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## **Intermediaries, Work and Creativity in creative and innovative sectors. The Case of Berlin**

### **Janet Merkel, Lech Suwala**

The organisation of creative and innovative processes has become a crucial issue for workers, companies, organisations and cities in the contemporary cultural economy (Scott, 2008; Krätke, 2011). In contemporary globalized capitalism's search for alternative sources of profit, "new time-space arrangements have to be designed that can act as traps for innovation and invention" (Thrift, 2006, p. 290). Since the early 1980s, business and technology parks provide institutionalised spaces for innovation targeting high-tech start-up and knowledge flows (Brinkhoff, Suwala and Kulke, 2012, 2015). More recently, a variety of new 'performative', flexible shared workspaces with an emphasis on interactivity, sociality and community (e.g. coworking spaces, maker spaces, labs, incubators, accelerators, etc.) have emerged and address freelance workers and young entrepreneurs (Schmidt, Brinks and Brinkhoff, 2014; Merkel, 2017).

In this chapter, we explore for the case of Berlin: the intermediary practices that cluster and network managers in technology parks, hosts of shared workspaces use to enact interactivity, sociality and community-building and to create atmospheres and environments conducive to the emergence of new ideas and different forms of working together. These actors have received little attention in academic literature, despite several empirical studies pointing to their crucial role in the socio-economic formation and organisation of institutionalised spaces for innovation and knowledge creation (Brinkhoff, Suwala and Kulke, 2012, 2015) or shared workspaces (Brown, 2017; Jakonen et al., 2017; Merkel, 2019a).

The chapter highlights their intermediary role and practices in establishing social and economic relations and in facilitating a collaborative work atmosphere in which institutions, firms and individual co-workers can engage in collaborative practices and knowledge exchange. We conceptualise these practices as socio-spatial curation situated in institutional embeddings (structures), a specific mode of intermediation that aims at the creation of spaces, situations, and affective work atmospheres. By comparing coworking spaces with traditional business and technology parks, we show that community-building initiatives are now a crucial factor in both highly and less formalised environments and that socio-spatial curation has become an important element in the organisation of both techno-innovative and cultural-creative work for future economic development initiatives. The study is based on several empirical research projects conducted in the past ten years in Berlin, Germany.

By interrogating intermediaries' practices and embeddedness, this chapter makes several contributions to the tension between individual and collaborative creative practices. First, it sheds light towards a better understanding of old(er) and new(er) individual and collective ways of working and their underlying organisational structures. Second, it contributes to the discussion about different modes of intermediation (e.g. favourable workplace design, stakeholder orchestration, socio-spatial relationships via facilitating interactivity and sociality) among workers and companies. And third, it provides insights into the interplay between practices and structures of intermediation in diverse innovation and creativity settings.

## Intermediaries of work and creativity

### *Intermediaries*

Intermediation is defined “as the process of connecting actors in systems of social, economic, or political relations in order to facilitate access to valued resources” (Stovel and Shaw, 2012, p. 141). Depending on the field, intermediation can be characterised in various ways. In culture and creative industries, intermediaries play a crucial role in connecting creative producers with audiences for their products (Foster and Ocejo, 2015; Maguire and Matthews, 2014). Typically, this involves three different functions: *scanning* and *selection* activities to identify promising talents and emerging trends; shaping the *production* process to ensure a balance between novelty and familiarity of the final product and the *promotion* of the final product towards consumers (Foster and Ocejo, 2015, 6–7). In high-tech and innovative SME-driven industries, intermediaries, such as cluster or network managers, have also manifold tasks that have been characterised as follows: the *selection* of network/cluster partners, the *allocation* of tasks and resources, the *regulation* of cooperation within the network/cluster and the *evaluation* of individual network relationships, or the entire enterprise network (Sydow and Windeler, 1994, 1997).

However, in both cases, these processes rely on two preconditions. First, intermediaries need to integrate those functions into certain structures that are essential for network, cluster or shared spaces management (Suwala, 2005; Suwala and Oinas, 2012). Second, intermediaries need to allocate meaning towards their practices. In other words, *meaning making* or *being aware* (Suwala, 2014; O’Connor, 2015; Grabher et al., 2018) is necessary beyond simply *being there* (Gertler, 2003). Based on this understanding, we highlight a specific mode of intermediation that aims at the creation of spaces, situations and affective work atmospheres. We call this form of intermediation *curation*. In this context, we investigate the role of coworking hosts and cluster and network managers as curators. We find these actors do more than merely “manage” a space or cluster but engage in multiple forms of mediation to facilitate new socio-spatial relationships and create conducive atmospheres. It will be argued that introducing the notion of curation for hosts and managers’ practices sheds light on different practices that help to enact coworking spaces or clusters as creative spaces.

### *Work*

Since the 1970s, structural changes in labour markets promote the “individualization of labor in the labor process” (Castells, 2001, p. 282). These changes are fueled by the expansion of new information and communication technologies (ICT) that enable remote and distributed work practices (e.g. teleworking from home), and change significantly how, when and where people work (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005; Taylor and Luckman, 2018). Against this background, critical cultural and creative labour studies scrutinise the atypical working conditions of independent workers, such as the prevalence of freelancing (Banks, Gill and Taylor, 2013; Bologna, 2018). In particular, freelancers are exposed to a high degree of risk and entrepreneurial pressure, volatility, flexibility and precariousness in their work. With the spheres of production and reproduction overlapping, the lines of the economic and non-economic sphere and between work and home are blurred for freelance workers (Reuschke, 2016). They must organise their work environment, training and skills development, search for new contracts and work opportunities, and cope with the sequencing of intense work schedules on projects and long off times in-between (Vinodrai and Keddy, 2015). Freelance work has a crucial role in project-based forms of economic production, yet until recently, it was mainly performed at home and invisible (Felstead, Jewson and Walters, 2005; Mould, Vorley and Liu, 2014; Reuschke, 2016).

The recent expansion of ‘alternative work arrangements’ (Spreitzer, Cameron and Garrett, 2017) has “lead to the emergence and diffusion of new organisational forms and institutions” (Barley and Kunda, 2001, p. 76). We see the rise of public and private institutions, companies and services that cater to the specific needs of these workers and companies with flexible, shared office solutions. These so-called coworking spaces are shared office infrastructures where professionals can rent a desk on a flexible base and are provided with the necessary technical equipment. These workspaces match the financial conditions of freelancers since permanent offices are expensive and do not provide the necessary flexibility. Similarly, since the early 1980s, business and technology parks provide— often publicly co-funded—workplaces and laboratories with basic infrastructure (e.g. fast internet, shared meeting facilities) and idiosyncratic machines for companies. These infrastructures are only accessible for preselected young innovators or innovation collectives (start-ups) aligning with certain technology fields that have additionally successfully submitted a convincing business plan for a limited time (Suwala, Kitzmann and Kulke, 2021). Both coworking spaces as well as business and technology parks aim to raise the productivity of their members and to provide stimulating work environments that facilitate creative and innovative processes (Suwala, 2005; Merkel, 2015).

### *Creativity*

Creativity is complex and elusive. Depending on the discipline or purpose of study, definitions around creativity can be formulated in terms of a problem, product, process, person or place (Suwala, 2014). Creativity is possible in all fields of human production that emphasises “creativity as something with meaningful originality, which is useful and valuable at the same time” (Suwala, 2017, p. 95). Creativity is not restricted to the arts or culture (creation) but also encompasses scientific creativity (discovery), technological creativity (innovation) or economic creativity (entrepreneurship) (Wyszomirski, 2004).

In general, it takes a certain minimum level of originality for activities be considered ‘creative’. Whereas novelty plays the crucial role within artistic (creation) and scientific creativity (discovery), practical or societal benefit (useful) and economic benefit (valuable) are paramount for technological (innovation) and economic creativity (entrepreneurship). ‘Original’ refers to the necessary component, ‘useful’ and ‘valuable’ to the effectiveness component of creativity (Suwala, 2014, 2017). These ‘varieties of creativity’ call for different curatorial practices and work arrangements’ of intermediaries (both as individual and collectives), depending on the objectives to either squeeze out, the meaningful originality (novel ideas), the usefulness (putting novel ideas into practice) or the valuable (making profit from the novel ideas).

### Socio-spatial curation of work and creativity

While the notion of curation and the role of the curator has long been associated with the art world, the concept has moved beyond the arts to understand intermediation practices in a range of creative industries (Bhaskar, 2016; Jansson and Hrac, 2018). For example, as a form of cultural intermediation, curation has emerged as a concept to capture practices of value creation that help consumers to select among an increasing abundance of products, services and experiences (Jansson and Hrac, 2018; Pfeufer and Suwala, 2020). And curators are increasingly seen as “a catalyst who prompts dialogue by bringing artists, places and publics together” (Puwar and Sharma, 2012, p. 41). Following this notion of a curator, we conceptualise *curation* as different practices of mediating social experiences that provide some type of connection, creative engagement, learning or collaborative activity — either in framed institutional spaces of technology parks or rather loose environments of shared workspaces taking the extended understanding of creativity as discussed above (novel, useful, valuable) into account.

Against this background, we conceptualise curation practices as a form of socio-spatial curation situated in institutional embeddings, a specific mode of intermediation that aims at the creation of spaces, situations and affective work atmospheres, and that are able to invoke different ‘worlds or types of creativity’. The role of intermediaries is to orchestrating places with distinctive qualities by promoting creativity through selection and connection, creation new socio-spatial relationships among many other processes. Our analytical focus will be on the curatorial practices of cluster and network managers and coworking hosts.

## Method

By examining intermediary practices of coworking hosts and cluster and network managers, we shed light on processes that aim at creating atmospheres and environments conducive to cultural-creative or techno-innovative work. We discuss practices of *assembling*, *gathering*, *caring*, *mediating* and *translating*, and *exhibiting* and *displaying* that help to enact spaces as creative or innovative (Merkel, 2019a). We argue that community-building initiatives are a crucial factor in both formalised and loose environments and that social-spatial curation has become an important element in the organisation of techno-innovative and cultural-creative work for future economic development initiatives.

Our exploration rests on shared interest in practices concerning curation in techno-innovative and cultural-creative work. It compares across several empirical research projects we both have conducted in the past ten years in the particular context of Berlin. Merkel’s (2015, 2019a, 2019b) research focuses on work practices of coworking hosts in Berlin’s coworking scene. These accounts provide unique insights into practices of social-spatial curation in coworking spaces and the multiple ways mediation facilitates new socio-spatial relationships for cultural-creative workers. In contrast, colleagues and Suwala’s (Lange et al., 2011, Brinkhoff, Suwala and Kulke 2012, 2015) investigations concentrate on institutional embeddings and practices of cluster and network managers and their acceleration.

There were a number of common findings in our research that inspired this collaboration. Our accounts emphasise insights towards structures and practices of social and economic curation in more formalised environments such as technology and business incubators or innovation policy measures. We have triangulated our qualitative data sets consisting of interviews, documents and observations. This comprehensive material allows us to gain a better understanding of this mode of cultural and economic intermediation. We also use the comparison between cluster and network managers in business and technology parks and hosts in coworking spaces to understand the widespread application of these intermediation practices in wider urban creative economies. We employ a typology of curatorial practices of coworking hosts inductively derived from an empirical investigation on coworking hosts (see Table 1, and in particular, Merkel, 2019a) to heuristically structure our analysis.

The study is a rough and aggregate summary of conducted projects over the years with purpose sampling juxtaposing practices of network/cluster managers and coworking space hosts. It is neither a representative nor exhaustive sample, but a plausible choice to portray similar, albeit alternating curative practices that have to deal with different varieties of creativity in idiosyncratic institutional arrangements.

Curatorial practices	Coworking Host	Cluster/Network Manager
Assembling and arranging	Bringing together people, ideas, objects	Custom tailored technologies, feasibility of business ideas, strategizing on-going tasks
Selecting	Members, experts, events	Appropriate firms for technology centres incubators
Caring	Well-being of members, effective work atmosphere	Economic objectives, trust and reciprocity among similar firms
Mediating	Between coworkers, between coworkers and external experts	“co-petition” (co-operation and competition) between firms, (in-)formal rules of regulations
Meaning making and translating	Valorising freelance and independent work and collaborative workspaces	Sanctions, win-win-situations, anticipate (mega-)trends
Exhibiting and displaying	Coworking space and its spatial design, community, projects and companies	Shared and common visions for trade fairs, PR

Table 1 Curatorial practices in coworking spaces and innovation centres

## Case studies curatorial practices

### *Case 1: network/cluster managers in Berlin*

Cluster and network managers and their practices are well-documented in studies beginning in the 1990s when the paradigms of ‘hybrid /network’ organisation (Sydow and Windeler, 1994, 1997) and the ‘management of knowledge or innovation’ across firms, technology parks or territorial innovation models emerged (Suwala and Dannenberg, 2009; Brinkhoff, Suwala and Kulke, 2012). Cluster and network managers in Berlin were mostly financed by subsidy programmes or public funds with the objective that cluster or network members will realise the potential and necessity of intermediaries in the mid- or long run and finance such positions (Suwala, 2005; Lerch, 2009). Those positions were highly institutionalised and monitored through scheduled activity reports.

Reviewing the curatorial practices laid out in Table 1, cluster and network manager practices can be described as follows: *Assembling* and *arranging* comprises a large strategic potential concerning the controlled input for future activities of the network/cluster. This is a continuous activity closely intertwined with the selection task (Suwala, 2005). The *selection* task goes in line with the question who and what should be included in the cluster/network. In addition to selecting suitable network members with regard to competencies and collective goals, the domain (relevant market, technology or industry) must be defined (Sydow and Windeler, 1997). Although trust and reciprocity are crucial ingredients in practices of intermediaries (Möllering, 2012), *caring* is first and foremost closely linked to the economic objectives. Here, the issue is the efficient allocation of resources, exemplified by questions about how tasks and resources should be distributed in the network/cluster depending on responsibilities, capital, capacities and resources, and the specific competencies of the companies in the network/cluster (Sydow and Windeler, 1994). *Mediating* needs to be carried out in negotiations with cooperative and competitive objectives based on balanced partnerships of equals. Moreover, mediating is about regulation: how and by what means the completion of tasks needs to be coordinated? The focus here is the development and implementation of rules within the cooperation (e.g. formal mechanisms such as contracts or informal agreements such as oral agreements). Rules for conflict management are key (Sydow and Windeler, 1997).

The *allocation of meaning* is integrated in practices pertaining to sanctions and win-win-situations. This meaning-making is a *translation* task that needs to be executed by managers towards cluster/network members. It is associated with evaluation, e.g. the how costs and benefits should be determined and distributed in the network/cluster context depending on the performance of each individual network member or the collective success (Brinkhoff, Suwala and Kulke, 2015). Finally, cluster and network managers are responsible for shared and common vision at trade fairs, a mutual appearance and/or marketing at *exhibiting* events (Lange, Power, and Suwala, 2014).

### *Case 2: coworking hosts*

Coworking hosts and their work practices have received little attention, despite several empirical studies pointing to their crucial role in the organization of coworking spaces (Brown, 2017; Capdevila, 2014). Hosts are often the founders of such spaces (in smaller, more bottom-up coworking spaces) or hired community managers (in more commercially oriented coworking spaces). Often members volunteer as hosts and receive then a reduced membership fee for their community building work. The motivations of hosts curating coworking spaces are manifold: most aim for cultivating a “sense of community” (Butcher, 2016; Garrett, Spreitzer and Bacevice, 2017) and “meaningful encounters” (Jakonen et al., 2017) among coworkers who often have “different and complementary experiences, skill-sets and contacts, but who share similar values and outlooks” (Brown, 2017, p. 120). Most argue that physical proximity or copresence alone does not lead to interaction, collaboration, innovation or a lively community in the space (Merkel, 2019a). Rather, coworkers must be engaged in different practices of working together collaboratively. Therefore, hosts also describe their work as “conducting”, “mothering”, “community-building”, or “social gardening” (Merkel, 2015, p. 128).

In *assembling* people, ideas and objects, hosts create distinct spatial settings for work purposes and gatherings and encounters among coworkers. They constantly re-arrange objects within the spaces to adapt to the needs of coworkers but also to surprise. Increasingly, coworking hosts also select new coworkers and act as gatekeepers to the professional community in the space. Furthermore, they develop ideas for workshops, educational programs or informal social events to promote shared interests among members (Merkel, 2019a). Coworking hosts also engage practices of care and in emotional work (Hochschild, 2003 [1983 ]) by constantly displaying positive emotions for creating welcoming, inclusive and “affective atmospheres” (Gregg, 2017; Pfeufer and Suwala, 2020). Hosts often describe *caring* and hospitality as the most important part of their work. They care for the members’ various needs (from personal problems to professional help for work-related projects) and their well-being, the sociable atmosphere in the workspace and the perception of the community outside the space.

Furthermore, in enabling sustained interaction amongst coworkers, as well as with actors outside the coworking space, host actively *mediate* meaningful social relationships. Moreover, as part of their curatorial practices hosts engage in various *meaning-making activities*. Hosts promote positive images of freelance and self-employed work as collaborative and as a social alternative to those highly individualised forms of work (Merkel, 2015, 2019a). For example, the workspace provider WeWork claims to organise a “revolution at work” by building a global “we” generation of knowledge workers (WeWork, 2015). At last, an important part of curatorial practices constitutes the *exhibiting* and *displaying* of those coworking activities to different publics—either through digital media posts, organised tours or in hosting external events.

### Discussion

By contrasting the curatorial practices of coworking hosts and cluster and network managers, we have found that both are skilled social actors (Fligstein, 2001) that provide identities, cultural and

socio-economic frames to motivate others. Moreover, they have the “ability to induce cooperation in others” (Fligstein, 2001, p. 105). Examining their daily work practices sheds light on a particular mode of how new ideas or practices emerge (‘curated serendipity’) and how cooperation is enabled in both networks/clusters in technology parks and arrangements in coworking spaces. Hosts and cluster and network managers bridge and bond companies, people, practices and different types of creativity from different institutional fields to create meaningful encounters among independent workers or businesses (Furnari, 2014, Suwala, 2014). As Foster and Oejo (2015, p. 13) argue, this type of brokerage is a complex process “involving search, selection, co-production, and taste-making functions that are accomplished by brokers in multiple formal roles (gatekeeper, coordinator, representative, etc.)”

Similarly, we found that both fulfil multiple roles in clusters and coworking spaces. Concerning differences in the cases, whereas cluster and network managers operate according to a ‘preconceived script’ in framed spaces for innovation and entrepreneurship with hands-on and economic rationales, hosts of shared workspaces have to negotiate many forms of creativity in loose or even playful environments, with or without an agenda depending on the type of shared space. Caring seems to be a principal task for hosts of shared workspaces often tied to emotional work and creating affective atmosphere. On the contrary, cluster and network managers must clearly communicate the rationale or value-added of the work, no matter what they are doing. Important is the distribution of responsibilities, transparency of rules/sanctions, and mutual economic objectives in balanced partnerships of equals among network/cluster members. Hosts, in contrast, are facilitators who connect people and initiate conversations but are not managing potential collaborations.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, we have explored how cluster and network managers and coworking hosts aim to create stimulating, affective and sociable work environments for companies and independent workers. In doing so, we have contributed to exploring the tension between individual and collaborative creative practices (tension 1) and the role of intermediaries in these processes. Results are that intermediary practices span across multiple roles and can differ substantially (depending if individuals or collaborations are addressed). Key is the ability to induce cooperation in others. Hereby cluster and network managers follow a rather ‘preconceived script’ and coworking hosts often curate social and emotional serendipity.

Transferring our results to the wider context of the field, we confirm that while spatial proximity or ‘being there’ has long been described as crucial for knowledge sharing and creativity in creative and innovative milieus (Gertler, 2003), shared workplaces, now heralded as a new innovative model for creative or innovative work (Schmidt, Brinks and Brinkhoff, 2014; Wagner and Growe, 2020), are much more about ‘being aware’ (Suwala, 2014; Grabher et al., 2018), mutual meaning-making, mediation and caring. In concluding, we want to draw out several points for consideration and potential avenues for further enquiry, many of which were developed during CCE: first, we need more robust empirical investigation into these curatorial practices and their effects. For example, there is little research that combines an interrogation of hosts and cluster and network managers curatorial practices with the experience of workers and companies. Second, new methodologies need to be developed that combine the curatorial practices as well as the effects on individual work practices. Third, when examining the curatorial practices of cluster and network managers and coworking spaces the dark side of curation has to be taken into account: the exclusionary tendencies through selection processes and thereby aggravating inequalities in access to these workspaces. Fourth, varieties of creativity require distinctive approaches towards curation depending if creativity (in the narrow sense), innovation and/or entrepreneurship is the main objective of hosts; hereby, the empirical insights from case studies are needed.



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