in this context can be regarded as people managers with a passion for the arts and the ability to identify, develop and market pro-am skills to a wider audience and, ultimately, to society as a whole. They can contribute in developing new means of cultural participation and in promoting the recognition of pro-am arts. Both can lead to social innovation, for example with more inclusive ways of working.

8. Conclusion

The position of this article is that cultural management can contribute to activating and supporting the potential for innovation among professional amateurs in the arts and in society. Pro-am activities revive the pluralistic and innovative spirit of the original dilettantism and they can trigger new (and possibly better) forms of social participation, for example by making 'intangible skills' more accepted. They can help to unseal the competency castles that were built by the expert establishment and might have excluded competent people from cultural (and economic) production. In order to find, support and lead pro-am networks, a common and successful form of pro-am self-organization, cultural managers need to cross over between arts disciplines and mindsets themselves. They can incentivize and oversee a process of pro-am innovation by getting personally involved in it, respecting the rules for networks and being courageous enough to foster the spirit of modern dilettantes through keeping their own inner amateur alive. Therefore, this topic deserves academic attention and deeper research both in the contextualization of modern dilettantism and the practical impact that pro-am networks can have on social innovation if managed well.

Notes on Contributor

Miguel Peromingo has been working and writing for international development projects with more than 30 countries in the field of social inclusion of vulnerable groups and culture for over 15 years, both as a consultant and as a manager.

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