Is print journalism creative?

Abstract

The idea that print journalism is creative is one that is not universally accepted: 'making a story up' goes against the fundamental understandings of journalism. Further to this, society's understanding of creativity is that a producer must have no limitations to be able to create and the rules and conventions a journalist works within are seen to constrain their production of creative media texts.

However, by using a Rationalist framework, it can be argued that creative activity in print journalism is not only possible but plausible. By using Mihalyi Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity to examine the creative practices of print journalists, this paper argues it is the structures a journalist works within that enables production and it is by their agency that journalists can produce creative media texts.

Interestingly, a literature review has revealed that *creative* and *creativity* are frequently used within journalism's literature but the terms are rarely defined. Therefore, this paper presents rational arguments for how a print journalist is a creative producer of media texts as well as providing a definition for creativity in a journalistic context.

Janet Fulton
University of Newcastle, Australia

Introduction:

What is the meaning of creativity in a print journalism context and what is a creative print journalist? 'Creative journalism' is a term that conjures up images of reporters making up stories. Mark Fishman described his research in *Manufacturing the News* as looking at how print journalists created the news, but he also mentioned his reluctance to use 'creation' "because of its pejorative connotations and because it suggests the fabrication of news" (1980, p. 13). Journalist and academic Margaret Simons summed up the commonsense understanding of creativity in journalism: "… I think the word *creative* confuses people, people who are not journalists. When I've raised that in nonjournalistic circles they think it means that you're going to make things up" (The Media Report 2004). 'Making things up' goes against the fundamental understanding of what journalism is.

However, a literature review done as part of a PhD project investigating the creative practices of the print journalist in Australia has revealed that *creative* and *creativity* have been used in both academic texts and other journalism writing to describe how the print journalist should go about their work. Yet the terms are rarely clarified. Research in other cultural domains, such as contemporary Western song writing (McIntyre 2006) and creative writing (McIntyre and McIntyre 2007), have come to the same conclusion. The application is typically based on a common-sense, person-centred view – for example, in journalism, how a journalist can be creative – without taking other factors into account. In addition to this, its usage often refers to such journalism genres as feature writing and literary journalism. This is because these genres are perceived to have less structural constraint than hard news and allow more of the individual journalist's imagination. However, these are examples of the Romantic view of creativity, a belief deeply embedded in Western culture.

The Western understanding of creativity implies that a creative idea comes from nowhere but the imagination of the individual; it is invented from nothing. This understanding is rooted in the Romantic ideal of a lone genius, slightly mad, who must be free of any constraints to be able to Create (Becker 1992; Becker 1982; Csikszentmihalyi 1997; Isaksen 1987; Pope 2005; Sawyer 2006; Wolff 1993; Zolberg 1990). In this sense, the Romantic ideal is the antithesis of the journalist who reports facts, works in a collective environment, must write within the structure of the publication, must follow the rules of journalistic writing, and must please the hierarchy. However, it can be argued that it is the very existence of these structures, and the

journalist's knowledge of them, that enables the production of creative media texts.

Therefore, rather than depending on Western culture's implicit understanding of creativity, this paper attempts to define creativity in print journalism in line with current thinking inside creativity research. Furthermore, it is a contention of this paper that all genres of print journalism have structures and practitioners of all genres can be creative within their own structures. In the domain of journalism, the assertion that hard news writing can be a creative endeavour could provide a better understanding of work processes and improve writing practices.

Brief summary of the research

The PhD research is using Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity (Abuhamdeh and Csikszentmihalyi 2004; Csikszentmihalyi 1988; 1990; 1997; 2003; Feldman 1994) to examine the creative practices of print journalists in Australia. Csikszentmihalyi argues that creativity can be found in the confluence of three elements: the domain of knowledge, the field, or social structure, and the individual. Each of the three elements must be present for creativity to occur and they are all of equal importance.
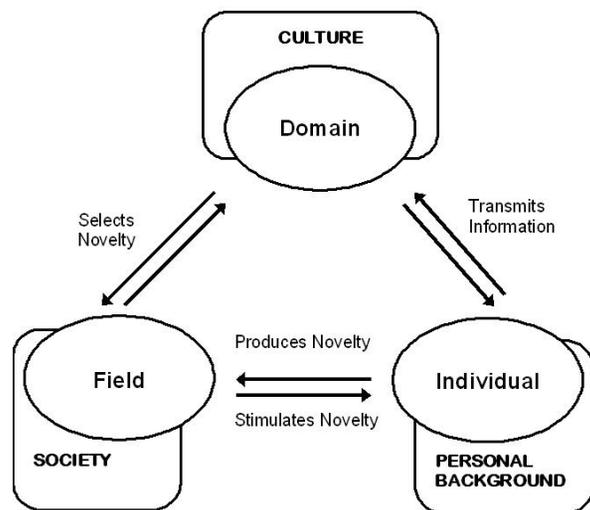

Figure 1 - Csikszentmihalyi's systems model of creativity (2003, p. 315)

The domain is defined as the "set of symbolic rules and procedures" (Csikszentmihalyi 1997, p. 27), the field as the "gatekeepers to the domain [who] decide whether a new idea or product should be included in the domain" (ibid., p. 28) and the individual as the person who "learns the rules and the content of the domain, as well as the criteria of selection, the preferences of the field" (ibid., p. 47). The individual uses the knowledge from the domain, produces a product and presents it to the field who verify it as novel and worthwhile. It is then included in the knowledge system of the domain.

Within print journalism, the domain includes such rules and procedures as the inverted pyramid, short, sharp pars, style guides, ethical and legal considerations, and news values as well as ideological rules such as the Fourth Estate, the public's right to know, truth and objectivity. The domain also includes "all of the created products that have been accepted by the field in the past" (Sawyer 2006, p. 125). These are the cultural structures the journalist works within. The field, or social structure, is made up of editors, sub-editors, other journalists, media owners and the audience, to name a few. The individual is, of course, the journalist with their background and personal attributes and knowledge of the domain and field.

The research is using ethnographic tools – semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and document and artefact analysis – as well as content analysis of newspapers to determine if a print journalist can be a creative producer of cultural texts. Up to the time of submission of this paper, 36 interviews have been conducted with members of the field – editors, journalists and cadets – from Australian newspapers and magazines. The participants were questioned about such things as their background, their knowledge of the journalistic domain, how they write an article, how members of the field affect their work processes and how they work within the rules and procedures of the domain.

However, one of the first items on the agenda was to determine if a print journalist can be a producer of creative cultural texts. It was discovered through the literature review that while *creative* and *creativity* are frequently used within a journalistic context it is rarely defined. Additionally, within the industry itself, journalism awards and the Australian journalism grading system use the terms without elaboration. All these instances expect the audience to understand what is meant and it does, but in a common-sense, person-centred way not within an academic framework.

Creativity

Arguments about the source of creativity are long-standing and have shifted along a continuum from Plato's divinely inspired poets (Plato 1971), to the Artist as individual source, and finally, to the post-structuralist view of the audience as the creator of meaning (Barthes 1977). However, it is still common to believe in the individual as creator (Sawyer 2006) although current research is exploring theories where more than one element must be present for creativity to occur – the individual situated within the context of culture and society .

Because of the belief of the individual as creator, much research has been done on identifying characteristics of creative individuals (for a comprehensive summary of creativity and personality research see Runco 2007, pp. 279-317; Sawyer 2006, pp. 39-56) and these ideas are what drive many of the references in the journalism literature. Characteristics such as divergent thinking (Guilford 1967) – fluency of thinking, originality and flexibility in thinking – and lateral thinking (De Bono 1967) are well known. While these characteristics may be important in the creative personality, an individual and their personality is only one aspect of what constitutes creativity and it is crucial to take social and cultural contexts into consideration as well. Csikszentmihalyi (2003) argues creativity is inherently social and although the above personality traits may be necessary for the individual to produce creative products, public recognition cannot be discounted. Creativity is "a phenomenon that is constructed through an interaction between producer and audience" (2003, p. 314). He further contends that an individual must refer to an existing culture, the traditions and conventions already in place, before a difference can be produced: "'New' is meaningful only in reference to the 'old'" (2003, p. 315). To summarise both points: How do we know something is creative if it is not presented to a social group for verification and how do we know something is creative if we have nothing to compare it to?

The definition for creativity in this PhD research is based on McIntyre's: "creativity is an activity whereby products, processes and ideas are generated from antecedent conditions by the agency of someone, whose knowledge to do so comes from somewhere and the resultant novel variation is seen as a valued addition to the store of human knowledge" (McIntyre 2006, p. 202). Following this definition, print journalists can be said to produce creative texts.

This, however, leaves another question to be answered: is news production a creative activity?

Creativity researchers Keith Negus and Michael Pickering note that for the most part, creativity "entails putting together various words, sounds, shapes, colours and gestures in a recognisably familiar and *only slightly different way*" (2004, p.70, my emphasis) and this is what the journalist does: uses recognised formats, constantly refers to previous stories, and follows the rules and preferences of the domain and field. Ian Ward states that, in journalism, "each news story told is not created afresh. Rather it is written against the backdrop of – and borrows from and adds to – similar, previously written stories" (1995, p.113). These observations coincide with current research within the creativity domain. Rather than creativity being seen as the antithesis of tradition and convention, in line with the Romantic myth, it is understood that it is these very traditions and conventions that allow for creativity. Creativity researchers Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi (2003), Margaret Boden (2004), Keith Sawyer (2006) and Sharon Bailin (1988) all argue the case that without knowing and understanding what is in a domain, an individual cannot produce, and a culture cannot recognise, a creative product.

Creativity in journalism literature

Although a number of texts from the literature review state that journalists need to be creative, it is a notion that is seldom expanded. *Creativity* is used in a number of different ways within journalism's academic writing: there are appeals to write creatively (Herbert 2000, p. 11); it is listed as a positive trait for a journalist (Conley and Lamble 2006, p. xiv; Sheridan Burns 2001, p. 33; Tapsall and Varley 2001, p. 4; Willis 2003, p. 66); lack of creative opportunities leading to disillusioned practitioners (Hirst and Patching 2005, p. 68; Underwood 1993, p. xx); and, conversely, the opportunity for creativity in journalism attracting "creative people to the media" although this "exerts a pull toward more interpretive news formats that let them express their creativity" (Lichter et al. 1986, p. 19).

The last point highlights the idea that feature writing is perceived as more creative than hard news (Daugherty 1999; Maskell and Perry 1999). In fact, it has been argued that there is no place in hard news for creativity; it is

formulaic or "a grey block of form"[1] (Ricketson 2004, p. 228). The main objective of hard news is factual information, quickly found and quickly reported, whilst feature writing contains "emotion and analysis as well as information" (ibid.). Writing feature articles is seen as a more creative, less constrained, genre of journalism (Randall 1996; Schumacher et al. 1989). Sara Niblock also differentiates between hard news and feature writing and the distinctions perceived between the two forms:

> While in newspapers and other hard news media, words are used simply and concisely, magazine articles are often longer and more detailed and have to paint an intricate picture for the reader. This means magazines can be a rewarding career opportunity for the journalist who wants to use language and vocabulary more creatively (1996, p. 77).

Niblock's contention implies that hard news journalists are so constrained they cannot be creative producers and is an example of the Romantic notion that freedom from constraints equals creativity. This is an argument that is unsustainable under a Rationalist view of creativity. If the journalist uses the structures for the genre they are writing for, and produces a novel and acceptable text that is verified by the field, a creative text is not only possible but plausible.

As well as academic writings, members of the field use *creativity* without defining the concept. Tom Salom in *Journalism: jobs that make news* says that: "While dealing with facts is top priority, being creative as to how those facts can be presented is also essential for any modern day journalist" (in Solly et al. 2007, p. 54). John Hartigan (Radio National 2002) believes it is his role as Chief Executive of News Limited to manage creativity and channel it into a commercial product to ultimately provide quality journalism for the audience. Paul Kelly, discussing his time as editor-in-chief of *The Australian*, considers how commercial and entertainment pressures affect the industry and challenge creativity (1998, p. 21). Apart from the ambiguity in the way *creativity* is used, these last two comments show how management

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[1] Although Matthew Ricketson describes hard news as formulaic, it is important to point out that he says "in straight news reporting the emphasis is on gathering and reporting factual information as quickly as possible. It is no insult to say that in a literary sense straight news reporting is formulaic. The need for speed dictates a formula that once learnt is never forgotten" (2004, p. 149). In line with this paper, I would argue that it is a formula that allows the journalist to be creative in the content of the news article.

views the structures in the industry: Hartigan sees them as enablers and Kelly perceives them as constraints.

In addition, a number of awards within the journalism domain specifically call for creativity in their criteria. The Bruce Jesson Foundation in New Zealand provides funding "for critical, informed, analytical and creative journalism or writing" (Bruce Jesson Foundation 2008) and the Melbourne Press Club/Trawalla Foundation awards a scholarship "to promote excellence, creativity and originality in reporting, reviewing or critical appraisal of the visual or performing arts" (Melbourne Press Club 2008). The Australian Walkley awards overarching criteria is: "Overall judges will be looking for journalistic courage and creativity" (The Walkley Foundation 2008) although within the print section the *Newspaper Feature Writing and Magazine Feature Writing* category is specifically judged on creativity but the *News Report* category is not, again in line with the Romantic ideal.

Finally, an interesting quirk within the journalism domain is the definition of journalists' pay grades posted by the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance (MEAA). According to this document, in a grading system that starts at cadet level and ends at Grade 10, a journalist does not need to be creative until Grade 5 is reached. Following are the instances when creativity is mentioned:

- Journalist Grade 5 – "Display a degree of creativity and innovation and independence in carrying out assignments" (MEAA 2008).

- Journalist Grade 7 Band 3 – "Their duties require the exercise of sustained high levels of professional, technical and creative skills" (ibid.).

- Journalist Grade 8 – "He or she will have mastered the advanced skills and will also be capable of displaying high creativity, originality and analytical ability in a range of assignments" and "Exercise a significant degree of creativity, originality or innovation" (ibid.).

- Journalist Grade 9 – "He or she will have mastered the advanced skills and will also be capable of displaying high creativity, originality and analytical ability in a range of assignments" (ibid.).

From this the following questions can be asked: Up to Level 5, is the journalist supposed to produce uncreative work? and How are the different degrees of creativity defined? If McIntyre's definition of creativity is used,

journalists from cadet level through to the highest grade can produce creative work.

Structures as constraints?

The structures that govern the print journalist's writing are frequently seen as constraints to production (Berkowitz 1997; Machin and Niblock 2006; Ricketson 2001; Sigal 1973; Stocking and Gross 1989). In each element of the systems model, structures can be found: in the individual, in the field, and in the rules and procedures of the domain. However, it is important to note that in any creative production the structures worked within should not only be seen as constraints. They are also enablers (Boden 2004; Giddens 1984; Wolff 1993). It is how the journalist, as agent, learns and uses these structures that lead to creative texts. Tony Harcup sums this up:

> Within the study of journalism, agency means the extent to which individual journalists can *make a difference* to media practices and content … To say that journalists have agency is not to deny that journalists operate in a world of constraints, but to argue that structural forces do not totally determine individuals' actions (Harcup 2004, p. 6, emphasis in original).

In fact, Herbert Gans (1980) argues that learning and knowing these structures allow a journalist to get on with what he [sic] does best; he does not have to think about what he [sic] is doing. It is this tacit knowledge that enables a journalist to 'do without thinking'. Donald Schön calls this "knowing-in-action" (1987, p. 37). Pierre Bourdieu's (1977) habitus also corresponds with these theses: a journalist is predisposed to act *because* of these structures although, as Johnson argues in line with Harcup, habitus "does not negate the possibility of strategic calculation on the part of agents" (1993, p. 5). In other words, the individual uses their habitus to make creative choices.

Within the first element[2], the individual, a journalist's background and personal qualities have an effect on the writing. Influences such as family, education, social class and cultural background (nurture) all contribute to a

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[2] Please note that discussing the individual as the first element in no way indicates that it is more important than either the domain or the field. The choice to start with the individual is an arbitrary decision.

journalist's view of the world as does talent, genetic predisposition and personality traits (nature). This is the individual structure a journalist works in: "Newsworkers also influence news production unconsciously because, like all humans, the 'lenses' of their personal histories and self-interest shape news" (McManus 1994, p. 26). Working within the domain and with the field also means these structures are constantly changing.

Within the field, or social structure, newsroom influences are seen as a limitation (McNair 1998; Sheridan Burns 2001) particularly with the hierarchy in the newsroom changing a journalist's article (Carlyon 1982; Sigal 1973). Henningham claims that: "The group nature of journalistic production is itself a major constraint on individual control" (1989, p. 27) and it would seem that if edited how can the print journalist be considered a creative producer? However, Sawyer, discussing fiction writing, poetry and scriptwriting, lists three 'lessons' that relate to writing: it is hard work, it is conscious and directed, and *it is collaborative and embedded in the social* (Sawyer 2006, pp. 206-210, my emphasis). Sawyer cites well-known poets and authors, including T.S. Eliott and Raymond Carver, whose work, in a similar fashion to journalists', was heavily edited by the field before publication.

Other influences from the field include media owners (Harcup 2004; Henningham 1989; Machin and Niblock 2006) and the audience (Berkowitz 1997; Machin and Niblock 2006). Hesmondhalgh, talking about cultural production in general, made the following observation:

> Conflicts between independence and external control should not be understood as zero-sum games, where, for example, greater constraint by owners and managers automatically leads to less creativity on the part of film-makers, journalists and musicians: in some situations, political or economic constraints can produce probing journalism and innovative entertainment" (2006, p. 51).

In regards to the audience, the adherence of print publications to a specific format gives the impression of routine and unoriginality. However, it can be argued that it is an audience's need for familiarity or ontological security (Giddens 1984) that promotes this perceived constraint: the audience expects particular styles in both writing and format from particular publications (Chandler 1995; Newman 1989). Hall notes that if journalists, "constantly broke the codes, people outside wouldn't understand them at all. So they need

to be operating within a certain set of discourses, but adapting that to the particular stories that they are trying to tell" (2002, p3).

Within the domain, it is the rules and procedures that can constrain journalists. However, rather than calling them constraints it is more pertinent to call them conventions, keeping in mind the earlier argument of the importance of learning the traditions and conventions, or rules, of the domain. Examples within journalism include the style of publication (Harcup 2004) – is it a broadsheet or tabloid. As Ian Ward has said: "Each medium has a distinctive news format and imposes quite distinctive rules and work practices upon journalists working within its confines" (1995, p105). Other rules are the conventions of newswriting (Herbert 2000): the shape of the story e.g. the inverted triangle approach in hard news; the basic questions of who, what, why, when, where and how (Harcup 2004; Lamble 2004; Perry 2005); and, the application of news values (Conley and Lamble 2006; Perry 2005; Sheridan Burns 2002; White 2005). There is also a style guide the publication uses to guide the journalist (Cameron 1996).

The media organisation worked for is also seen to limit agency (Altheide 1974; Berkowitz 1997; Fishman 1980) due, in part, to economic considerations (Fishman 1980; McNair 1998; Ward 1995), which is also related to competition (Machin and Niblock 2006; Manning 2001; McNair 1998). Further to this, legal and ethical implications need to be allowed for (Cunningham 2006; Harcup 2004; Henningham 1990; Machin and Niblock 2006).

However, one of the largest conventions a journalist is subjected to is the deadline (Fishman 1980; Gardner et al. 2001; Harcup 2004; Machin and Niblock 2006; Manning 2001; McNair 1998; Sheridan Burns 2001; Tapsall and Varley 2001; Tiffen 2006). As Manning notes:

> It is the cycle of news deadlines that drives the journalists' routine within a news organisation … it is this, more than anything else, which shapes how each news worker goes about her or his work, and which determines both the constraints and opportunities of the job. In other words, most news journalists and news workers have to meet deadlines as a matter of routine, and they will develop a number of techniques and organisational practices in order to accommodate this imperative (2001, p. 54).

With newsroom budgets decreasing and management's desire for audience share and profits increasing, and a very definite deadline, it is easy for a journalist to take shortcuts to produce a story – use press releases verbatim, use information directly from news wire services, use easily accessible sources. Amabile and Tighe (1993) call this satisficing: only doing as much as is necessary to get a task accepted. Conversely, in line with the above arguments, time constrictions can lead to excellent journalism and it has been noted that some journalists thrive under the pressure of deadlines (Meunier 2004, p. 21).

The belief system of the domain governs both the practitioner's practices and the public's perception of the profession. Tapsall and Varley state that, "the principles of professional journalism are to tell the truth, minimise harm, act independently, and be accountable" (2001, p5). The MEAA Code of Ethics (MEAA 2008) embodies these principles: Honesty, Fairness, Independence, Respect for the rights of others. Objectivity, the notion that "there are independently verifiable 'facts' that can be separated from subjective values" (Franklin 1997, p177), is another belief system that governs journalism although many journalism texts now advocate fair and balanced rather than objective reporting (Carlyon 1982; Conley and Lamble 2006; Downie Jr and Kaiser 2003; King 1997; Lamble 2004; Soloski 1997; Tapsall and Varley 2001). Other examples include fundamental ideologies such as freedom of the press and the Fourth Estate.

All of the above can limit a journalist's agency and not every article produced will be considered a creative product. However, it is possible for a journalist of *any* genre to utilise these exact same structures as enabling factors. As Sheridan-Burns suggests, "many journalists, well aware of the constraints under which they work, find ways to write stories they can be proud of" (2001 #54, p. 37}. To further strengthen this argument, we can refer back to Gans (1980), Schön (1983) and Bourdieu (1977) who all argue that the tacit knowledge a journalist has allows them to 'do without thinking'. Manning contends:

> This is where human agency meets social structure. To adapt a phrase, journalists may make their own news but they do not make it just as they please under conditions chosen by themselves but under circumstances directly encountered, given and determined by the rhythm of the news organisation (2001, p. 54).

This conditioned agency is as valid for a hard news journalist as it is for a feature writer, an opinion piece writer, a review writer, a magazine writer, etc. Furthermore, the phrase can be adapted to be an appropriate comment for any writing domain.

Conclusion

This paper asserts that print journalists are creative when they understand the rules and procedures from the domain, understand the preferences of the field and use this knowledge to produce an article that is novel and appropriate. A print journalist cannot be considered creative within the common-sense, Romantic view but by placing the journalist, as individual, within Csikszentmihalyi's systemic Rationalist approach and viewing the social and cultural contexts as of equal importance within the creative process, all genres of journalism can be seen to be able to produce creative cultural texts. Rather than using a narrow, person-centred view of creativity, encouraging a broader understanding could lead to better journalistic practices.

In the PhD thesis, *Was there much blood kid?: cadet journalists in Australian media,* Mandy Oakham made the following observation:

> If senior journalists are incorporated as part of the method [of inculcating cadets] then it has to be asked what are the implications for innovation if what has gone before is always presented as best practice? Where indeed when one trainer explicitly states, 'we are trying to create journalists in our own image, it is a chance to shape people' and further, 'we try to influence them culturally'. The constant emphasis on replication would seem to leave little ideological space for the notions of innovation and change (2004, p. 140).

I would answer that question by saying that it is important for a journalist to learn the traditions, the existing structures of the domain and the preferences of the field before they can introduce innovation and expand the domain. I say this because of the understanding in the creativity research domain that creative producers must learn the rules, or structures, and traditions of the domain before they can become a "skilful bender of rules" (Evans and Deehan 1988, p. 33). Creativity researchers such as Bailin (1988), Csikszentmihalyi (2003), Boden (2004) and Sawyer (2006) stress the importance of domain acquisition before a creative contribution can be made.

Rather than regarding tradition as being in opposition to innovation, "creative talent requires a tradition so that it can learn how to go further within it, or beyond it" (Negus and Pickering 2004, p. 91).

As to a definition for creative print journalism, the paraphrasing of McIntyre's (2006) definition can be expanded on:

> Print journalism is a product and process where a journalist, with their talents and background, learns and uses the rules, procedures and previous work in the journalism domain to write an article that is both novel and appropriate to the context it is written for. The article is presented to the social group for verification and acceptance into the domain for future reference and for the cycle to continue.

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Janet Fulton is doing a PhD in Media and Communication at the University of Newcastle, Australia. Her research is an ethnographic study investigating how social, cultural and individual influences affect how print journalists in Australia produce, or create, their work. Janet also teaches into the Communication degree at the University of Newcastle as a casual tutor and has worked as a research assistant in the School of DCIT. Her research interests include communication, journalism, creativity and cultural production.