Culture, creativity and community:
reflections on the urban economy

cultural intermediation
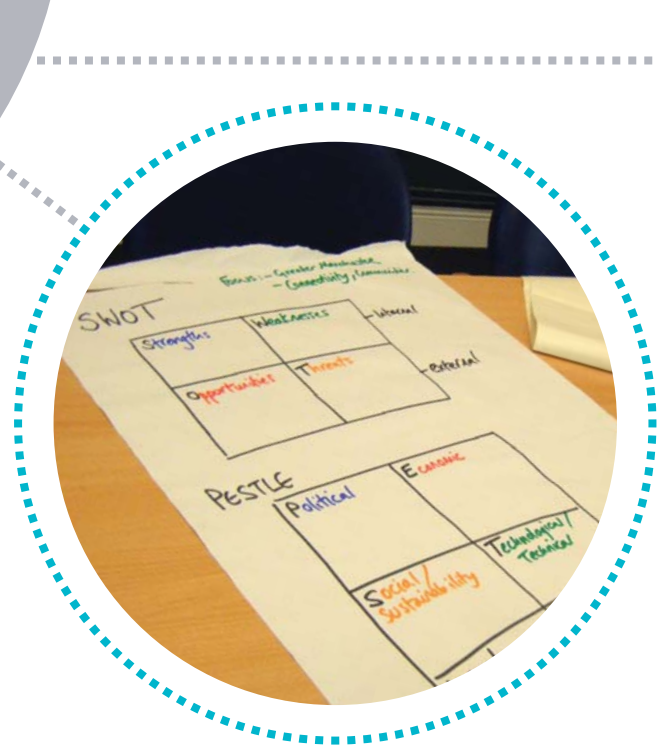
Introduction

This booklet outlines some of the findings of an ongoing research project *Cultural intermediation in the creative urban economy* which is funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of its Connected Communities scheme. The purpose of the project is to look at the ways in which cities are trying to use culture and creativity in order to grow their economies.

From the late 1970s the UK economy became more divided between the haves and the have nots. The Gini Coefficient, a measure of income inequality, rose steadily until the mid-1990s and although it has declined slightly since its peak, there have not been significant gains for more deprived communities who are still being left behind as the economy grows.

The big rises in income inequality during the 1980s coincided with a collapse in the numbers of skilled manufacturing jobs. The major areas of economic growth since the 1980s have primarily been in services of different kinds, but another highly dynamic sector of the economy in recent years has been the 'creative industries'. In 1998 the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) defined the creative industries as comprising 13 sectors: advertising; architecture; arts and antique markets; computer and video games; crafts; design; designer fashion; film and video; music; performing arts; publishing; software; television and radio (DCMS, 1998). By 2004, it was estimated that these 13 sectors employed 1.8m people, generated £13bn in exports and represented 7.3% of the UK economy's gross value added (DCMS, 2007).

There is a temptation to use these kinds of figures to tell a good news story about the UK economy, although this definition of the creative industries has subsequently been criticised for being somewhat vague and not really differentiating commercially-led sectors such as software, as against arts and performance which tend to rely more on public subsidy (see Flew, 2012, for a summary of these debates). More significantly, however, although the creative industries are a lucrative segment of the UK economy, they tend to have high barriers to entry and a disproportionately large number of people working within the sector have under-graduate degrees. Thus while the creative industries may generate economic growth, the danger is that they do little to reduce overall inequality in the UK.

Gini Coefficient for the UK, 1977–2012 (Office for National Statistics, 2013)
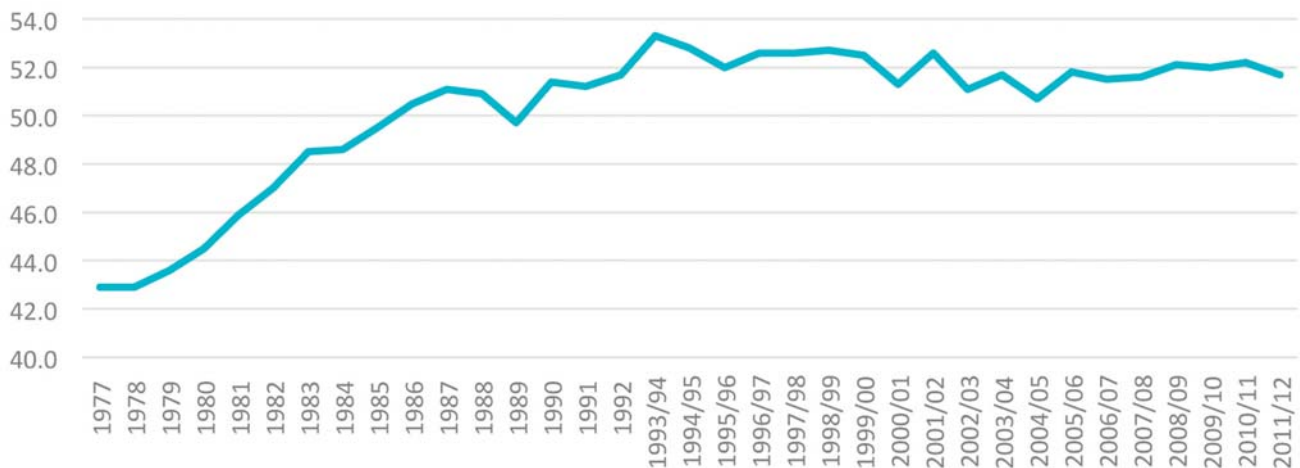
Cities are home to some of the biggest challenges in terms of inequality. Urban areas see concentrations of wealth and poverty in neighbouring districts. Larger cities are often 'superdiverse' in that they contain a large number of varied migrant communities, with different needs and aspirations. People living in areas of multiple deprivation face complex and compound problems related to poor housing, struggling schools, few jobs, crime, access to transport and public health issues. These are the very communities that are not directly benefiting from the economic growth generated by the creative industries.
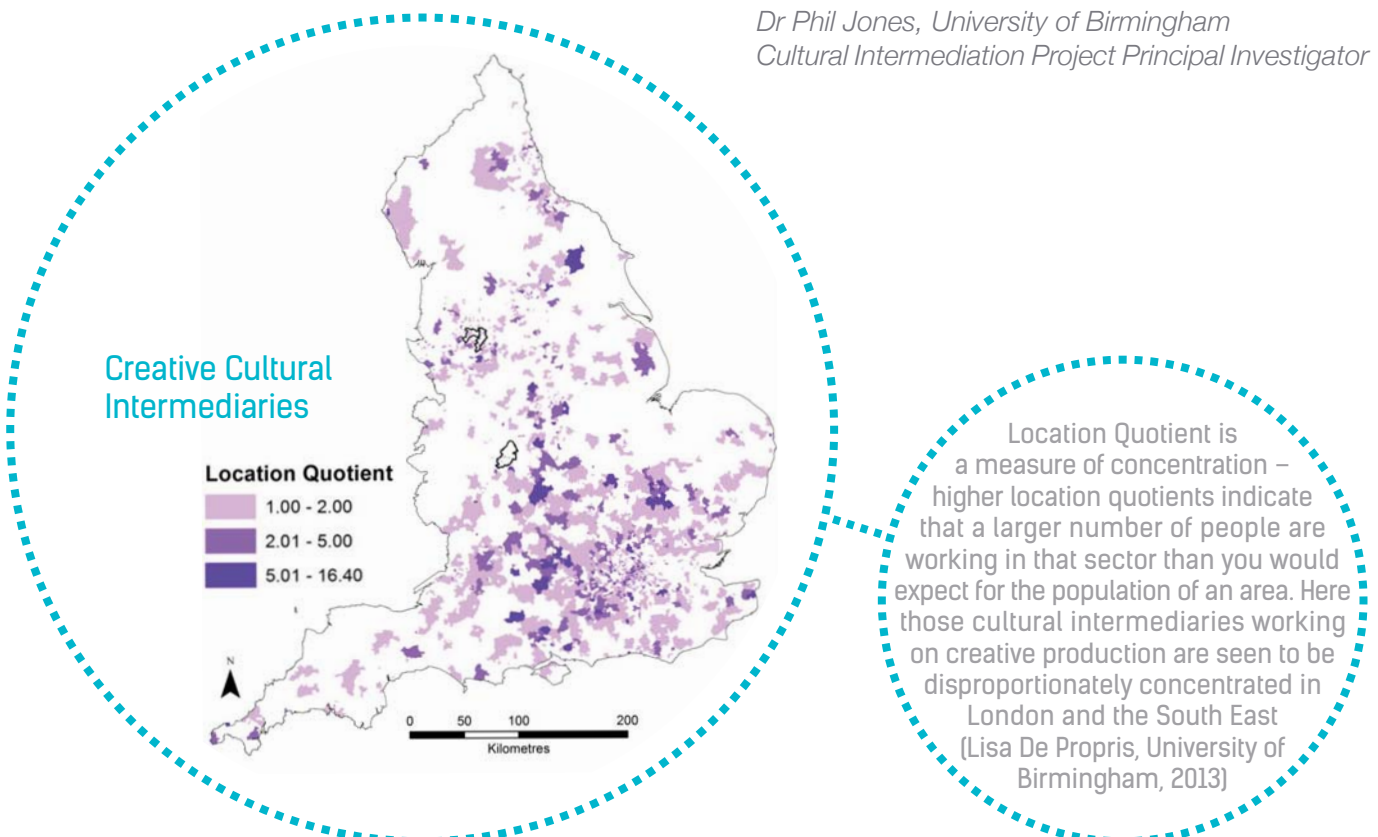
Nonetheless, a great deal of effort is being made to help more deprived communities gain from the benefits of creative economic activity. This is more obvious in the publicly subsidised arts and culture sectors, which have a more overt social mission than the private sector.

There is a belief that engaging struggling communities with different kinds of arts and culture will have a series of benefits: inspiring young people; raising aspirations and confidence; as well as a general sense that culture enriches people's lives. Engaging with a local arts project or going to your local art gallery thus does not immediately hold the key to getting a job in the creative industries, but is often seen as an investment in the future of a community.

In our project we have been looking at the people and organisations who see it as their mission to get communities more engaged with arts and culture. Drawing on the work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, we refer to such people as cultural intermediaries, in that they act as bridges, joining up communities and forms of cultural activity that are often disconnected. The purpose of our project is to examine how this process of intermediation operates and how it can be improved. It should be noted, however, that if you map where cultural intermediaries are located, there are many more in London than you would expect given the size of that city's population. This reflects a well-established trend within arts funding that concentrates public resource in London and the south east of England. If cultural intermediaries are to make significant inroads into addressing issues of upskilling and confidence building it is clear that consideration will need to be given to rebalancing the distribution of public funding across England.

In this booklet we outline some of the key findings from our research project. We start with a review of international case studies, looking at how cities across the globe have sought to find ways of using culture and creativity to bolster their economies. We then move to look at how cultural intermediaries operate in the UK context, with case studies in Birmingham and Greater Manchester. Finally we reflect on working in the communities of Balsall Heath in Birmingham and Ordsall in Salford to examine how people in deprived neighbourhoods experience culture and the activities of cultural intermediaries.

Dr Phil Jones, University of Birmingham
Cultural Intermediation Project Principal Investigator

Creative Cultural Intermediaries

Location Quotient

	1.00 - 2.00
	2.01 - 5.00
	5.01 - 16.40

N

0   50   100   200
Kilometres

Location Quotient is a measure of concentration – higher location quotients indicate that a larger number of people are working in that sector than you would expect for the population of an area. Here those cultural intermediaries working on creative production are seen to be disproportionately concentrated in London and the South East (Lisa De Propris, University of Birmingham, 2013)

International perspectives on creative cities

The creative city has gone global. Creativity is, of course, a defining feature of humanity. Looking globally we see a world of different cultures, different languages, different arts, different foods, different ways of seeing the world, all based on our innate creativity. In more recent years, however, culture and creativity have started to be seen not as not merely enriching people's lives, but as something that leads directly to economic gain.

This idea that culture and creativity should be the engine of economic growth is a relatively new one. Writers such as Richard Florida and Charles Landry have popularised the idea that cities can become hubs for creative activities which drive the economy forward. Florida (2002) wrote about this in terms of there being a 'creative class', an elite group who make their living from thinking and acting in new, innovative and creative ways instead of sitting doing routine work, day-in, day-out. Whether this be a graphic designer, software engineer, poet or musician, Florida argues that cities have to work to attract the creative classes because they will in turn attract businesses that are reliant on a pool of creative talent being locally available.

These kinds of writers argue that creativity is vital for economic growth because it maximises the value added as goods and services are produced and consumed. Cities that fail to nurture their creative talent will, it is suggested, start to struggle economically. Policymakers in the global north have jumped on this idea that culture and creativity matter, with a series of interventions aimed at tackling economic decline in former industrial cities as manufacturing jobs have moved to places like India and China in the global south.

Economies in the global south have grown rapidly over the last thirty years with manufacturing firms attracted to sources of cheap labour. More significantly, policy-makers and others in these countries have woken up to the possibilities of being more than an unskilled global labour force making the products that are designed and bought elsewhere. The idea of becoming a creative city, capturing more of the high-value end of the global economy, has become attractive to cities in the global south. The importance of creativity and culture in making this transition has not been lost on these cities. While many cities have bought in to the idea of using culture and creativity to produce economic gains, a number of different approaches can be seen. In Columbia, for example, cities faced specific and acute problems related to the drug cartels, which turned neighbourhoods into no-go areas. Help from the US government did much to drive back the paramilitaries.

Meanwhile in Medellín a new Mayor was elected in 2003 leading to a series of culture-led projects intended to drive economic growth and try to heal some of the social wounds opened up by the cartels. The Social Laboratories for Cultural Entrepreneurs, for example, was founded in 2009 and works in some of the most deprived neighbourhoods of Medellín to provide training and assistance for young creative entrepreneurs. Some 5% of the city's annual budget is set aside for community budgeting and in 2010, for example, the city's 15th district voted to use their allocation to establish a school of arts in the neighbourhood.

Community budgeting is not widely used outside of South America, which highlights the importance of governance – the process of how ideas and policies are transformed into realities on the ground. In China, for example, the Communist party has a very high level of control over different aspects of banking, real estate, industrial policy, social development and so on. Leaders in cities like Guangzhou have traditionally attempted to grow their cities very rapidly in order to exceed central party targets for economic development in order that those local leaders might curry favour with the national leadership and be promoted further up the party hierarchy.

Murals in Medellín (Photo: Ruth Daniels)

Despite the rigid controls, however, there are still opportunities for more edgy policies to be pursued. As an example, in 2008 a group of artists converted an old fish canning factory in Guangzhou into a creative arts and business cluster called Redtory. Similar kinds of industrial conversion as the heart of a creative hub can be seen the world over from Rotterdam's Lloyd Quarter to Sydney's Newtown district. In Guangzhou the local municipal authority were happy for Redtory to exist until a change of policy designated the site to be the home of a new financial district, which is seen to be a more profitable use of the space.

Thus cultural and creative infrastructure can be quite vulnerable to policy change. In Budapest, for example, the directors of both the Ludwig Museum and the National Theatre were removed in 2012 following political intervention. Meanwhile Hungary's national government has been promoting a controversial scheme to bring a number of major cultural institutions together into a New Museum Quarter, modelled on a similar scheme in Vienna. Here we see a clash between how culture is seen in policy terms and how those working within the sector want to operate.

This tension is visible at a number of scales. Budapest's famous 'ruin bars' for example, grew out of a problem of poorly maintained and abandoned buildings following the collapse of Communism. As being places to drink and party, since 2000 many of these bars, concentrated in the city's 6th and 7th districts, have included arts and cultural functions as well. Although these bars have an economic function and are a major tourist attraction for the city, they can also come into conflict with people who live in the neighbourhood, tired of the noise and disruption that they can cause. Should local residents have to tolerate the sounds of late night partying just because it is good for the local economy?

One last example of how cities across the world are trying to make use of culture comes from the United States. Chicago is a classic example of a former industrial city that is trying to find a new identity and new sources of economic growth. In a pioneering move in 1986 Mayor Harold Washington established a Cultural Plan for the city. Although this first attempt ran out of steam it inspired a second plan to be drawn up in 2012 by the new Mayor Rahm Emmanuel – President Obama's former Chief of Staff. On the surface this was a highly democratic process with eight town hall meetings, 20 neighbourhood 'conversations' and more than 50 meetings with specific sectors and high-level organisations, as well as Facebook and Twitter forums.

The City's new Cultural Plan allocated resources to a range of different cultural activities across different timescales and encouraged the opening up of city-owned resources – for example parks buildings – to new cultural uses by communities. Only 17% of the projects listed in the final plan were costed at more than $1m, meaning that the vast majority of the city government's funding was going to smaller cultural projects - 34% of the total was for projects costing less than $50,000. Of course, you can make an argument that this can mean the city's effort is spread too thinly. Indeed, the democratic credentials of the scheme can also be criticised, with stories in the local press about how the public meetings and social media conversations were steered very heavily by people representing the city's Department for Cultural Affairs and Special Events, which led the production of the plan.

Wherever public money is being spent there will be controversy and compromise. Nonetheless, the Chicago Plan, like the other initiatives discussed here, demonstrates that culture and creativity are taken very seriously by policymakers in cities around the globe. In order to understand the modern global economy, one has to understand the place of culture within it.

Based on working papers by Whitney Johnson, Emília Barna, Theresa Bean, Yuanping Fang, Sisi Wang and Xuewei Liu, which are available to download from www.culturalintermediation.org.uk
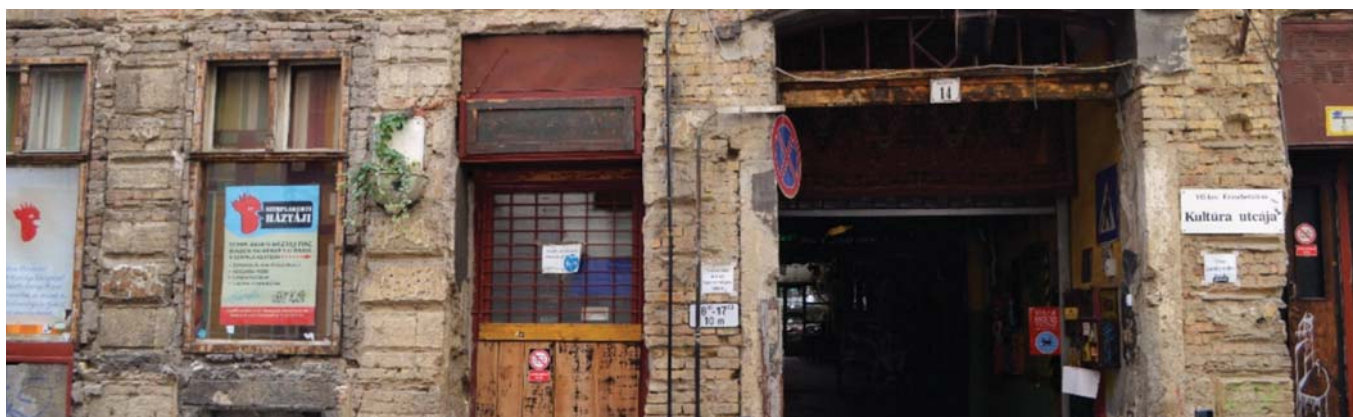
Szimpla Kert 'ruin bar' in Budapest (Photo Emília Barna)

Governing the creative urban economy

When people talk about governance in the creative industries, they are often referring to the boards that oversee the operation of a particular organisation – the BBC Trust for example. Governance can also refer to the ways in which different people, organisations and parts of the government come together in order to take an idea (such as using culture and creativity to improve people's social and economic wellbeing) and deliver it on the ground.

Scholars and practitioners have highlighted the failure of major creative city infrastructure projects such as new galleries and media spaces to deliver tangible benefits for deprived urban communities. Indeed culture-led regeneration is often blamed for gentrification and other effects having a negative impact on specific city quarters. At the same time other people argue that 'arts are for everyone' and that getting people engaged with arts and culture will raise aspirations and build confidence. Meanwhile, on the ground, lots of people are engaged in cultural activities every day without the active involvement of local authorities and other cultural agencies. Everyone has culture, it just means different things to different people. We can characterise these different views and uses of culture as being different 'ecologies'. The way that we think about these creative urban ecologies, however, shapes the governance of culture – the mechanisms by which it is delivered and what it is intended to do. We've been investigating these issues through specific case studies of Birmingham, Manchester and Salford, highlighting a series of key lessons.

Cultural intermediation as a bundle of practices

Cultural intermediation takes many forms, existing both inside and outside the formal creative economy. Through a combination of case studies and diary-keeping, the Cultural intermediation project has developed an innovative approach to the study of governing practices in the creative urban economy. This approach has revealed a complex network of activities, bridging production and consumption, as diverse agents perform multiple functions simultaneously.

The research reveals the co-existence of forms of cultural intermediation across a spectrum of creative industries and community engagement. In particular, we suggest the term 'cultural intermediation' should be reclaimed to draw attention to the links between communities and the cultural urban economy, raising the visibility of less formalised activities and socially engaged cultural practices.

Different cultural ecologies

The mainstream, professionalised, formal creative ecology is often juxtaposed with an informal cultural ecology. Some claim that large cultural infrastructure (museums, galleries, concert halls etc.) combined with specific outreach activities will create trickle-down economic benefits to disadvantaged communities. For others, this is a sticking plaster; they argue instead that the professionalised delivery of culture should be set aside in favour of community-led creative activism.

We argue that this apparent split between top-down and bottom-up activities is unhelpful. Our research highlights the myriad interconnections and interactions between different creative urban ecologies through practices of cultural intermediation. Furthermore, the research raises central questions of accountability and responsibility. In particular, we question whether the celebration of bottom-up cultural activity may inadvertently mean that policymakers can dodge questions of fairness and social benefit when making funding and policy decisions.

Governing creative urban ecologies

A crisis of governance is limiting the extent to which creative city initiatives 'connect' with deprived urban communities because of a mismatch between structures, policies, institutions and values. Our research highlights the need to move away from static snapshots and structural solutions. We need to understand the practices that have developed to mediate between formal and informal cultural ecologies and to rethink governance. This is challenging to local authorities as their traditional roles are reshaped in the context of austerity, localism and public sector reform. Yet it is also an opportunity to open up decision-making processes and ensure the more effective use of limited public resources.

New research methods

By asking cultural intermediaries to keep diaries of their activities, the knowledge and skills of practitioners helped shape our research. The chance to reflect on their practice was valued by participants, particularly at a time of great change in the governance and funding of their work. Diary-keeping created a

safe space to reflect on and share experiences, in contrast to their often frenetic day jobs. Participants demonstrated how they played multiple roles, both bridging the gap between economic values and established cultural hierarchies and also subverting them. New kinds of intermediation are emerging, generating artistic and social worth, aiming to create not just new consumers (passive) but also producers (active).

Asset-based cultural development

Our research suggests that one route forward to local policy-makers is to reframe cultural urban policy as asset-based cultural development (ABCD). Research outside conventional arts and humanities scholarship is informative here, with a rich literature already existing on ABCD. Critically, this would encourage an asset-rich, rather than deficit-based, approach to cultural urban policy.

Academics as cultural intermediaries

Several examples we examined suggested close inter-relationships between community arts organisations and universities (see Laura's Story below). This also raises the fascinating prospect of future work evaluating the Cultural intermediation project's own role as a cultural intermediary.

Beth Perry, University of Salford

Laura's Story: University Festivals

I am currently in the 2nd year of my PhD which is part of the Cultural intermediation project and I also work as a freelance programme developer for a major UK film festival.

A festival brings together many different partnerships, discourses and cultural forms in a short, intense period of activity. They create new coalitions, commission original content, reveal informal connections between communities; they can reflect the semiology of a whole city or region. Arts festivals are thought of as part of the 'public cultural sphere' so what I want to know is what exactly is happening at festivals where universities are strategic partners?

I've been looking at who works with who, how, why and with what effects. I have always been interested how people attach meaning to their actions when collaborating on a creative project in the context of an institutional setting. I'm also interested in how government policies that demand competition, impact and measurement from academic activities are interpreted in these contexts, which calls for the critical evaluation of processes of change and counter–change in institutional practices, the commodification of spaces in the institution and the effects of 'culturalisation' in the economy.

Laura Ager, University of Salford

Researching communities and the creative economy – a reflection

Why does culture matter? In what ways does culture matter – if it does at all – and in fact, what exactly does it mean? We're interested in how these questions are addressed by the communities who are the participants, audiences and customers that policy makers and creative workers seek to cultivate.

We're currently exploring the relationship between communities and cultural intermediaries in two locations: Ordsall in Salford and Balsall Heath in Birmingham. Both have rich histories and figure in the cultural imaginary in various ways, not always positive. Each has seen different kinds of cultural interventions and have demographics that comprise a range of those who might be considered 'hard to reach', whether in terms of education, employment or cultural activity (for a summary, see Jancovich & Bianchini, 2013). This is the group whose response to culture we are particularly interested in understanding.

One of our interviewees in Balsall Heath had an interesting perspective on the problems of engaging hard to reach groups:

> "There are people … who have come over from Pakistan to visit who have said that the communities here are more closed than they are in the cities in Pakistan where they have a wider understanding of what is going on in Pakistan itself, that they have a sort of ghettoization".

This story is useful in drawing attention to some of the issues that arise in cultural intermediations. These problems are highlighted when one interviewee was considering a project designed to explore the neglected history of a colony of surrealist artists in Balsall Heath:

> "I don't think that that is going to work. It is such a lovely idea but really in a way you have to be educated to what surrealism/dada is to know what the possibilities are and to open up your mind to that sort of thing. When it is not part of your culture anyway, and even if you look at what part of our culture is, that is something that is known by such a small percentage of people anyway".

Insights such as these are emerging from our use of 'walking interviews' with local residents. We record these interviews and map the routes that individuals take us. These allow us to explore the area, guided by locals who are expert in their own lives and preferences, pinpointing people, spaces and places that are currently or historically significant for their own consumption and perception of intermediations and indeed of the very meaning of culture.

Both Ordsall and Balsall Heath have their specialised cultural places – Islington Mill in Salford for example or the Midland Art Centre (MAC) at the edge of Balsall Heath. And yet whatever the creative sound and colours emanating from cultural spaces, much of this appears to go unseen and unheard, sometimes wilfully ignored. One woman in Balsall Heath seems typical in recalling the interesting nature of activities organised in the streets around her home during one cultural festival, resisting their appeal as they did not seem to be "for me". Yet for others culture has had an impact taking a variety of forms which we might describe as illuminating, entertaining, even life changing.

Whether attributed to ethnicity, familial ties or economic status, the realities of engagement and of categorising individuals and particular groups as 'hard to reach' is problematised by the understanding and validation of culture as 'a whole way of life', not least of all for its creative aspects, for the way in which meanings are produced and directed by people as social agents. Thus, each site reveals its variety of activity independent of the sanction of policy maker or qualified intermediary. Graffiti murals, online rap videos or the nature of clothing stores and hairdressers play their own part in highlighting the work of what we might call 'organic' creative workers and intermediaries. These may not always come up in discussions, but often emerge as part of our wandering conversations around the neighbourhoods. We don't rush and account for the time of day; for some interviewees their contribution is given in between household duties, around the school or working day. Along with questions about engagement and consumption, this method reveals practical issues of mobility and access – sometimes circumscribed by one's social identity or physical being – which make the very fact of walking a challenge. Behind language barriers or behind doors, sometimes the under-engaged appear very different when understood outside our usual ways of thinking. Nonetheless, we see things from the pavement under skies blue or grey, accounting for the seasonal shifts in people's lives and activities, noting how spaces like parks, side streets, boarded-up pubs say something about changing community needs and expression. We encounter people on our walks who interrupt our conversations and make a contribution; mobile phone calls prompt a recollection of a place or person.

Something seen online or a poster reminds us so many leaflets and invitations to cultural events that come through the door go straight in the bin. As researchers we also have to reflect on what we are doing in a community when told about those other interested outsiders who have come before us – people asking if we were police officers or seeking to make another programme like 'Benefits Street'.

Culture, memories and encounters with the activities of intermediaries wax and wane in importance in relation to other types of stories about how life has been lived and how communities are understood and matter. In such instances, what might be 'the best that has been thought and said' appears a distraction when set against issues of safety on the street, of deprivation and opportunities for simply getting by. Of course, our objective as researchers of cultural intermediation is to attempt to navigate around such distractions while registering their importance.

In tandem with interview material there is also a wide array of cultural matter to account for; individual accounts and practices might be accessed online and through new forms of media where digital modes of 'participation' do not map easily onto familiar forms. These offer a texturing of activity and creativity to be apprehended in each area. In Ordsall we are further aided by Practitioner Researchers who are tasked with capturing a detailed snapshot of cultural intermediations – of places, people and events which give a context in which to set subjective accounts. In Balsall Heath, we are crowdsourcing a record of artefacts and accounts to populate our map of cultural activity in the area. We're not trying to do an evaluation where you follow a cultural project to its audience in order to measure its effectiveness in terms of the criteria set by funding bodies. Instead we're exploring the landscape of culture in these neighbourhoods across time and space, to get a rich sense of culture's role in everyday life. This helps us to understand what the role of an intermediary could, and perhaps should, be.

Paul Long, Birmingham City University
Saskia Warren, University of Birmingham

Islington Mill

Project workshop

Balsall Heath

Information

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