

## **Cultural intermediaries or pragmatic deal-makers? Local government officers and their contribution to the cultural ecology of cities**

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### **Abstract**

The cuts in local government funding during the last ten years of 'austerity' in the UK have led to major reductions in staffing and service provision with the consequent loss of expertise and experience across departments. This article examines whether the decline in numbers of local government officers with knowledge and experience of working in support of arts and culture has left a serious gap in the cultural ecology of major cities like Birmingham. I contend that these officers should be regarded as 'cultural intermediaries' and that they have played a significant but relatively 'unsung' role in facilitating relationships with and between external organisations across cultural, creative and funding bodies. Drawing on my experiences as an officer working for the Birmingham City Council between 1988 and 2008, I seek to illustrate the mediating activities undertaken and the professional and personal qualities necessary for acting as a cultural intermediary. Based on the qualifying attributes for a cultural intermediary identified here, I consider that there is a case to be made for local government officers with the necessary professional expertise and social capital to be considered as cultural intermediaries. I further maintain that the reduction in the numbers of local government officers with the requisite experience as well as expertise is detrimental to the cultural ecology.

This paper has been prompted by a case study on the Birmingham-based creative industries company Beatfreaks which I am undertaking as part of my doctoral research. As part of this study, I have been following Beatfreaks' organisation of their Brum Youth Trends Survey 2018 and getting involved in the analysis of its findings. This year's survey into what it is like to be young and living in Birmingham follows a pilot undertaken in 2017 and, as with its predecessor, has attracted a high level of interest from both public and private sector decision makers and influencers. The company seems able to command the respect and gain the ear of local politicians, officials in the public sector and members of the business community on the one hand and of young people on the other. This observation has led me to consider the

place of Beatfreeks within the cultural ecology of Birmingham and whether the actions by Beatfreeks to establish a new form of dialogue between recipients (policymakers) and generators/creators (young people) of ideas constitute the work of a cultural intermediary. It has also prompted me to reflect upon my own agency as a local government officer in Birmingham facilitating relationships with and between external organisations between 1988 and 2008. This often involved shaping/matching/interpreting public policy objectives in relation to arts and culture to the objectives and values of the city's cultural and creative community as well as to those of other public bodies. As my study of Beatfreeks is still in its early stages, I will use my previous personal experiences working for Birmingham City Council (BCC) to reflect on the role of local government officers as cultural intermediaries and their contribution to the city's cultural ecology (Holden, 2015).

According to Smith Maguire and Matthews, cultural intermediaries "impact upon notions of what, and thereby who is legitimate, desirable and worthy – and thus, by definition, what and who is not" (2012: 552). Yet a definitive description of cultural intermediaries remains the subject of extensive debate, particularly as the political, economic and cultural contexts in which they operate are constantly changing with the arrival of new forms of cultural goods, markets and regulatory frameworks. This has encouraged a broadening of the notion of cultural intermediary to embrace "a wide variety of people working in advanced services" (Kuipers, 2012:584) and to the application of new lenses to their study such as that offered by economic sociology. I am not aware, however, of local government officers being included as a specific group - even in the expanded categorisation of 'cultural intermediaries'. Yet many may have mediated or navigated between political, economic and cultural objectives in various capacities such as officers in the arts, museums, PR, events, finance and economic development. Hence my decision to share reflections on their agency and possible role as cultural intermediaries and to offer a response to the provocation: 'Are we all cultural intermediaries now?' which was posed by Smith Maguire and Matthews in 2012 in their editorial for the *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, as I believe the question continues to be relevant to Cultural Studies research today.

My career with Birmingham City Council spanned a period when the City Council was engaged in a lengthy programme of what has been described as culture-led

urban regeneration in which ‘the arts’ formed part of strategies for the physical and social regeneration and destination marketing/image making for the city. I contend that there is a case to be made for some public officials to be regarded as cultural intermediaries according to Bourdieu in the sense of “taste-makers” and “match-makers” between people and things (Bourdieu 1984:243) and as market actors involved in mediating between culture and economy (Callon et al, 2002). As such, they should be included in “the complex interdependencies that shape the demand for and production of arts and cultural offerings” (Markusen, 2010:8); in other words, the ecology of culture.

I begin by exploring the political and economic background to the period in question to set the context for the transactions which took place between the local authority (together with its private and public sector ‘partners’) and the creative and cultural community and to locate local authority officers in this environment. I go on to consider the structures within which officers such as myself worked and the constraints upon our agency. Amongst such structures, I include the hierarchy of local government, national government’s representation in the West Midlands region (GOWM), business and marketing networks and other institutions such as the Arts Council of England. In examining how to navigate through these structural minefields, I begin to consider the significance of officers’ occupational expertise to the building of mutually beneficial relationships between the funders and intended recipients of public funding. I then move on to a more detailed exploration of the importance of professional expertise and personal habitus in differentiating between officials who facilitate and those who act as cultural intermediaries.

### **Context**

The context in which I worked was shaped by Birmingham City Council’s determination to re-structure the city’s economy and revitalise its image in response to the dramatic decline in traditional manufacturing of the 1980’s. The plans for the economic regeneration of the city were closely aligned to the need to invest in its physical infrastructure including reclamation of brownfield sites, improved transport links and high quality facilities designed to make the city more attractive to companies seeking to relocate and to business visitors who might become investors. In this, the City Council was influenced by the Highbury Initiative of 1988 which

brought together a range of local, national and international architects, planners, politicians, cultural leaders and other professionals to consider what could be done to transform what the architect and planner Teun Koolhaas called at the time: "the most chaotic city I've ever seen." They provided a 'blueprint' for the development of distinctive quarters around an expanded city centre. At the same time political interest was growing in the 'Creative City' agenda which included a role for culture within urban regeneration strategies. For example, a state-of-the-art concert hall for the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra was integrated into the plans for the new International Convention Centre in the city centre. Leading artists were commissioned to enhance the public realm, for example Tess Jaray's mosaic across Centenary Square and Dhruva Mistry's sculpture the river (or as it was affectionately called 'The Floozie in the Jacuzzi') in the newly pedestrianised Victoria Square. More arts companies were added to Birmingham's portfolio of grant-aided organisations. The commitments of the political and officer leadership of the City Council to the enhancement of the city's national and international image through its cultural offering framed the work of local authority officers in a number of different departments - notably those concerned with economic development, planning, promotion and external funding.

### **Structures**

The first stage in my 'apprenticeship' as a cultural intermediary came at the beginning of my career with Birmingham City Council in 1988 when I was appointed to the post of Assistant to the Director of Birmingham's Centenary Festival to mark its centenary as a city in 1989. My credentials included a track record of negotiating sponsorship for arts projects, including an understanding of business priorities and budgets, and familiarity with the arts scene. My role was to liaise with the business sector to secure sponsorship particularly for arts projects (notably from the subsidised sector) which would enhance the year-long programme of sports and entertainment activities. I had also lobbied local Council and Arts Council England (ACE) officers so I had some insights into how the institutional funding systems worked. It soon became clear, however, that my understanding of my role as fundraiser for arts and cultural events was not one which some of my colleagues in marketing and promotion shared. My agency to shape the programme or persuade potential sponsors to support the festival was constrained by my comparatively low

status in the organisation. I soon realised that I had to grasp their agendas and priorities and adapt my approach accordingly, if I was to be successful in connecting the City Council with business sponsors and with a range of arts organisations across the city. Thus I sought to exercise my own agency by demonstrating competence in financial management to the finance department and in assisting Museums and Arts colleagues to secure funding for their special projects. I also found like-minded allies elsewhere in the organisation. This was my first exposure to the power that could be exercised by individual officers through their position in the hierarchy of the department to constrain my actions and authority in the organisation.

From this role I moved on to liaising with Birmingham's partner cities across Europe and then becoming a core member of a new team created to bring together finance officers dealing with major European Union (EU) funding together with networkers and project developers like myself. My career with the City Council was thus developed around EU collaborations, funding and projects involving the cultural sector. This meant working closely with politicians and senior officers in various departments of BCC as well as officials from external agencies such as the Government Office for the West Midlands, the Chamber of Commerce, Birmingham Marketing Partnership and ACE. The team was also responsible for managing Birmingham's participation in Eurocities, a rapidly expanding network of major cities across the EU. Established to lobby Brussels for more funds to tackle economic and social regeneration, it also aimed to facilitate exchanges of know-how on a wide range of common concerns such as social welfare, destination marketing and the role of culture in city-making and city-marketing. These experiences formed a major part of my journey as a possible cultural intermediary: learning to manage the constraints on my agency imposed by the increasing number of structures and networks within which I worked.

European grants were a vital source of match funding for regeneration initiatives in Birmingham during the 1990's but securing funding for capital and revenue projects involving cultural organisations, especially those in receipt of grants from City Council and Arts Councils funding met with institutional resistance. For example, our ability to assist cultural companies to access EU funding was hindered by the regulations and structures within which we had to operate. Particularly challenging

were the complex EU rules and conditions to which we had to adhere and which were overseen by a specialist team of government officials within the Government Office for the West Midlands (GOWM). In addition, there were procedures to be followed within the City Council to obtain the necessary internal political and departmental approvals to initiate projects and make/or support applications for EU funds.

### **Structure and agency**

So how did we acquire agency to do things differently? We had to construct value by mediating how these projects were perceived and engaged with by others (Amin and Thrift 2004:xv). In dealing with GOWM, we had to demonstrate expertise in the areas which their officers viewed as essential to a successful application. We had to make the case, for example, for how the project would create and/or secure jobs; how it would enable the beneficiaries to generate more income and contribute to the growth of the local economy. This meant applying formulae known to have been used and accepted previously to calculate the likely numbers of jobs to be created and the amount likely to be spent by visitors to the city, attracted to the project venue or events. We did this by seeking advice and guidance from colleagues internally with whom we already had a constructive working relationship. I myself undertook a close reading of the relevant EU rules and the guidance issued by the GOWM, before entering into any dialogue with the 'gatekeepers' and thus was able to develop a mutual trust based on respect for each other's arguments. My colleagues and I also worked to build networks of supporting organisations which could lend credibility to our project proposals and help legitimize the 'not-yet-legitimate' (Bourdieu, 1984:326). Our agency as officers facilitating these negotiations was usually helped by their being undertaken in the context of city-wide institutional acknowledgement of the importance of securing EU and other external investment in the regeneration and promotion of Birmingham and the region.

There was one issue, however, which raised doubts among City Council colleagues in other departments as well as in GOWM and that concerned projects involving the subsidised cultural sector and their potential to make a positive contribution to the city's economy. Here there may have been an unconscious bias by officers in, for example, economic development against subsidised arts organisations which could

also be described as not-for-profit. Together with colleagues from the Council's Museums and Arts teams, I argued that the subsidised cultural sector also had to operate as creative businesses, generating earned income to supplement grant aid in order to sustain and grow their activities. Moreover, their 'products' (concerts, exhibitions, plays etc.) made a positive contribution to the image and 'offer' of the city when competing nationally and internationally for business investment and highly qualified and skilled workers. To support this, we drew on research into the arts and cultural organisations of Birmingham and the West Midlands which had been commissioned previously. A key finding which we used, for example, was that the City of Birmingham Symphony Orchestra was one of the best known assets of the city internationally, helped by the growing international reputation of its then conductor Simon Rattle.

The political environment in which we operated was a significant factor in enabling myself and colleagues to counter the prevailing doubts over the value of the subsidised arts to the future economic success of the city. The City Council was committed to developing the city centre as a hub for the 'new' economy, one driven by leisure and business tourism and financial services and attractive to highly educated and skilled workers. Its leaders were influenced, amongst others, by Charles Landry and his concept of the Creative City and by examples of other cities in the Eurocities network of the effectiveness of culture-led generation. I had been party to some of the discussions and felt that I had the trust of senior officers and politicians to pursue the inclusion of grant-aided cultural organisations (large and small) in projects to raise the profile and improve perceptions of the city. Having the trust of as well as access to the key political decision-makers enabled me to counter the doubts of other officers across the City Council and from within the arms-length city marketing organisation, Birmingham Marketing Partnership (BMP). I, therefore, felt empowered to push for the adoption of my assessment of the value of including arts and culture in the city's bids for EU funding.

### **Professional expertise**

Demonstrating that I understood that support from European structural funds for cultural projects was based on their 'use value' to the urban economy was just one facet of being an intermediary. I also had to show the 'arts' community that I

understood their artistic and creative values and that I could be trusted not to compromise these in any negotiation for EU funding. I was greatly helped in this by my active involvement in the arts as both a performer with Ex Cathedra Chamber Choir and for a number of years its volunteer marketing/development officer. I had lobbied for and represented the smaller arts organisations in the city on bodies such as Birmingham Arts Marketing. I had also built up a network of contacts amongst cultural organisations and artists through working on the Birmingham Centenary Festival project.

My relationship with this sector was based on the understanding cultural producers had of my ability to protect their artistic integrity whilst at the same time giving them access to much needed extra funds. This is where I would prefer to refer to myself as a cultural interpreter (Battilana, 2006) rather than intermediary, since much turned on being able to interpret the language, priorities and codes of administrators and artists responsible for creating the 'product' to the 'consumers' (City Council, GOWM, BMP) whose officers use different language, have different priorities and codes framed by their working environment.

During the negotiations over any destination marketing project which sought to involve the major arts organisations in providing 'product' to attract more visitors to the city, for example, there would always be tension over guaranteed availability of theatre/concert hall tickets for potential visitors. The arts companies would argue that they could not risk holding off sale a certain number of tickets just in case visitors to the city decided to take up the offer at some unspecified time in the future: they could not afford to bear the risk. Yet the tourism officers could not see how else they might get measurable economic value out of including these organisations in the project. It fell to me and my colleagues to try and reconcile the two positions. Despite knowing the codes and the thinking behind them, I found it almost impossible to resolve the argument to the entire satisfaction of both sides-but any negotiator ought to acknowledge that managing reconciliation is never easy.

Another area in which cultural intermediation takes place between public officials and cultural organisations is in translating the expectations of how financial information needs to be presented and justified to satisfy the funding body concerned. Arts



organisations have long been familiar with the requirements of the Arts Council of England (aka Arts Council England or ACE) and the National Lottery but navigating an application for EU funding or other public programmes needs a close understanding of what lies behind the instructions. For example, in applying for EU funding the priority will be the positive impact on the economy whereas, for the Arts Lottery or Arts Council England applications, artistic merit and/or number of participants reached are more important. Getting involved in EU projects, therefore, may mean accessing additional resources but at what cost to the company in terms of extra time spent on administration, accounting and reporting. Will the benefits outweigh the time and trouble taken to comply? This is where the cultural intermediaries need to have built up trust with cultural 'producers' through their professional expertise, knowledge and understanding of all the parties involved and, in particular, their tacit knowledge of what lies behind the construction of, and instructions for, the completion of the application forms. All this contributes to the authority which they must demonstrate in their presence and their advice. I argue, however, that a passion for the work of the arts organisation(s) interested in getting involved in any such project is also a necessary prerequisite for developing a trusting and therefore sustainable relationship.

### **Personal habitus**

The fourth aspect of being a cultural intermediary which I wish to consider, therefore, is the importance of the personal characteristics and background of the individual in shaping the preferences of the 'consumer' (in my case, the public sector) or in instilling confidence in the 'producer'. They must be comfortable with being taste-makers and "match-makers" between people and things (Bourdieu, 1984:243) but how does this work within the context of the public sector? They must be able to engage with individuals at all levels from Chief Executive to Administrative Assistant and, in some situations, to win their respect as well as their confidence in your judgment. This calls on skills in reading the priorities and codes of anyone with whom they need to communicate which have already been referred to elsewhere. My ethnicity and my age as well as my track record in the arts and previous career as a teacher combined with my university education-in other words my accumulated cultural and social capital-gave me authority and added to my credibility with senior policymakers in both the public and the cultural sectors. This made it possible for me

to help legitimize the “not yet legitimate” (Bourdieu, 1984:326) in the context of shaping a positive public sector response to the idea that the subsidised arts sector had economic and promotional value to Birmingham.

Most of the actors I describe are not in occupations which have been identified as ‘symbolic’ or ‘cultural’ as they mediate between arts organisations (‘producers’) and policymakers/funders (‘consumers’). Nevertheless, they are key players in the urban networks which link independent artists, cultural entrepreneurs, the managers, finance officers and directors of grant-aided arts as well as commercial organisations, venues (to name but some of the constituent parts of a city’s cultural ecology). They are able to build relationships for the producers of cultural products with political and other institutional decision-makers. They can also connect them to other public and private sources of funding and promotion, because of the access to influencers which their professional position within local government gives them and their social capital, personal passion and commitment to the cause. I maintain, therefore, that their agency in the above, combined with their expertise and experience, enables them to help shape the agenda in the Bourdieusian sense as ‘taste makers’ working at the intersection of culture and economy. They should be seen as cultural intermediaries and, as such, the reduction in their numbers across local government is leaving an ever widening gap in the cultural ecology of our cities.

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