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XR Stories as innovation and cultural intermediary for the creative industries

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Abstract

This paper extends scholarship on innovation intermediation within the creative industries, through case study analysis of XR Stories. XR Stories is a Yorkshire and the Humber based Creative Industries Cluster Partnerships (CICP) programme, focused on providing access to expertise, infrastructure and facilities to creatives working in extended reality. Through its exploration of the different ways in which R&D was facilitated, the paper positions XR Stories as an important cultural and innovation intermediary in delivering the aims of the CICP. It does this through demonstrating the varied examples of cultural and innovation intermediation which XR Stories undertook. The paper also draws upon Foucault's notion of the *dispositif*, adopting the term 'CICP *dispositif*' to acknowledge the wider context of R&D intermediation within which XR Stories operated. It explores how XR Stories's intermediation work was shaped by the CICP *dispositif*, including how it is constrained by CICP aims, but also actively developed new forms of activities outside of the CICP limitations.

1. Introduction

In his independent review of the creative industries, Sir Peter Bazalgette (2017) identified that, although the creative industries were highly active in R&D, the contribution of creative disciplines to the level of UK innovation was not properly valued or sufficiently invested in. Bakhshi's (2017) research echoes this, finding that a significant barrier to innovation investment within the creative industries has been the way R&D has been defined. Until recently, the UK's model for R&D support was structured around STEM based activities and outputs, and therefore this does not map on to the knowledge creation coming from the arts, humanities and social sciences disciplines. Bakhshi advocates for the use of the Frascati manual's definition of R&D as: "creative and systematic work undertaken in order to increase the stock of knowledge – including knowledge of humankind, culture and society – and to devise new applications of available knowledge" (OECD, 2015: 28). Without a shift to a more holistic understanding and tools to measure R&D (embracing the Frascati manual's definition), alongside the implementation of effective policies to support creative industries R&D, the UK Government 'risks ignoring the full value of R&D in the UK economy, and missing out on incentivising investment innovation in arts, humanities and social sciences (AHSS) related sectors and activities' (Baskshi et al., 2021). It is from this context that the Creative Industries Sector Deal (2018) was produced with a key focus on R&D, and subsequently the AHRC's development of the Creative Industries Clusters Partnerships (CICP) programme.

From an academic perspective, Bakhshi (2017) argues that extending scholarship on innovation intermediation into the creative industries could provide one means through which creative industries R&D is better recognised, and its contribution to innovation be better

valued. The recognition of this value could then be articulated financially, such as through the development of tax breaks for creative R&D, in line with other industries including manufacturing and ICT, to bring the UK in line with other high innovation countries including South Korea, Germany and Norway (Bakhshi et al., 2021; Bakhshi, 2022). In 2011, NESTA and the AHRC launched the Digital R&D fund for Arts and Culture which aimed to draw together interdisciplinary teams of technology companies, creative industry business and researchers to experiment with technologies and to discuss the data, research findings and lessons learned so the wider industry could benefit. The findings of the research fund therefore helped to provide more insights into the *process* of creative industry R&D (Bakhshi, 2012). In 2018, UKRI and the UK Government invested £95 million into Research and Innovation for the Creative Industries, through the Audience of the Future and the Creative Industries Partnerships (CICP) programme. The later was designed to foster local and regional clusters of creative industries activities within cities, city regions and larger regions. Evaluation of this investment has found that public R&D funding drives co-investment from industry and other private investment partners. It also found that creative industry R&D drove the development of new, commercially viable, immersive products and services, helping to drive the scaling up of SMEs across the UK in the process. This evidence base showed that R&D investment in the creative industries is as significant in delivering impact as the UK's other globally competitive sectors, such as engineering or automotive (Chitty, 2022). Such shifts, however, threaten to undermine cultural value of creative industries activities as they are increasingly enrolled into economic and techno-centric discourses (Roberts, Lowe and Moreton, 2025).

With the role of R&D in the creative industries now increasingly recognised (Cantrell, Quigley, Love-Smith and Graham, 2025), and the different forms it takes being explored, the specific role of universities as innovation intermediaries has only recently begun to be examined (Stockley-Patel and Swords, 2023). Innovation intermediaries are important actors in R&D processes in other parts of the economy, and the lack of work on their place in the creative industries represents a significant gap in the academic and policy literature. This is surprising given the amount of literature on the role of universities in urban innovation systems through policies such as science cities (Benneworth and Ratinho, 2014), innovation districts (Battaglia and Tremblay, 2012), commercialisation processes (Feller, 1990) and university-city collaborations (Benneworth, Charles and Madanipour, 2010). In this paper we explore the ways in which R&D was facilitated by XR Stories, based at the University of York, UK. To do this, we explore the different forms of innovation and cultural intermediation undertaken to help deliver the aims of the CICP programme. We do this by building on work which seeks to define intermediation processes and show that strict delineations are not neatly reflected 'on the ground'. We illustrate the plural and hybrid activities undertaken by XR Stories which cross between cultural and innovation intermediation. We also mobilise the idea of a *dispositif* (Foucault, 1980: 194, cited in Mort, 2020: 24) as a framework to understand the power relations and apparatus used to govern what could and couldn't be done through the CICP programme, and ways in which this was resisted and expanded.

The XR Stories cluster partnership is based in Yorkshire and the Humber, UK. Its focus was to support research, development and innovation for extended reality storytelling. Established at the University of York, and working with Screen Yorkshire, the British Film Institute and a variety of regional and national partners, the principal aim of XR Stories was to 'invest strategically in R&D activities that would have a transformational impact on the

economy of the screen industries (film, TV, games and digital media) in Yorkshire and the Humber' (XR Stories, 2023: 6). A city-centre lab was built as part of the redevelopment of York's historical guildhall as part of broader urban development programme by the city council. Project personnel consisted of an R&D team, a research team, a senior management team and a professional services support team. XR Stories launched in 2018, and concluded in 2024. Based on XR Stories legacy as a successful CICP, XR Stories also now leads XR Network+, an EPSRC-funded project focused on establishing a digital research agenda for content creation in virtual production which brings together other CICP projects from Belfast, Cardiff, Edinburgh and London.

Following this introduction to XR Stories and the paper methodology, the article examines scholarship on both innovation intermediation and cultural intermediaries, drawing together this literature on cultural and innovation intermediation. The paper then moves to introduce the concept of the 'dispositif' as an apparatus or governing mechanism for intermediation work within the creative industries. The paper then uses the case study of XR Stories to demonstrate the varied intermediary activities undertaken by projects within the CICP programme and examine how the CICP dispositif shaped these projects. The conclusion reflects on the future of UKRI funding programmes for the creative industries..

2. Methodology

The empirical data contained within this paper comes from the authors' involvement in the XR Stories project. All authors were part of XR Stories for between two and six years, and worked across various work streams including leadership and management, research and development, academic research, and monitoring and evaluation. The insights below come from the author's day-to-day activities, overseeing and delivering the programme of work, and evaluation of XR Stories R&D processes. These insights were captured by the authors through a formalised evaluation process which was active throughout their involvement with XR Stories. This process involved the authors regularly meeting with the XR Stories evaluation manager, where together we would capture all of the authors' engagement with R&D processes within an evaluation spreadsheet which was oriented to helping evidence XR Stories achievements of KPI's (key performance indicators) linked to R&D. This included the authors evaluation of applications for R&D funding, involvement in bi-weekly R&D team meetings, and the development of, and participation in, evaluation of the XR Stories programme for internal and external monitoring. Crucially, these insights from the evaluation documents bring in perspectives from companies who interacted with the XR Stories project, which feed into the broader paper analysis and discussion. Alongside this, our analysis is further informed by extensive notes and reflections made during our involvement in the XR Stories project which was captured within the evaluation spreadsheet, along with XR Stories publications, evaluation and monitoring documentation, original bid documents, minutes from key meetings, R&D funding call applications and impact assessments.

These sources were triangulated through semi-structured interviews with four of the five members of the R&D team who had most involvement with innovation intermediation. Interviews were conducted online using Zoom, lasted between 60 to 75 minutes in length and were recorded. In the interviews, participants were asked to reflect on the intermediation they undertook through 114 funded R&D projects involving 224 different companies (Murphy et al., 2023). The audio data from the interviews was transcribed by the researchers. In order

to analyse the evaluation sources and the interview transcripts, we undertook a mixture of inductive and deductive thematic coding. Initially, we used Howells (2006) examples of intermediary types (Table 1), as the codes to which we attributed different examples of XR Stories intermediary work. Then in a second level of coding, we supplemented these initial deductive codes, with inductive codes from the data itself, which were examples of intermediation which were present outside of Howells (2006) definitions, and to code particular examples of the wider context of intermediation, such as the specific constraints which XR Stories had to work within (Section 6).

3. Intermediaries for R&D and Innovation in the Creative Industries

3.1 Innovation Intermediation

Howells (2006) provides a seminal examination of ‘intermediaries’ within the innovation process. As Stockley Patel and Swords (2023: 4) highlight, Howells’ work “help[s] to address the under-theorisation of intermediaries involved in the R&D process in the creative industries”. Howells (2006: 715) defines intermediaries as “a set of actors...who perform a variety of tasks within the innovation process” and synthesises the existing literature on innovation intermediation from the mid-1980s onwards. Watkins and Horley (1986), for example, examined the role of intermediaries in the transferring of technology between large and small firms. They found that intermediaries played a role in packaging technology, selecting suppliers and in supporting deals between the large and small firms. In this way, intermediaries play an important formal and informal role in the transfer technology process. Building on this technology diffusion work, Hargadon and Sutton (1997) recognised the role of intermediaries beyond simply linking up different enterprises. They also recognised that intermediaries often play a role in knowledge transfer, helping to provide new solutions to their clients. Literature focused on systems of innovation have also acknowledged the importance of intermediaries in facilitating and coordinating different entities within a production system (Stankiewicz, 1995).

In his synthesis of the literature on innovation intermediaries, Howells (2006) highlights the importance of intermediaries in the growth and development of sectors as centres of innovation. However, he notes that the majority of the literature considers intermediation primarily as a process premised on information scanning/exchange and communication, and does not detail the interactions the intermediaries facilitate between different parties. In order to attend to this absence, he conducted primary research with 22 innovation intermediary organisations, finding these intermediaries conduct activities including: “helping to provide information about potential collaborators; brokering transactions between two or more parties; acting as a mediator or go-between bodies or organizations that are already collaborating; and helping find advice, funding and support for the innovation outcomes of such collaborations” (Howells, 2006: 720).

Howells (2006) developed a typology (Table 1) for categorising and understanding the different functions of innovation intermediaries within the context of the UK. Table 1 highlights the varied nature of the intermediaries work, and therefore the value of such intermediaries within the innovation process. He also argues that organisations provide

different intermediary functions, both simultaneously and at different times within their interactions with clients.

Table 1. Innovation intermediary process taken from Howells, 2006: 721-722.

Intermediary Type	Function
Foresight and diagnosis	Foresight, forecasting, horizon-scanning, needs identification
Scanning and information processing	Information gathering, partnership identification and selection
Knowledge processing, generation and combination	Combining knowledge from partners and/or generating knowledge internally to be combined with external partners
Gatekeeping and brokering	Matchmaking, negotiating with/between partners, legal advice, contracting processes
Testing, validation and training	Lab work, testing and experimentation, prototyping, piloting, skills and training provision, production testing, analytical development and testing
Accreditation and standards	Formal accreditation processes, standards setting/advice, voluntary code development, specification development/advice
Regulation and arbitration	Formal and informal regulation
Intellectual property	Rights management, protection advice, assessment of IP value/potential
Commercialisation	Market research, business development advice, sales and market advice, funding guidance and support, venture capital, IPO development
Assessment and evaluation	Assessment and performance of technologies/products/processes (pre and post-market entry)

With nearly 3000 citations at the time of writing, Howells's 2006 paper has informed a great deal of research. Some of these citations are in papers about the creative industries, but work on 'cultural intermediaries' has been more influential.

3.2 Cultural Intermediaries

Research into cultural intermediation has either focused on the development of cultural intermediaries as indicative of the new middle class who are preoccupied with production and consumption (Bourdieu, 1984), or it has focused on the role of cultural intermediaries as market actors who are involved in the qualification of goods, and who therefore mediate

between economy and culture (Callon et al., 2002). Smith-Maguire and Matthews (2012: 1) argue that cultural intermediaries “construct value by framing how others engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientations towards those goods as legitimate”. They suggest that cultural intermediaries therefore impact upon what and who is considered legitimate, desirable and worthy, and that the existence of a multiplicity of cultural intermediaries, necessitates further scholarship into exactly what cultural intermediaries do and why they matter. Smith-Maguire and Matthews advocate for a contemporary examination of cultural intermediaries which forges relationships between these two research trajectories of Bordieusian and cultural economy approaches. In doing so, they define cultural intermediaries as “the taste makers defining what counts as good taste and cool culture in today’s marketplace” (Smith-Maguire and Matthews, 2014: 1). . Working at the intersection of culture and economy, they perform “critical operations in the production and promotion of consumption, constructing legitimacy and adding value through the qualification of goods” (Smith-Maguire and Matthews, 2014: 1). Parker et al., (2018) respond to Smith-Maguire and Matthew’s (2014) call for new contemporary examinations of cultural intermediaries, through their investigation of ‘the Megabooth’ as a critical broker and cultural intermediary within the field of digital games. Parker et al., (2018) highlight how this cultural intermediary operates at the intersection of both culture and economy, in order to construct legitimacy and add value by qualifying goods and services within the indie game sector. In their special issue analysing the drivers of innovation within the creative industries, Jones et al., (2016: 762) also turn to consider the plurality of the concept of cultural intermediaries. In particular, they discuss how cultural intermediaries increasingly forge relationships between the two research trajectories of Bordieusian and cultural economy approaches, explaining how cultural intermediaries ultimately derive value from creative industries products and services through a ‘complex mixture of formalised knowledge, informal reference, experience, taste and personal judgement’.

Through his examination into crowd-patronage platforms, Swords (2017) also discusses the range of agents (including human actors and also other processes) which influence the valuations, perceptions and understanding of cultural products (see also Benghozi and Paris, 2016). He finds that examination of these processes of cultural production circulation require an examination of intermediaries which exist beyond a Bourdieuan understanding of cultural intermediation. This includes examination of socio-technical devices (such as algorithms), alongside financial or regulatory intermediaries (see Table 2). Drawing on McFall’s (2014) work, and in acknowledging these varied cultural intermediaries, Swords (2017) also demonstrates the utility of process-centric approaches in understanding the role of intermediation as constantly fluid, within an always connected process of (cultural-economic) production and consumption.

Table 2: Cultural Intermediaries (adapted from Swords, 2017 and Lize, 2016).

Intermediary Type	Function	Examples
Mediators	Actors ‘guiding the audience through its relationship with the artworks’ (Lize, 2016: 36) or independent third parties brokering relationships between other actors	Booksellers, museum workers, radio hosts, fans, brokers

Appraisers/prescribers/selectors	Influential actors making qualitative judgements, curating and selecting based on quality or marketability	Critics, experts, members of juries, reviewers
Curation	Those making implicit and explicit curatorial decisions	Directors of cultural institutions, museum directors, radio programmers, curators, recommendation algorithms
Distributors	'intermediaries of the art market' (Lize, 2016: 37)	Film or music distributors, publishers, cinema owners, online media platforms
Intermediaries of production	'have a hand in the creation process and most of them bring cultural goods to market' (ibid)	Publishers, music producers, gallery owners, TV commissioners
Intermediaries of artistic work	'set between artists and employers' (ibid)	Working for artists: managers and agents Gatekeepers working for employers, investors or producers: talent buyers, scouts, casting agents
Financial intermediaries	Financial agents who facilitate more efficient aggregation and reallocation of finance and capital (Cai, 2018)	Banks, credit card companies, credit unions, funders, venture capitalists, online payment providers
Regulatory intermediaries	Actors involved in the (formal and informal) regulation and accreditation of professional standards, terms of use and legal instruments	Professional bodies, community guidelines, laws, terms of service

In thinking specifically about intermediaries within the creative industries, some scholars have argued that cultural intermediaries also begin to take on functions of co-producers, managers and brokers (Jansson and Hracs, 2018; Foster and Ocejó, 2011). Thus, mirroring the work undertaken by the innovation intermediaries which Howells (2006) describes. Comunian et al. (2022) suggest that we need a reconceptualisation of 'cultural intermediaries' to acknowledge these new and varied roles. This is also as a result of the redefinition of the creative industries to encompass new sectors (such as video games and software), where intermediaries have become crucial components in providing a complex ecology for these emerging sectors (Comunian, 2019). It is also as a result of the increased emphasis being placed on the creative industries as a catalyst for economic growth and innovation and the associated marketisation of creative culture, that demonstrates the need to recognise the varied work and importance of intermediaries within the creative industries. In line with this, Pratt (2021) has examined the role of creative hubs for fostering activities. (Benghozi and Paris, 2016).

Within his examination of intermediaries within the creative industries, O'Connor (2012) draws on Jessops (2005) notion of the 'economic imaginaries' to argue that intermediaries help to 'shape and regulate' and 'organise and govern' the creative industries. Intermediaries

play a central role in both linking actors from different fields, ensuring knowledge is transferred between such actors. Virani and Pratt (2017) and Moreton (2021) explore the role of universities as intermediaries in the creative industries through knowledge exchange, and argue it is important to recognise universities “are active agents in the management, production, translation, agenda setting and day-to-day work of brokering, designed to facilitate collaboration between sectors by importing existing and sometimes fragmentary ideas about creativity to rationalize, shape and mobilize their activity” (Moreton, 2021: 284).

This management, production, translation and agenda setting includes the reproduction of ideological and policy-driven agenda from which universities are unable to escape. Munro (2017: 14) explores the role that policy-related intermediaries in the creative industries play, arguing they are “key to the functioning of the creative economy, working as they do to organise and govern creative production and to keep creative practitioners aligned with high-level cultural and creative-economic policy”. Another example of this can be seen in Durrer and O’Brien’s (2014) work on arts promotion. Here, the authors explore how cultural intermediaries constantly negotiate the boundaries between the public and the ‘art world’. Crucially, they note how the work of cultural intermediaries within this space are influenced by governmental policy (and associated funding regimes), with a discussion of how art professionals as cultural intermediaries are forced to fund projects based on policy objectives, rather than on artistic creativity. Below we mobilise the concept of a *dispositif* to understand how the intermediary roles that XR Stories played was shaped by government policy.

4. Creative Industries Clusters Partnerships Dispositif

Foucault’s concept of *dispositif* is mobilised below to help understand the wider context in which the R&D intermediation of XR Stories operated. There are libraries of scholarship on Foucault’s work on governance and governmentality, so it is not our intention to re-review this scholarship. Rather, in this section we outline a framework drawing on the idea of a *dispositif* to understand the power relations and apparatus used to govern the creative industries clusters programme.

Dispositif (commonly translated into English as ‘apparatus’), is defined by Foucault as “a thoroughly heterogenous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions - in short, the said as much as the unsaid” (Foucault, 1980: 194, cited in Mort, 2020: 24). These apparatus take different forms in different fields of life to discipline actors into certain ways of working through forms of governance and self-governance.

The concept has been applied in numerous contexts, two of which are most relevant here: the ‘creativity *dispositif*’, and the metricised evaluation of higher education under neoliberalism. The former was introduced by McRobbie in her examination of the reproduction of creative labour. The creativity *dispositif* consists of “various instruments, guides, manuals, devices, toolkits, mentoring schemes, reports, TV programmes and other forms of entertainment” (McRobbie, 2015: 11). The latter has been explored from a series of perspectives: ‘employability *dispositif*’ which emphasises the role of universities in producing labour market-ready graduates (Hartmann and Komljenovic, 2021); ‘*dispositif* of university

reform' (Ostrowicka et al., 2020); 'elitism dispositif' which, through rankings, constructs ideas of excellence in universities (Maesse, 2017; Hamann and Schmidt-Wellenburg, 2020). Both sets of scholarship illustrate the way in which universities are governed through the use of rankings, metrics, targets and key performance indicators (KPIs). The CICP programme is not exempt from this and has its own dispositif, which we refer to as the 'CICP dispositif'.

The dispositif governing the CICP has its origins in the, then Conservative Government's 2017 Industrial Strategy, specifically the 'Sector Deal for the Creative Industries' (2018). Key stakeholders in the creative industries lobbied for a sector deal alongside: aerospace, artificial intelligence, automotive, construction, life sciences, nuclear, offshore wind, rail, and tourism. Being included was seen as a reassertion of the creative industries' place as key to the UK's economy but in so doing, it reproduced the economic discourse of the sector's value through metrics, such as gross value added, employment figures, exports and growth rates. These metrics are part of what Belfiore (2020) calls 'celebratory rhetoric' which privileges increases in economic output figures over social, cultural or aesthetic value. For Walmsley (2013: 200), this leads to increasing commercialisation of cultural and artistic endeavour, with the result that products are privileged "over processes... and ticket sales over audiences". Prioritising economic values "silences, or at least overlooks some of the negative aspects of the creative industries" (Swords and Prescott, 2023: 180). Thus, being enrolled into the government's industrial strategy came with strings attached. With HM Treasury the lead department for the strategy, economic performance measures were key to the industrial strategy being defined as successful. Policies included:

- Raise total research and development (R&D) investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027
- Increase the rate of R&D tax credit to 12%
- Invest £725 million in new Industrial Strategy Challenge Fund programmes to capture the value of innovation
- Drive over £20 billion of investment in innovative and high potential businesses
- Boost our digital infrastructure with over £1 billion of public investment, including £176 million for 5G

For the creative industries, contributions to these goals included initiatives and targets such as:

- £20 million over the next 2 years to roll out a Cultural Development Fund so that local partnerships can bid for investments in culture and creative industries, with industry contributing funding, networks and leadership
- Tackle copyright infringement, continue to address the transfer of value from creative industries, and progress work on closing the value gap at European and domestic levels
- Convene online intermediaries and rights holders to consider the need for and agree new Codes of Practice in: social media, digital advertising and online marketplaces, including extended investment for the 'Get it Right' copyright education campaign
- Reduce barriers to accessing finance for growth
- A 50% increase in creative industries exports by 2023
- Increase the supply and diversity of skills and talent in the creative industries

It also established the CICP programme:

“We will also jointly invest £64 million in an Arts and Humanities Research Council programme to deliver eight partnerships between universities and creative businesses across the UK, creating 900 business-led collaborations, 360 jobs and 65 new businesses, backed by a national Policy and Evidence Centre.”

For the AHRC, funding the CICPs represented a huge investment and a move into new kinds of research. The earlier EPSRC-AHRC Immersive Experiences funding scheme marked their first foray into explicit R&D funding for the creative industries, but the CICPs were an order of magnitude greater in terms of geographical and funding scale. At the time, the programme was worth about 50% of the total AHRC budget. The AHRC's Creative Economy team were in charge of the programme and ensuring it met the needs of HM Treasury, and there was pressure to demonstrate the Research Council could deliver on the promise that university-led projects could produce significant R&D benefits.

To monitor and evaluate delivery, HM Treasury and AHRC had sets of KPIs which the cluster partnerships needed to achieve, which set the *dispositif* for the programme. These included:

- Number of businesses engaged
- Products, services and tools developed with cluster partnership support (e.g. prototypes)
- Value of investment made into the creative industries by partnership and investment this leveraged
- Research partnerships between cluster members and businesses
- Businesses engaging with skills and training development provided by cluster partnerships
- Placements and internships at businesses
- Number of research projects undertaken
- Number of business spin outs, start-ups, scale-ups related to cluster partnership activities
- Economic performance of businesses created or supported through R&D programmes

In our case study, these were monitored by quarterly reports from the director of XR Stories, annual data requests relating to the overall programme KPIs, regular reporting on XR Stories-specific KPIs, a mid-term report, an overall programme evaluation subcontracted to a consortium of consultancies, and ad hoc reporting on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic. The AHRC provided templates for this monitoring to enable comparability between cluster partnerships and included requests for qualitative and quantitative data. Alongside this, XR Stories had to make an annual return to ResearchFish which UKRI used to monitor outputs from research projects they fund.

In addition to KPIs, throughout the life of the CICI programme requests were made to XR Stories from AHRC, Creative Industries Council and other stakeholders for best practice examples, case studies of success, high profile partnerships and statistics to show positive economic impacts. The nature of requests, within the context of the CICI *dispositif*, were hard to turn down and needed to help support the economic discourse about the success of the creative industries and the CICI programme. It was through this *dispositif* that XR

Stories's activities were shaped: from the remit of the industrial strategy, through the creative industries sector deal, the AHRC's funding call for cluster partnerships and associated evaluation and monitoring regime, through to KPI's developed by XR Stories and the way these were interpreted through the programme's activities. In the next section we illustrate the ways in which the innovation intermediation was performed by XR Stories, followed by exploring how it was shaped by the dispositif highlighted here, and instances where it was resisted.

5. Innovation Intermediation of XR Stories

In this section we draw on Tables 1 and 2 to help classify the innovation activities of XR Stories. These tables outline a range of activities which sets a broad horizon for interpreting the kind of innovation and cultural intermediation XR Stories could engage in, but this is constrained by the aims of the CICP programme and further limited by the success measures and reporting requirements bounded by the dispositif. Therefore, not all types of intermediation are applicable, and not all functions discussed. The exploration below, therefore, should not be treated as an exclusive list of activities the XR Stories project undertook.

Foresight and diagnostics - *Horizon-scanning*: research associates and research fellows employed by XR Stories undertook explicit horizon-scanning activities (e.g. Stockley-Patel, 2021) and kept up to date with the latest thinking or products through literatures as part of research, networking with industry partners or contacts, and by attending conferences and trade events.

Scanning and information processing - *Partnership identification*: XR Stories partnered with a series of companies, academics and other industry bodies on R&D and research activities. Identifying the right partners was crucial to enable aims and objectives to be achieved.

Knowledge processing, generation and combination - *General*: huge amounts of knowledge was generated through XR Stories, especially from the research team undertaking research projects and the R&D team managing innovation programmes. This was codified into academic outputs (see Murphy et al., 2023 for a full list) but also held by members of the team and used to support organisations in the region:

"The in-kind support [provided by the XR Stories R&D team] was invaluable and we wouldn't have been able to deliver the project to the same quality without it. We're very grateful."
(Company C: Immersive theatre company)

"We can speak to businesses [we're working with] and say 'this is an area you are struggling with, have you seen these research papers?' We can bridge that gap, just helping to bring industry and academia closer together" (Participant 2: R&D Team)

Gatekeeping and brokering - *matchmaking...* and **Intermediaries of artistic work** - *gatekeepers working for employers*: XR Stories acted as a gatekeeper for broadcasters and international media companies including WarnerMedia, Sky and ITV through managed

innovation projects. As one of the R&D team explained, XR Stories could offer value to both parties:

“For managed innovation, e.g working with a broadcaster to work out what is the area of R+D interest for that particular organisation, it might be a research question, it might be a piece of IP which they’ve got which they are interested in pursuing, its creating a relationship between that broadcaster and local talent...providing an opportunity for businesses in our region to respond to a brief from a leading broadcaster which would have been very difficult for them to get that opportunity without our intervention...from the broadcaster perspective its opening their eyes to regional talent which often doesn’t have the huge overheads which you would have for a lot of these broadcasters...so those projects we are brokering and facilitating that relationship” (Participant 2: R&D Team)

Testing, validation and training - *skills and training provision*: with the increasing viability of virtual production after the pandemic, XR Stories staff identified a gap in skills within the Yorkshire and the Humber region and an opportunity to partner with sister project, Screen Industries Growth Network (aka SIGN, also led by the University of York), who delivered a ‘Fundamentals of Virtual Production’ course. This involved a six-month programme of training, workshops, masterclasses, industry insights and mentoring. Given SIGN’s focus on equality, diversity and inclusion, the course was for those from marginalised groups¹.

Regulation and arbitration - *self-regulation processes*: the R&D team’s creative producers often acted as project managers to help SMEs keep on track and regulate where they spent time and effort. In response to a question about the biggest challenges faced, this member of the R&D team explained:

“[It was difficult] trying to keep businesses to their deadlines ...there comes a point where we need to come in and bring some order as project managers. That is always the challenge...and trying to get them to the point where I just say, ‘look, you’ve done it now, don’t keep working away.’ Sometimes they’re maybe initially a bit too ambitious” (Participant 3: R&D Team)

Commercialisation - *sales and market advice/funding guidance and support*: the R&D team did not undertake direct work to help companies commercialise their products, but they did consider how proposed products could be brought to market:

“When people apply for funding it can be the best idea in the world but if they haven’t got an idea about how to make money out of it, whether they even know there’s a market for it or audience demand or whatever, then it’s not necessarily [fundable]”. (Participant 1: R&D Team)

In addition, guidance was provided to support companies applying for other types of funding.

¹ People who are disabled, LGBTQ+, women, from underrepresented ethnicities, from a socially or economically disadvantaged background and/or aged over 35 and entering the screen industries sector for the first time.

Appraisers/prescribers/selectors - *experts and reviewers*: in the process of assessing applications for funding, members of the XR Stories team acted as appraisers of quality projects. In addition, the expertise within the team was used by other organisations who invited members of the R&D and research teams to act as experts on panels and reviewers for festivals.

Curation - *curators*: XR Stories staff curated events and exhibits of work which had been funded through the programme. This included at BEYOND (2022), SXSW (2023), XR Stories's own events throughout the life of the programme, and in partnership with the National Science and Media Museum.

Intermediaries of production - *commissioners*: through the process of running funding calls, XR Stories acted as a commissioner of new XR products. In total, nearly 50 products, experiences and tools were produced by the companies funded.

Intermediaries of artistic work - *gatekeepers working for employers*: XR Stories acted as a gatekeeper for broadcasters and international media companies including WarnerMedia, Sky and ITV.

Financial intermediaries - *funder*: one of the central roles of the R&D workstrand was to provide funding to SMEs in the region to undertake innovation activities.

“XR Stories funding and support in 2019/20 underpinned our innovative thinking at the time”
(Company B: game studio)

Importantly, these activities were often undertaken simultaneously and should not be seen as distinct tasks or actions. In many cases, the R&D team only labelled their activities in line with Tables 1 and 2 when prompted, but recognised how their work fitted into the framework. Crucially, however, they emphasised the blurring of cultural intermediation and innovation intermediation activities. As Stockely-Patel and Swords (2023) argue, this is inevitable in relation to innovation intermediation with creative industries companies. The research presented here, however, goes further and illustrates this plurality and hybridity of intermediation at a greater scale than one project.

6. Measuring Outcomes

To understand how the CICP dispositif influenced the work of XR Stories, this section examines how measures of success (e.g. KPIs) and reporting requirements shaped R&D intermediation activities. In so doing, we highlight the importance of flexibility to tailor activities to local needs, rather than solely to the requirements of the funders through the CICP dispositif.

In Section 3, we discussed the aims of the UK Government's industrial strategy, the AHRC's goals and how these translated into KPIs for XR Stories. All of these influenced the strategic and operational decisions made by XR Stories staff in the design of R&D funding calls, the ways applications were assessed and the nature of innovation intermediation activities undertaken by the R&D team. Importantly, the state of the CICP dispositif, and the power exercised through it, was dynamic. Deleuze (1992) and Mormont (1996; 2003) suggest “that

the state of a dispositif at a given moment is the result of a number of past processes that are susceptible to being transformed” (Silva-Castañeda and Trussart, 2016: 494). From this processual perspective, Silva-Castañeda and Trussart (2016) argue, a dispositif reflects and is born from moments in time and can therefore be subject to transformation. This change can come from the forces which generated the dispositif, but also through resistance. But importantly, this resistance does not have to be seen as hostile (Legg, 2011). We can observe the dynamic nature of the CICP dispositif through the ways in which XR Stories engaged and reproduced it in its original form, helped to transform it, and engaged with activities outside the original remit of the dispositif.

a) Alignment with original aims

Companies who were funded by XR Stories were contractually bound to provide data about the organisation, the R&D project they undertook and the impacts it had. The XR Stories R&D and evaluation teams made periodic requests for this data so it could be fed in directly to the reporting templates provided by AHRC. It could also inform XR Stories’s KPIs and help ‘tick’ them off on the spreadsheets and trackers used to monitor progress. Here, we can see a very strong alignment with the overall goals of the CICP programme and elements of the creative industries sector deal, especially in relation to creating prototypes, placements and internships and business performance.

There is also alignment with what interviewees considered success. Participant 2 from the R&D team explained that a key sign of a successful project was:

“a high fidelity prototype so it's something that is playable, we can go and take that to conferences and take it to events and talk about [it]. [But] it's also beyond...the output, it's the impact that we can see that it's had on that business.” (Participant 2: R&D team)

This kind of response was echoed by other participants we interviewed and through our observations on the programme:

“I don't know if [all projects have] been commercially successful but I think that they've all contributed in a way to the growth of a business” (Participant 3: R&D team)

Alignment with the CICP dispositif - through a focus on growth and impacts - helped create successes, but it also constrained what could be done. In response to a question about what wasn't possible, Participant 4 (R&D team) told us: “the funding requirements is one of the biggest challenges because we do have to turn away some people who come to us for support...I guess they can demand a certain service model”. In some cases rejecting ideas proposed to the team was seen as a negative aspect of the constraints placed on XR Stories, but in other circumstances it was a useful tool to say no to projects which were not interesting, not innovative enough or without clear direction:

“The funding guides us towards certain things about growth, new staff, new products or services. So [we have to get] a sense of whether [a company] are focused on developing something new [and helping with the KPIs] or whether they're just in it for a bit more kind of open learning...you could just turn up and be like, ‘I just wanted to learn about this stuff, I haven't really got a clear idea’.” (Participant 1: R&D team)

b) Transforming the CICIP dispositif

Other measures of success participants highlighted weren't included in the formal and quantitative reporting templates:

"It's all very well having a product or service that's generated as a result of [our funding] but actually, I don't know if there is a box that says 'have you learned a new skill?'" (Participant 5: R&D team)

Here we start to see some movement away from the original CICIP dispositif, that reflects the acknowledgement of skills gaps in the sector. These came to light during the project, in part through research undertaken by XR Stories and SIGN (Jones et al., 2022; Hughes and Webber, 2023). Similarly, other measures of success started to be valued, especially if they have recognition beyond academia and in the creative sector:

"[Success includes] getting traction from media and seeing, ultimately, any awards being won" (Participant 2: R&D team)

"I believe it was the Open XR funding first round and [Company X] partnered with [Company Y], and that product models have gone on to various festivals abroad." (Participant 4: R&D team)

At a broader level of change, the impact on the understanding of storytelling through XR technologies was a common area colleagues highlighted when discussing success. As Participant 3 put it: "I think [XR Stories] has helped people think about the way stories are told...that it's not just linear, that there are massive ways in which you do it" (Participant 3: R&D team)

These kinds of narratives weren't easily captured in metricised KPIs, but were particularly helpful in telling impact stories of the work done by, and funded through XR Stories. As the CICIP programme developed, and as the AHRC's Creative Economy team and other creative industries stakeholders sought to lobby for changes in the sector, these narratives became more important and their value was recognised, creating leeway to be flexible around the kind of success measures appreciated within the CICIP programme. Such stories, however, reproduce the celebratory rhetoric about the creative industries and thus expand the scope of the CICIP dispositif, rather than significantly altering it.

c) Outcome beyond the CICIP dispositif

As the clusters programme progressed, the CICIP dispositif remained and the reporting structures had to be adhered to, but there was recognition that the clusters were generating different kinds of changes. Equality, diversity and inclusion (EDI) wasn't included in the CICIP programme at its start and didn't form part of the dispositif. But midway through XR Stories, EDI became a more important focus for the project and something which the AHRC saw as useful to promote for two reasons. Momentum behind movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter led to many creative organisations being criticised for taking little or no action against abuse, exploitation and discrimination. In response, social media was used to

show support through hashtags and 'Blackout Tuesday' which the creative industries were at the centre of (Bakare and Davies, 2020). At the same time, UKRI was facing criticism over its weak action on the lack of diversity in their funding awards.

XR Stories was able to engage with EDI challenges through the Screen Industries Growth Network (SIGN) project which, although ultimately funded by UKRI through Research England, operated outside of the CICP dispositif and was not beholden to the same KPIs. SIGN's focus was also on the screen industries in Yorkshire and the Humber, and this overlap with XR Stories meant both projects could share staff and governance structures. EDI was central to SIGN and it ran funding schemes, training and other initiatives that sought to address the longstanding exclusion, exploitation and discrimination faced by screen industries workers. Research and inclusion programmes developed through SIGN meshed with research interests of some of the research team on XR Stories (see Stockley-Patel, 2021; Ward, 2022; Bramwell-Dicks et al., 2023), which boosted the latter's capacity to consider EDI challenges. This was manifest in R&D funding calls where creative producers' lived experience of the screen industries inspired more inclusive approaches e.g. the *Immersive Digital Accelerator* scheme (exclusively for women, people of marginalised genders and the LGBTQ+ community) and the *Fundamentals of Virtual Production* training scheme (aimed at anyone marginalised in the screen industries). These schemes had their own EDI-related KPIs not part of the AHRC's aims, and participants highlighted these as positive:

"[Success was] creating safe spaces in which diverse groups can come together and it isn't just sort of your white middle-aged man with a beard - no offence!" (Participant 3: R&D team)

By looking beyond the CICP dispositif, then, XR Stories was able to engage in broader activities which did not have to frame success within the celebratory rhetoric valued by funders and policy makers. This was only possible because of local circumstances - i.e. the presence of SIGN - global campaigns to address EDI, the AHRC's need to be seen to be doing something in this area, and earlier activities on XR Stories transforming the CICP dispositif to value qualitative successes.

7. Conclusions

This paper has provided an in-depth examination into one example of the CICP programme, XR Stories. Through interrogation of the varied nature of XR Stories R&D work, the paper has demonstrated the intrinsic value of innovation and cultural intermediaries for the creative industries, and for broader R&D innovation within the UK. To make such claims, the paper has brought together literature on innovation intermediation and cultural intermediaries, using this scholarship in conjunction with the case study of XR Stories to demonstrate the varied, complex and evolving nature of intermediaries within the creative industries.

Using Foucault's concept of the dispositif as a lens, we have explored the ways in which the creative industries clusters programme was shaped by economic ideas of success and celebratory rhetoric. And, in turn, we've analysed how the generation of a CICP dispositif reproduced that discourse to shape and constraint how XR Stories operated. By examining intermediary activities of XR Stories, the paper shows the ways in which the CICP dispositif

was reproduced, transformed and finally, moved beyond. In so doing, we wanted to recognise the significance of a dispositif as a way to provide a mechanism for understanding the broader context of creative industries R&D which may constrain intermediaries, and ultimately how intermediaries may resist and reconfigure the dispositif in positive ways.

Reflecting on XR Stories' engagement and resistance to the CICP dispositif offers insights into how such funding schemes such as the CICP programme might be improved. Funding programmes must allow flexibility for award holders to shape dynamic KPIs which respond to changing local conditions. To do so, reporting structures cannot be too rigid, nor uncritically pass on KPIs handed down from government departments. UKRI must become an active partner and critical friend to shape strategic goals of Government that reflect the strengths of the higher education sector and research therein, alongside the full range of challenges the creative industries are facing. The emphasis on R&D and economic values marginalised a constellation of issues which intersect with, and undermine, the headline aims of economic growth. Recognising this constellation of challenges would have situated EDI as a key element of the cluster programme, rather than a late addition with no connected KPIs. Such a shift would allow scope for more radical and progressive thinking in terms of successful outcomes, that value people and processes over products and metrics. Given the appalling state of equity, diversity and inclusion in the creative industries, combined with the ecological crises which the creative industries are contributing to, future UKRI funding in this sector must allow for truly novel activities which resist, transform and move beyond hegemonic discourses.

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