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## **From Store Clerks to Google Searches: Curating and Filtering Information in the Cultural Economy**

Sponsored by the Economic Geography Research Group (EGRG)

### **Organizers:**

Patrick Adler - University of California Los Angeles

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### **Session Abstract:**

Digital technologies have dramatically altered the production, promotion, distribution and consumption of cultural products. While 'off the shelf' software has lowered barriers to entry for producers, increasing the ranks of musicians, artists, designers, videographers, and craftsmen, web commerce allows consumers to buy directly from producers located around the world. As a result, the contemporary marketplace for cultural products is characterized by infinite choice for consumers and intense competition for producers. Yet, whereas geographers have studied the marketing strategies that producers use to 'stand out in the crowd' exactly how consumers find, evaluate and choose specific alternatives remains poorly understood. One emerging trend is the rise of 'curation'. Although intermediaries are less needed to physically distribute products, the demand for their ability to sift through the options and provide customized buying recommendations is growing. Therefore, the role of 'curator', an agent who filters information and performs the function of choice, is more common and important than ever. These intermediaries can be professionals (paid technology reviewers, personal shoppers), or people that recommend for free to friends and 'followers'. Crucially, despite the rise of mass-curation through online channels such as blogs and micro-blogs, the demand for face-to-face interaction and personalized advice means that digital technologies have not eliminated the importance of spatial proximity, the attachment of products to 'authentic' places and key spaces of cultural consumption such as record shops, fashion boutiques and art galleries. Drawing on diverse conceptual, empirical and geographical perspectives the papers in this session explore the 'curation economy' in greater detail by questioning how curators help consumers choose cultural products and how spaces are implicated in this process.

## **Session 1**

**Chair:** Patrick Adler

### **'Amazon' is not a Place: Exploring the True Origins of Digital Books and Music**

Patrick Adler - University of California Los Angeles

### **Festival as curator in the international film economy: a Toronto case study**

Amy Cervenak - University of Toronto

### **Repositioning a City on the Internet through a Cultural Facility**

Beatriz Plaza - University of the Basque Country

### **Making value by making sense – curators and knowledge production in the art world**

Melanie Fasche - HafenCity University Hamburg

### **Cultural Gatekeepers of the Restaurant World: The role of professional food critics and social media in the cultivation of taste and the business of food**

Vivian Wang - University of Southern California

## **Session 2**

**Chair:** Melanie Fasche

### **Like a bull in a china shop? The relentless role of Internet-enabled technologies in restructuring the Canadian book trade**

Jeff Boggs - Brock University

### **The social life of mediators: the everyday making of the indie music scene in contemporary Chile**

Arturo Arriagada - London School of Economics

### **Redefining Retail: A Study of Independent Fashion Retailers in Dundas West, Toronto, Canada**

Taylor Brydges - University of Toronto

### **'You Can't Find This Online': Curation and Consumption in Local Record Shops in Stockholm**

Brian J. Hrac - Uppsala University

### **Discussant:**

Oliver Ibert - Leibniz-Institute for Regional Development and Structural Planning

## **Abstracts**

### **Session 1**

#### **'Amazon' is not a Place: Exploring the True Origins of Digital Books and Music**

Patrick Adler - University of California Los Angeles

Digital technology has lowered the barriers to production and consumption of cultural products. Recently consumers needed to be physically proximate to a marketplace in order to purchase books and music there. Technology has untethered consumers, bringing the marketplace to their fingertips and allowing for media to be 'transported' from far away, often instantaneously. On the production side, the costs of getting content to the market have declined. Where recording studios and printing presses were once perquisites for publishing, today bedroom artists can self-publish to digital platforms with millions of subscribers.

Twelve years since the launch of Napster, hopes (or fears) that the geography of cultural production would be transformed have not been realized. Music production centers such as New York, Los Angeles, London, Mumbai, and Nashville still create their own orbits. Book publishing is still based in a handful of places. Superstar producers still exist, even while niche genres have emerged. Beyond these obvious facts, technology's impact on the geography of cultural production is poorly understood.

Using original datasets for music and books, this paper investigates whether digital cultural products are distinct in their place of origin. Preliminary analysis acts a vehicle into a discussion of networks and cultural production. Here, the paper marshals recent discussion about "curation" to explain its empirical findings. It argues that while products themselves are no longer limited by physical constraints, access to appropriate intermediaries, is still spatially determined. Only when returns to agglomeration among these actors, are eliminated will cultural geography be transformed.

#### **Festival as curator in the international film economy: a Toronto case study**

Amy Cervenak - University of Toronto

The cultural industries are characterized by uncertainty, competition and abundant choice. This is certainly true and increasingly pronounced for screen-based media, where the proliferation of digital cameras and screens has democratized the making of moving pictures. We all have stories to tell. On film, some stories are better told. Most never reach their audience. The path from concept to consumption for film, is complex and requires a tremendous amount of information gathering and filtering at many stages in the process. This is not a new challenge for filmmakers creating experiential, cultural goods for a market; what has changed, however, are the types of intermediaries active in the variegated curatorial process. My research examines an under-studied yet crucial player in the curatorial space: film festivals. In particular, international film festivals with

active, if informal, markets shape the curation and filtering of information in the cultural economy in two ways. First, as a place, festivals function as a key site of social interaction which fosters industry learning and discerning about product and production processes alike. Second, as an actor in their own right, festivals produce knowledge and judgements through the slate of film screenings and industry workshops they program. Drawing from research interviews and event ethnography of the Toronto International Film Festival, this paper offers insights in the relevance and impact of film festivals on the industry through their curatorial influence.

## **Repositioning a City on the Internet through a Cultural Facility**

Beatriz Plaza - University of the Basque Country

Purpose – City-Image-Makers continue to draw upon cultural policies in order to diversify economies and regenerate urbanity. Cultural facilities, such as art museums, housed in architecturally iconic structures can amplify cities' visibility and increase the attractiveness of a place. In some cases, such as the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, iconic art museums have aided in repositioning postindustrial economies.

The Guggenheim Museum Bilbao (1997) opened around the same time as the Internet boom. The heightened use of New Media more than likely leveraged it an additional advantage in the form of more rapid information publication, attracting a large number of foreign visitors. Working under the assumption that effective cultural brands can heighten place visibility and generate economic activity, we ask:

- (1) How effective is the Guggenheim Museum Bilbao in connecting Bilbao with top tier, world-class cities? (RQ1)
- (2) How effective are these connections with top tier world-class cities in repositioning Bilbao? Do world-class cities function as 'curators' (drivers)? (RQ2)
- (3) Can the research questions 1 and 2 (RQ1 and RQ2) be verified through online press? Can the 'power of press' reposition a city on the Internet?

Methodology – This paper addresses these questions by Social Network Analysis of online press data.

Findings – An iconic cultural facility in combination with New Media can alter the spatial distribution of cities on the Internet. Furthermore, direct connectivity to world-class cities (powered by a cultural facility) can fuel digital association growth.

## **Making value by making sense – curators and knowledge production in the art world**

Melanie Fasche - HafenCity University Hamburg

This paper focuses on the role of selection and curating in the process of knowledge production and valuation in the cultural economy. Cultural markets that are characterized by unlimited consumer choices and wide access to information and in which economic value is largely determined by immaterial qualities such as novelty, design, reputation and meaning make orientation and selection necessary. It is argued that market orientation is increasingly provided by curators who make pre-selections and contextualize cultural products within a broader discourse over time and space.

This paper builds on continuing work on the value making process of contemporary visual art. Here, it will briefly reflect on the long tradition of the practice of curating in the art world as well as recent shifts in curatorial practices and their organization. The paper will show that curating or making sense of contemporary visual art production by selecting artists and their artworks for exhibitions, creating intellectual frameworks, and promoting this knowledge to a wider audience is a socially and spatially entangled process that may or may not generate economic value over time.

Thus, as the practice of curating is proliferating who decides what becomes widely recognized and successful in the market and what remains rather invisible and fades away? It will be argued that for the determination of economic value the role of curating needs to be conceptualized as part of a competitive process within a larger selection system.

## **Cultural Gatekeepers of the Restaurant World: The role of professional food critics and social media in the cultivation of taste and the business of food**

Vivian Wang - University of Southern California

Restaurants are a part of the “cultural industries” as they are a taste driven industry where the evaluation of food and dining experience is subjective. Cultural gatekeepers play a significant role in the cultural industries and often impact the reputation of products and whether the products reach consumers. It has often been said that restaurant critics may “make or break” a restaurant, but is this true given the rise of Web 2.0 and the abundance of restaurant reviews on user-generated websites? How do gatekeepers impact the popularity of eating establishments and contribute to the business of restaurants? This paper examines whether the restaurant industry, namely restaurant critics, are linked with one other. How are restaurant critics, the restaurant industry “gatekeepers” connected to other restaurant critics? Using a combination of

social media (e.g. Twitter, Yelp) and professional restaurant reviews (LA Weekly, LA Times) I analyze how these two types of reputation sources interact and impact each other. The overarching goal of this paper is to understand the gatekeeper network underpinning the restaurant industry and how these networks influence diners in their patronage and participation in such social media.

## **Session 2**

### **Like a bull in a china shop? The relentless role of Internet-enabled technologies in restructuring the Canadian book trade**

Jeff Boggs - Brock University

Echoing the fate of the recorded music industry a decade before, North America's English-language book publishing industry teeters on a precipice. In Canada, Internet-based innovation batters this fragile cultural industry. All nodes of its production system — but especially manuscript selection, editing, marketing, printing, wholesaling and retailing — have restructured as Internet-enabled innovations open new possibilities for competition, revenue and specialization. For instance, while nationalist market protection in the form of cultural industry policy has protected the brick-and-mortar retail monopolist Indigo/Chapters, publishers large and small — whether foreign- and domestically-controlled — have adopted a range of online and social media practices to position their titles before an increasingly digitally-mediated readership while circumventing Indigo/Chapters shelf-space monopoly. By reducing start-up, transaction and production costs, these same technologies allow small Canadian publishers to sell not only in the US e-book market, but also in the traditional US book market. With a website, a print-on-demand provider and an electronic retailer (e.g., [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com)), anyone with digital editing skills and access to manuscripts stands a chance — however small — of becoming a profitable publishing enterprise. Coupled with what Richard Caves over a decade ago called the 'art for art's sake' and 'nobody knows' properties of cultural industries, these technologies enable increasing number of titles to enter the market, as a large and constantly refreshed pool of hopeful fiction authors, often incubated in genre-based fan communities, feed fresh manuscripts into this evolving production system.

### **The social life of mediators: the everyday making of the indie music scene in contemporary Chile**

Arturo Arriagada - London School of Economics

This paper aims to understand how processes of cultural mediation are performed and experienced in a particular creative industry in contemporary Chile. Its focus is a group of music fans that create websites about Santiago's indie music scene. It will focus in particular on the material practices around the qualification and organisation of flows of goods (local and global) and the role of technologies –websites and social networking

sites- as devices through which culture and markets are connected, mediated, and also constructed. Mediation is broadly understood as meaning and value assignment of global and local cultural flows whereby they are transformed into something valuable in market conditions. This understanding draws together Pierre Bourdieu's 'cultural intermediaries' (1984), cultural economy, and other mixed theoretical frameworks for exploring the material practices and social relations of mediators with different actors that convert the music scene into a niche marketplace.

The paper is based on eight months of fieldwork (2011) in Santiago (Chile), following the everyday practices of a group of "mediators" (Latour, 2007), the creators of eight music websites through which global and local flows are mediated and organised. The paper explores the relations between mediators, markets and market agents represented by branding consultants, as well as marketing executives. This stage involve issues about, mediation of flows (e.g. goods, music, brands and identities) from global to local through technological uses, the professionalization of mediators' practices and their role at music events as an stage where the market and the scene is assembled in a "niche market".

### **Redefining Retail: A Study of Independent Fashion Retailers in Dundas West, Toronto, Canada**

Taylor Brydges - University of Toronto

The notion that consumption defines our identity is nothing new. Indeed, in 1899 Veblen argued that consumption is the way we define ourselves in the world. Today, the importance of shopping as a strategy to generate value continues to grow and fashion in particular has become the quintessential signifier of taste and status. Yet, as the contemporary marketplace becomes increasingly saturated with how do consumers choose what to buy and who helps them in this process? Although often overlooked, retail workers play a vital role as style curators for their customers, their store, and even their community. Moreover, independent and vintage clothing stores, contribute to the hipster subcultures within 'up-and-coming' neighborhoods. To explore these issues, this presentation uses a case study of Dundas West Toronto and interviews with independent fashion retailers who have been the definitive style curators of this neighbourhood. The findings demonstrate that these workers serve as the physical embodiment of this subculture, blur the boundaries between production and consumption and carefully curate and craft the aesthetics of the local marketplace. As such, the presentation examines their evolving skill set and the ways in which these curators are rewarded, both monetarily and psychically. In so doing, it is argued that because the nature of service work in these independent retailers is increasingly autonomous and flexible, it should be considered creative work.

## **'You Can't Find This Online': Curation and Consumption in Local Record Shops in Stockholm**

Brian J. Hracs - Uppsala University

As digital technologies democratize the tools of cultural production and create new channels of global promotion and distribution, cultural producers face intense competition to 'stand out' in the growing crowd. In the music industry, where iTunes offers over 30 millions songs, this pressure is particularly acute and geographers have examined the strategies that music producers at different scales use to generate distinction, value and loyalty. Yet it is equally important to consider how consumers find, evaluate, and select specific products from a sea of alternatives. To date, the people who help to make these choices, the interactions between curators and consumers and the physical and virtual spaces where advice is created and distributed remain poorly understood. This presentation will explore these processes by drawing on new interview and observation-based research in local record shops in Stockholm. As firms like iTunes, Amazon and Spotify push the boundaries of e-commerce by using customer tracking data to make personalized recommendations and offering home delivery or instantaneous streaming to mobile devices, this research considers why consumers are willing to pay a premium, in both time and money, to patronize bricks-and-mortar shops. In so doing, it identifies different sources of value, including face-to-face curation, that make some local record shops attractive and resilient spaces in an age of digital distribution and on-demand consumption.