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Revisiting the creative/commercial clash: an analysis of decision-making during product development in the television industry

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This article is based on the findings of primary research undertaken in 2007/8 into the activities of British television companies involved in programme selection and development. Specifically the research explored organization, process and decision-making in and around the selection of programme ideas and their passage through the various organizations involved in programme development up to and including final commissioning by the broadcaster.

The output of the research does much to confirm the findings of previous cultural industries researchers in a variety of areas, but perhaps more significantly begins to question the enduring accuracy of a number of long-held assumptions about why organizations in cultural industries are organized and function as they do.

This article will focus on one aspect of this: the perceived differences in agenda between commercial and creative constituencies in organizations within cultural industries (specifically mass media entertainment companies) and the degree to which this clash is one of the primary shaping forces of organization and behaviour in the sector.

The article reviews a necessarily broad and indicative range of previous work in the area of media production studies, and attempts to identify key biases and omissions, before describing findings of the current research and discussing their implications.

The sociological perspective

Sociologists have a long tradition of exploring media production. Central to many such investigations are questions of how broader societal characteristics

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such as power structures, modes of production and issues of gender, race and culture play out in cultural production and consumption. Hence the production of cultural items is used as a field to explore bigger issues of inequality (Bourdieu, 1984, 1993), or the ability of mass media organizations to commodify culture and 'dumb down' audiences (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977 [1944]).

Specific work on the nature of production and how ideas are selected and changed as they move through companies in the cultural industries reflect a variety of different theoretical perspectives. At a macro level, Peterson and Berger (1975) and Tarrow (1985) theorize that explanations of company behaviour (particularly around creativity, innovation and the diversity of product output) are best sought through an analysis of broad changes in the economic cycle and market structure of the cultural industries. Hence their theories revolve around predicting the degree of product innovation evident in a market as a function of the number, type and competitiveness of companies active in it.

Macro theories are complemented by a range of more organizationally focused approaches. Hirsch (1972) and Peterson (1976, 1982, 2004) characterize the activities of cultural industries organizations in selecting products as a series of filters and flows. Peterson's 'production of culture' theory points particularly to how such filters, that is organizational roles, processes and decision criteria, 'constrain aesthetic choice' (Hirsch and Fiss, 2001), a theme that constantly appears in sociological enquiry.

Ryan's (1992) work offers a more detailed description of such processes in the publishing sector, identifying major devices used to manage the development and production of products, for example the use of formats, while at the same time alluding to broader issues of modes of production and social structure as explanatory factors for the functioning of production activities.

Negus (1992, 1999) offers perhaps the most integrated set of approaches and findings to date. He explores the interaction of a variety of organizational functions such as A&R and business affairs in the identification and selection of product ideas, while acknowledging the importance of social characteristics like the personal background of senior staff, and the impact of market and industry-wide developments on such selection decisions.

Organizational, process and market-based approaches emerge in the specific study of television production and again much of the theory focuses on the constraining character of each. Seminal pieces of research by the likes of Elliott (1972) Silverstone (1985) and Dornfeld (1998) have examined individual programme creation projects. Others have focused particularly on specific roles in product creation, for example those played by producers (Cantor, 1971; Newcomb and Ally, 1983), or on production in individual institutions (e.g. Born's [2004] study of the BBC) and in specific markets (e.g. Gitlin's [1983] and Cantor and Cantor's [1992] reviews of the operation of the US television markets).

Still other studies have set out to look at production through a lens of particular theory; for example, following on from Gallagher's (1983) comprehensive and valuable analysis of control and constraint in media organizations, Berkeley's (2003) use of a theory of constraints as a way to explore British drama production.

The economic and management perspective

The interest of economists in media has typically focused on questions of market and company efficiency, the allocation of scarce resources and industry policy. Theoretical perspectives have varied, including the theory of the firm, structure, conduct and performance models and resource-based views (Mierzewska and Hollifield, 2006, offer a thorough review of such theoretical approaches).

In terms of how organizations make decisions around product selection, particularly in television, economists have contributed rather less, in terms of sheer volume, than sociologists. Central to work that has been done are highly quantitative programming models first developed by the likes of Steiner (1952) and Beebe (1977), and continued today by researchers like Bourreau (2003). They theorize that, however complex the reality of day-to-day decision-making, programming choices can be predicted through the manipulation of a relatively small number of variables (e.g. the number of television channels on offer) in a variety of competitive market scenarios.

In the US, a significant body of work has emerged around cable television programming strategies (Eastman and Ferguson, 2007; Vane and Gross, 1994), though this is generally focused less on production or pre-production decision-making and more on content acquisition, scheduling and promotion of finished content.

Collins et al. (1988: 9) use the language of mainstream management when exploring the production function in media organizations. They briefly develop the idea of the creation of cultural products as a type of R&D, with each programme or book a prototype launched to the market. In this environment, production is actually reproduction. This work is typical of much of the output of economic literature in this area, in that such insights, while valuable, are typically a way of getting to the real area of interest, that is, implications for policy issues and prescriptive analysis of the efficient functioning of companies and markets, rather than the description or analysis of the operation of actual processes within organizations.

However, more recently, a number of researchers have emerged with a broader agenda and have begun to deploy a more managerially and operationally focused approach to the examination of media companies, including Hoskins et al. (1997), Küng-Shankleman (2000), Aris and Bughin (2005), Chan-Olmsted (2006), Lampel and Lant (2000) and Lampel et al. (2006). But while

they offer significant insights into the organizational and management contexts for such activities as product creation (e.g. Lampel et al.'s [2006] work on Irving Thalberg in the film industry), they have yet to turn their attention to a detailed exploration of production or its associated processes.

Another strand of management research intruding into the study of cultural production explores the intricate and complex relationship between management, creativity and innovation in both cultural and more mainstream organizations (Bilton, 2006; Bilton and Leary, 2002; Perretti and Negro, 2007; Thompson et al., 2007). The focus is particularly on the cross-fertilization of ideas between the two sectors, but again, specific detail about organizational structure, process and decision-making is often lacking.

Hence one of the biggest gaps in the economic study of media (and to lesser extent management studies to date), at least in terms of media production, is a lack of attention to specific case studies of organization, process and how individual decisions are taken (see for example Picard, 2002: 1). Caves (2000) also notes a lack of economic tools to tackle questions of why cultural industries are organized as they are. To deal with this he advocates the explanatory benefits of analysing the contracts used to regulate the activities of creative and support staff. While this is a useful and more practical turn, again he does not probe operation of individual companies in any detail and, in stressing contracts between artists and organizations, misses the increasing importance of contracts between corporations.

As this brief review concludes, it is perhaps worth noting the news genre as a special case in media production studies, as the single genre that has received the most consistent attention from researchers and which has been explored from the greatest number of the above-mentioned perspectives. While other media and genres have apparently been subject to the waxing and waning of academic interest, news, particularly on television, has attracted consistent and detailed attention from academics, perhaps due to its overwhelming power to influence audiences and reflect the interests of powerful corporate hierarchies and professional groups like journalists. But, I would argue, in no other media or genre have researchers built up quite this level of understanding of how content is selected for development.

Key biases and gaps in the current body of research

Hence a significant body of research exists on media production. It demonstrates, inevitably, major biases and gaps based on who has been doing the research and the perspectives that have framed the theory being tested. Sociologists have generally focused on micro organizational issues of structure, practice and role, linked to macro societal issues like power relations and themes such as inequality and autonomy. Hence this body of theory focuses on the explanatory benefits of looking to wider social issues in trying to understand media production processes.

Economists, in terms of media production, have generally adopted a more macro view of industries and markets rather than the detailed description of actual process and structure within companies. Recently there have been some attempts to look for commonalities in these social and economic perspectives (e.g. du Gay and Pryke, 2002; Ray and Sayer, 1999), but little attention has been paid to media production. There have been few, if any, serious attempts to synthesize work from these various schools to develop an integrated theory of media production, combining theoretical and empirical inputs at the industry, market, organizational and individual level.

Throughout the work that has been conducted, however, a number of findings have emerged so consistently that they have almost taken on the status of dogma. Occasionally, the overall operation of media companies then has been characterized as a single-minded production line issuing standardized products to create profit (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1977 [1944]). Far more often, it is characterized as field of struggle (Bourdieu, 1993).

One aspect of this struggle (and, according to some, one of the major forces that shapes the organizations within the cultural industries) is the often-described conflict between creative and commercial constituencies. At its very heart are the apparently conflicting agendas of each group, the way that 'commercial and administrative goals appear to conflict with an artistic and creative system of values' (Elliott, 1972: 11) leading to mutual suspicion and the development of 'a separate professional ideology' (1972: 11).

DiMaggio characterizes these goals as 'the aspirations of artists for creative expression and the desires of management to be able to predict and control' (1977: 443), and, as far as management is concerned, perhaps the additional desire to generate acceptable returns on risk and investment. Others use different language but suggest similar differences in aims and agendas (e.g. Hallin, 2000, on commercialism versus professionalism in news media).

Throughout such commentary there appears to be an in-built assumption that these aspirations are antithetical, that they cannot exist simultaneously without creating significant organizational conflict. This is partly explained by the nature of the processes by which these aspirations are pursued. On the one hand there exists a set of artistic processes wherein 'the arbitrariness of creation defies reduction to precise universal operating rules' (Ryan, 1992: 110). Management processes are characterized as relying on rules to ensure certainty and control of creative aspirations, with the aim not of product diversity or high-quality cultural items 'but ... [of] higher profits' (Cantor and Cantor, 1991: 60).

Management and their activities are consistently characterized as a constraint on the 'professional autonomy or creative freedom of individuals' (Ettema and Whitney, 1985: 8). In some cases this may lead to the effective destruction of creativity in an organization, an argument central to Born's (2004) study of Birt's tenure at the BBC, through creative isolation, alienation and antagonism (Ross, 2007; Scase, 2002; Towse, 1992), the theme of much sociological enquiry into media production.

In the context of this clash of objectives and processes, much of the research work on media production focuses on the struggle of wills between the creative and the commercial. The power of this basic conflict to shape the sector is revealed in structural and managerial features apparently evident in companies in the cultural industries.

First, commercial and creative activities and agendas are separated into different parts of the organization or project team. Creative issues and aims are considered to be the province of writers, script editors, actors, directors and, to some extent, producers. Non-creative activities and goals are the province of typically full-time 'humdrum interests' (Caves, 2000: 1), including lawyers, finance and administrative staff, marketing and sales teams, and general management. Further, in order to control these groups we note fundamentally different approaches to management, a more bureaucratic, tight control of distribution activities and other non-creative functions, and a 'looser' management style when dealing with creative staff, though this may take place in the overall context of strict financial parameters set by senior management and other functions (Frith, 1983; Negus, 1992; Ryan, 1992).

As part of this looser style when managing creative staff, we also note the use of specific 'tools' to control them. Ryan, for example, describes product formatting as 'the principal mechanism of bureaucratic control within the [creative] labour process' (1992: 126), as 'a system of creative control' (1992: 177), steering 'the otherwise uncontrollable artist to corporate goals' (1992: 178).

Ultimately, DiMaggio (1977) suggests that, given this division between creative and commercial agendas and approaches to managing them, a particular form of administration has emerged to cater to their various requirements. He describes the 'negotiated administration common to all the cultural production industries as brokerage administration' (1977: 442), distinct from craft and bureaucratic administration due to its inherent 'ambiguity, informality and [reliance on] negotiation' (1977: 442).

DiMaggio appears to use the term 'brokerage administration' in two ways, as a descriptor for a style of management, but also as a position, either in the industry value chain or within the cultural organization itself. Hence he variously describes the creative company as broker (e.g. between advertisers and creatives), but also notes the existence of brokers as a tier of employees within the company (1977: 443).

Ryan (1992) also notes the existence of this tier of staff, calling them creative management, potentially including (according to your translation) what Bourdieu calls 'new cultural intermediaries' (1984), whose key role is to juggle commercial and creative issues within the organization (Wright, 2005). Hence companies in the cultural industries will typically have a tier of staff whose primary role is to mediate on a day-to-day basis between the interests of creative and commercial constituencies.

But throughout all of this work (perhaps with the exception of Negus) the agendas of non-creative constituencies are largely assumed. When they are

mentioned, it is usually from the perspective of creative staff in their role as constraint (see, for example, Born, 2004). Very little primary survey work has been done among non-creative functions (e.g. programme finance executives, business affairs, general management and support staff) to explore their perspectives directly.

There are of course textbooks on media law and advice on accounting for intangibles (Buigues et al., 2000), and pieces have been written on issues such as budgeting television productions (Stark, 2006). But very little primary research has been done on how non-creative functions are organized in large entertainment companies, their major activities, how they interface with creative staff and, indeed, their views on their own activities. Their voices have simply not been heard.

The whole issue of the degree to which the operation of media companies can be characterized as the conflict between competing agendas lacks simple empirical backing. We have one side of the argument, the creatives', but not the other.

Inevitably, in any organization, there will be clashes and disputes based on the 'localized rationalities' of different functions and tiers of employees. These conflicts occur throughout all large-scale organizations and have long been acknowledged and studied (see Cyert and March, 1992). This is particularly so in the area of new product creation (Xie et al., 1998). But is the clash between creative and commercial interests the best way of articulating conflict in modern media companies? Is it the best and most analytically fruitful lens through which to view media production? Does it really shape activity and structure to such a great extent that it can be considered a defining characteristic of the cultural industries? Are these differences as evident, immutable and universal as many suggest? The research study set out to explore these among a variety of other issues in the television sector.

The research

The research study was undertaken among a selection of broadcasters and major independent production companies in the UK during 2007/8. The aim was to create a comparative map of structure, process and decision-making around the selection of ideas and their early stage development up to commissioning of ideas by broadcasters. Further, the aim was to include functions usually excluded from media production studies, that is the non-creative functions, including business affairs, scheduling and finance executives. The study focused particularly on decision-making processes, their steps, participants and criteria. Interviews were conducted with senior creative and commercial staff, including commissioners, producers, schedulers, heads of genres and business affairs executives.

The work focused particularly on the drama genre and the sample included staff from BBC, ITV, Channel 4, major producers within the broadcaster (e.g. BBC Vision Productions) and major independent drama producers. Forty-five interviews were conducted at a variety of levels covering the majority of senior management and many of the staff involved in commissioning and developing drama in the UK, representing creative and non-creative constituencies.

Research findings

The research revealed a very complex decision-making environment for product development, involving a wide range of participants, institutions, processes and individual decisions. A number of major themes emerged as particularly significant, mentioned in summary form only here.

A perhaps surprising degree of similarity in approach to product development among organizations was evident: structure and process in broadcasters were closely matched. While there were of course variations around job titles, overall size, scope of activity and level of formality, broadly speaking structure, process steps and criteria in decision-making were very similar. The same was true among the sample of production companies.

At the same time, commissioning and development systems within broadcasters and production companies were subject to regular change, even on a daily basis. These included major changes to overall structure (e.g. the introduction of e-commissioning systems) to subtle changes in how a process was run to accommodate working partners. Detailed analysis of system change has attracted very little attention from academics (compared to changes in overall industry structure for example), with the implication that systems are relatively monolithic and unchanging. This was not the case in this research.

A significant number of different types of decision, based on a wide variety of criteria were evident. Previous analysis of decision-making has attempted to draw very broad conclusions about overall characteristics (see for example Ryan and Peterson, 1982: 22–5), or has characterized decision-making as broadly simplistic (Born, 2004, on ‘pitch talk’). Existing approaches do not capture the diversity and complexity of day-to-day decision-making associated with pre-production, uniting as it does multiple organizations, participants, criteria, agendas and perspectives.

The degree of innovation evident in content and process was significant. Content production in television is often criticized for a lack of innovation, or at least an over-reliance on pre-existing formulas and formats (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Born, 2004; Gitlin, 1983; Ryan, 1992). The research revealed a significant amount of innovation in a variety of forms, not only in content, but also in organization, process, deal structures and financing. The existing rather limited definition of innovation needs to be refined and expanded by future researchers to fully capture this diversity.

In terms of this article, however, perhaps the most interesting findings were around how individual decisions in product selection and development were made. While decisions were diverse in nature they tended to revolve around three areas according to interviewees. To summarize, these were the creative idea; the project that turned the idea into a programme; and the programme as product (i.e. does it deliver the right content to audiences and the right audiences to advertisers?).

At some point in the life of most programme ideas they will be considered from all of these perspectives. In terms of formal decision-making responsibilities in organizations, these concerns appeared broadly to gravitate to different functions; for example, commissioners, producers and writers were particularly focused on creative issues; business affairs, producers and finance staff the project; and schedulers and channel heads focus on the product. But the degree to which these groups and their concerns were mutually exclusive was much less clear. For while formal decision-making remits exist (e.g. typically the final commissioning agreement must be signed off by the head of genre and channel head) they reflect only a very small part of the overall process of decision-making.

Much of the early assessment and development of ideas appeared relatively informal, through a series of emails, casual discussions or telephone calls. At this point, both in production companies and broadcasters, a wide range of issues, both business and creative are being considered very rapidly by a variety of different functions, but these were not particularly segmented along organizational lines:

We think about a lot of things ... is it interesting, can we make it, can we sell it? ... It tends to all happen at once ... but we don't do a huge amount of work on it at this stage, it's more gut instinct. (Head of Drama, production company)

The researcher's discussions with television workers revealed that even the most junior creative member of a programme development team was acutely aware of and considered (at least to some extent) the issues that business affairs and schedulers had to deal with. They were conscious of audiences and where the potential programme might fit into channel schedules. They were deeply aware of budgetary issues. These issues, along with other, far more creative ones, were factored into their decision-making. Writers, perhaps the most creative of constituencies involved in drama production, appeared to have a 'built-in' understanding of the implications of their creative output for areas like budgets and audience profile when crafting their treatments and scripts.

Equally, business affairs staff were very aware of creative issues. They were often the main negotiators with key creative workers, writers, directors and their agents. They would usually sit in on early-stage creative meetings; they were heavily involved in finding creative and funding partners. Increasingly they are co-located with creative staff. As one interviewee suggested: 'If we weren't interested in creative work we'd be working in another sector.'

Schedulers, for many part of the non-creative workforce in broadcasters, were acutely aware of the need for programmes that were creative and innovative in a schedule, both in terms of achieving audience goals (size and shape) and for the genre group to continue to attract creative talent. They made up their own minds about the creative strengths or weakness of a project in conjunction with a thorough interrogation of potential audiences in individual schedule slots.

Channels need to do risky things to get profile and attract talent... If you keep making the same stuff, over time the implications are inevitable ... you lose audience, you have to find material that can do the same job better. (Head of Scheduling, major terrestrial broadcaster)

In production companies, there was an even greater sense that staff and management simultaneously adopted a pragmatic, mixed agenda of business and creative issues in their decision-making

You can't just focus on big, worthy marquee productions where you join a queue to work with a high-profile writer for two years, and when you get it he takes half the production fee. That's not a business... When you get overheads you need a popular returning series to underpin a business. (Head of Drama, independent production company)

Certainly senior creative management were often recruited for their creative sensibilities (cf. Gitlin, 1983):

You always have to rely upon your own personal taste ... and belief and a passion in what you are going to do... If I'm going to do something for 12 to 18 months, it's a big percentage of my career, I have to love it. (Head of Drama, independent production company)

But the same producer suggested 'an idea never gets developed without knowing exactly who [which broadcaster] it's for'.

Hence, while passion will take the development and selection process so far, unless there is a potential product and consumer at the end of it, an idea is unlikely to go the distance. Even the most junior staff were inculcated with an understanding that ideas needed to be commissioned by specific channels with specific audience and 'business' goals.

Decisions were conceived and made with an eye to the concerns and agendas of other departments and broader strategic and commercial issues. Creative and commercial issues were jointly considered. This was not slavish devotion to satisfying the next executive (as characterized by Gitlin, 1983) but a mature consideration of the totality of issues to be considered in developing and commissioning a programme.

While conflict did exist at a variety of levels, it did not necessarily line up neatly along a commercial/creative battlefield. Often the battle lines were

over creative issues: which programme would be developed, what would the particular look of the programme be? And in making decisions, commercial and creative issues were not seen as particularly antagonistic, but merely part of the realities of programme-making. Decision-making was not characterized as the clash of two very divergent agendas, but rather the more subtle interplay of mutually influential factors dictated by a generally realistic view of what television drama is there to do.

In terms of organizational structure, then, there are clear divisions between functions (particularly creative and commercial functions). However these divisions are far less rigid when it comes to describing decision-making, which is what most staff spend most of their time doing.

Discussion of findings

Where then is the clash of agendas? Where is the inevitable and insoluble conflict of aims between the artistic and business communities requiring dedicated staff to manage it? The previous description outlines a much less tidy and predictable approach to decision-making, which contrasts with the clear battle lines described by previous researchers.

A number of potential explanations lie behind this apparent departure from existing theory. Perhaps differences have been vastly over-emphasized, a function of the way in which the sector has been examined. Perhaps in the past differences were more obvious and significant, but changes are taking place, agendas are becoming similar or other agendas are becoming more dominant (e.g. retaining employment). The departure from expected findings may be more to do with the subject and research method; hence findings are peculiar to this piece of research and sample. Each of these explanations will now briefly be considered.

A matter of perspective

It could be argued that perhaps there never has been as extreme a difference in agenda between creative and commercial staff, particularly in large mass-media organizations, as has been portrayed by academics. By concentrating on the assumed agendas of creative and commercial constituencies, and focusing almost exclusively on creative constituencies as sources of information, a rather one-sided image has emerged. This happened to suit a critically biased view of the world, and a desire to trace broader themes of conflict, inequality and exploitation through the media production field.

Given the absence of detailed analysis of the activities of non-creative constituencies, it has been relatively straightforward to assign them a specific and narrow commercial agenda and outlook without much fear of contradiction.

But in this research there is an overriding sense that staff in non-creative functions are in the sector because they have creative sensibilities, are interested in the creative product and are able to factor creative issues into their decision-making.

Equally, writers and other core creative workers were described as ‘canny’, ‘greedy’ and generally commercial in their negotiations around rights, revealing an understanding of their value in market terms and of the potential for downstream revenues.

they [writers] want a big share of the production fee, they want input over change of format if it gets exported ... they will want deal approval and a share of the back end. (Senior business affairs executive)

And surely, it has always been so; artists can display a highly commercial and business-oriented dimension to their creation; they satisfy an audience of some form in order to put food on the table. Creative staff in the television industry (writers, directors and actors) have an equally well-developed understanding of market and business issues.

So have things changed?

Changing conditions

It could be argued that in the past commercial and creative differences have been more acute than they are today. Changes over time have helped to blur the boundaries between creative and business decision-making as organizations have become more coordinated, new information is brought to bear on decisions, existing functions have become more powerful and organizations have grown. Hence creatives have moved closer to their commercial counterparts and vice versa. One commissioner noted how, in a more managerially driven and coordinated broadcasting sector, product is as important as the creative idea:

There is no point in trying to develop something unless it's clear where it is going to go in the schedule and you have the channel's backing.... Things used to be less coordinated and you might take a chance ... but we also ended up with three lawyer-based series for one slot.... Now ideas are interrogated more ... they will be stopped before they get too far if it's not really obvious where they go [in the schedule]. (Commissioner, major broadcaster)

In the broadcasting sector, increased competition and the maturation of the scheduling function and consumer research generally has encouraged the use of data in creative decision-making which might not have been available in the past to ‘interrogate’ ideas more fully. It could be argued that such data might constitute ‘business-oriented’ material as it often addresses the product/market

sphere in a particular, business-like way (e.g. matching product characteristics to consumer demographics) and hence creative decisions are moving closer to business oriented ones.

Equally, we have seen a broadening of those involved in decision-making and perhaps a shift in power, from a situation in the past in which:

they [business affairs and finance] were there to rubber-stamp deals ... deals [between commissioners and producers] were done over dinner ... they were not really involved beyond this ... (Head of Drama, broadcaster)

to one in which:

In the future we will go where our head of business affairs tells us ... because it's the management of rights that's become more important as the means of distribution becomes more fragmented and complex. (Head of Programming at a major terrestrial broadcaster)

While the complete domination of business affairs is unlikely (and probably quite unwelcome), this is perhaps indicative of a shift in power in development decision-making to more commercial constituencies. But this may be a symptom of a much larger change. The television sector has witnessed a major movement, in the last 15 years, from a distribution-based economy, where limited competition ensured that distribution on terrestrial networks, while difficult to secure, ensured large audiences for broadcast programmes, to an attention-based economy where securing distribution is easy, given the large number of channels and distribution platforms, but gaining significant audience attention (viewing) is increasingly difficult. This has arguably led to all workers in television taking a greater interest in that most commercial of issues, the audience, their needs, wants and views.

Equally, the increasing facility of producers to retain rights in programmes has allowed the emergence of larger-scale companies that arguably need a greater level of business input in order to function. When broadcasters were paying 100 percent of production fees in the 1980s and acquiring all the associated rights, it could be suggested that operating a production company (from a business point of view) was more straightforward. With the growth of secondary markets and rights retention by production companies, it is arguable that more business input (planning, forecasting, sales activities, administration) is required if production companies are to maximize the value of retained rights.

Hence, as production companies have broadened their scope and increased their size, they have required relatively more administration and management to function effectively. Ostensibly 'creative' producers have thus been forced to become more business-oriented as a result of these changes. Perhaps then we have entered the television equivalent of Hallin's (2000) 'total newspaper' environment. While this may be true, it is at least as likely that independent producers have always had to have a balanced business and creative sense,

and that recent developments have only served to emphasize already evident characteristics.

Changes in employment practice (e.g. the move to a freelance economy) might also be highlighted as a significant force for major change over the last 15 years. Whatever the cause however, the lack of empirical evidence from past studies of how these apparently different agendas manifest themselves (particularly the lack of empirical evidence about the activities of non-creative elements) makes any assessment of the historical element of this argument (i.e. is it down to historical changes?) difficult. While the argument may 'feel' right, that change is the major driving force behind the apparent blurring of agendas, it is difficult to prove conclusively.

It's just TV, it's just product development

This apparent blurring of agendas may be a function of product development in the television sector in the UK at this particular point in time. Certainly the study has identified a number of factors that characterize this environment, which might contribute to this apparent blurring of boundaries.

The study noted the significant movement of staff between sectors and company types in television, for example producers become commissioners and vice versa on a regular basis:

There is an awful lot of movement between broadcasters and production companies ... poacher turned gamekeeper is when things work at their best.... It happens a lot and it does help; it leads to an understanding of what it's like on both sides of the fence. (Head of Drama, production company)

Even the most cursory examination of those running major production companies and heads of commissioning groups reveals that most had worked 'on the other side of the fence' at some point.

It could be argued that this movement might imbue staff with a broader perspective, taking in commercial, creative, supply and demand aspects of the business. Equally, it may be that television tends to attract more 'balanced' workers in the first place. By its very nature, television tends to attract creative and commercial workers who have a more rounded view of the products they create and the process required to create them than other creative sectors. The most artistic and creative workers may throng to more 'artistic' mediums (theatre, installations, etc). The most brutally commercial lawyers will work in investment banking practices. When creative and commercial workers enter the television sector, they know what they are getting into and what is required of them, producing programmes to please audiences, and ideally the biggest relevant audience possible.

In terms of the macro environment, it might be suggested that this blurring is there as the result of the presence of an 'independent' supply sector that

needs to market its creativity to distributors and financiers (and does this partly by stressing its relevance to certain audiences), but also has to operate in a commercial way itself in order to survive and prosper. Finally, it may be that the existence of a public service broadcasting ethos in the UK has helped to maintain a creative agenda alongside one dictated by market forces. In other countries, like the US, where public service broadcasting is weaker, it is arguable that commercial agendas are more dominant (see Cantor and Cantor, 1992; Gitlin, 1983) and their interaction with creative ones might be characterized as more of a clash.

Other than the public service broadcasting element, however, similar characteristics to those noted above are apparent in some other entertainment sectors (e.g. the games industry and music sectors), and hence the more blurred boundaries between commercial and creative decision-making noted in the television sector might also be evident there.

Finally, it might be argued that this is a phenomenon characterized by activities around product development, and that outside this sphere, clashes between commercial and creative agendas are more common, overt and cantankerous. This is a difficult point to address. At the heart of the problem is partly a lack of definition from previous researchers of what constitutes the core elements of a creative and commercial agenda. DiMaggio only gets us so far. Without such a categorization, gathering and analysing evidence from relevant processes and activities is difficult. We lack an empirically based description of how creative and commercial agendas evolve and manifest themselves in different companies and sectors. What, then, constitutes a commercial versus a creative agenda in cultural companies? Is this just making money versus making art? How and where do these barriers break down? Are new activities emerging that blur the boundary, for example rights management? How should they be defined?

A definitive answer to these questions was beyond the scope of the research, but it should be noted, finally, that in framing the research, product development was deliberately chosen as the space where clashes might be apparent, mainly because it involves the interaction of a large variety of different creative and commercial functions (in a way the operation of a make-up department does not), and that such tensions were observed in similar product development activities in other industrial sectors.

It's just this study, just this sample

As with any primary research, the findings are subject to their own biases in choice of interviewee subject, question focus, response, recording, etc. It could be argued that that the study did not consult a sufficient number of 'artists' and it is only they who can articulate the clash more clearly. The views of a number of well-known writers were drawn on, but generally the focus was indeed skewed towards what potentially might be considered less

creative roles (e.g. commissioning executives, genre and script development staff). Equally, it might be argued that a greater focus on the project form of media production might reveal rather more detail on the clash between functions and agendas.

In terms of research method, it could be argued that a more discreet, ethnographic approach would have revealed more conflict and that interviewees may have played down the degree of conflict in order to portray their organization in a positive light. In terms of the ethnographic approach, it too is vulnerable to accusations that such an approach might not reveal the true nature of decision-making, but rather the types of behaviour that participants wish to be observed. It is also arguable the researcher might not have secured access to meetings with very senior staff (particularly those that involved significant areas of corporate strategy) had an ethnographic approach been pursued.

A different approach

Whatever the conclusion, it seems clear that a conflict-based approach is but one way of exploring media production, and that other approaches may be equally, if not more analytically fruitful, in examining activity and process in media production. The decision-making approach taken in the research for example has revealed a number of new perspectives on relevant issues.

Rather than the primitive, functionally divided chain-based decision-making process that has been described in media production in past studies, the research highlighted pattern-matching, as described in naturalistic decision-making models of experts (see for example Beach, 1990; Orasanu, 1993; Rasmussen, 1983) as a potentially valuable insight into, and explanatory device for, creative and commercial decision-making among staff and management in media organizations.

Pattern-matching allows a wide range of both commercial and creative issues to be considered simultaneously in comparing new ideas to previous experience. It produces what appear to be quite instinctual decisions on how to proceed, whether to broadly accept or reject an idea, which elements of the idea, project or product need to be finessed and monitored carefully in the development process, and how the concept might be sold to relevant constituencies. Other schools of decision-making theory, both rational and behavioural, may have further insights to offer.

Conclusions and implications for research

Historically, researchers have sought clashes in the process of media production and inevitably have found them. In terms of the culture industries, these

conflicts have been bundled together as examples of the enduring and defining clash between artist and commerce, a convenient categorization that maps easily to organizational structure. The reality of decision-making, revealed by this study, is less clear-cut.

Adopting a decision-making perspective has revealed a number of apparent challenges to the existing model. Decision-making in media production, and particularly the early stages of idea selection and development in television, is complex and involves many different decision types, constituencies and agendas. But their concerns are far from mutually exclusive: decision-making criteria are diffuse and do not respect functional lines. Rather than a clash, the research reveals the subtle interplay of a wide variety of factors that do not fall neatly into either category, or, if they do, are not considered solely by the relevant functional specialist.

Decision-making analysis then allows us to access, from a somewhat different perspective and perhaps one they did not anticipate, what Nixon and du Gay call 'the interdependence and relations of reciprocal effect between cultural and economic practice' (2002: 498).

A variety of potential explanations for these findings have been suggested, some of which focus on the particular characteristics of the television sector and the specific type of worker it attracts. However, there appear to be sufficient similarities to other sectors to suggest that such conditions might exist elsewhere, including the games design and commercial music sectors.

Hence the study points to a number of issues around the apparent clash of agendas in cultural companies that warrant further investigation, including the way in which commercial and creative agendas and activities are defined in a variety of different sectors, and the degree to which the structural or practice-based characteristics of particular industries tend to blur them.

At the very least, further research is required into the conduct of non-creative constituencies in a variety of functions (and sectors), particularly in terms of their organization, how they interact with creative processes, and their own views of their activities and agendas. Issues of change would also need to be considered, including the degree to which creative and commercial boundaries are becoming blurred through organizational responses to perceived environmental changes and the degree to which business functions are increasingly taking on roles that have a creative element, for example the management of rights.

Finally, further research might usefully be undertaken into the degree to which decision-making models like pattern-matching, as yet largely untested in the media environment, can offer new insights into the views and actions of individuals and the operation of processes in media production.

While conflict-based approaches have sustained the examination of media production for the last 40 years, it is arguable that other perspectives, as yet relatively unexplored, including decision-making studies, can offer useful and valid insights into the potentially changing character of media production

in organizations. This may lead researchers to critically review some of the basic tenets of thinking they have inherited from previous work in the field, and, with the significant and ongoing change apparent in the media industries, it is arguable that this re-examination is necessary and perhaps overdue.

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