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Widening the web. Applying a production network approach to the cultural and creative sectors

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ABSTRACT

This paper argues that to understand the Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS) we need a wholesale re-conceptualisation of its economic organisation to render visible its production system. We counter the model of the sole artist engaged in craft production, or the corporate industrialised mass production of commercial products, with a more nuanced model of cultural production (eco-)systems which does not depart from location, but instead from organisation. Drawing on research for the CICERONE Horizon 2020 project, we show that by adapting a Global Production Network (GPN) framework to analyse the particularities of the CCS, we can develop a conceptual lens which goes beyond the creation phase and systematically maps other related activities and their respective locations; looks at the forms of embeddedness of these activities and at the governance of the production networks. This challenges extant approaches to understanding the CCS which are siloed either by industry, phase of production or by location. The structure of the paper is as follows: we present a brief overview of key developments in the CCS. This is followed by a critique of existing cluster and ecosystem approaches. Next, we outline the conceptualisation of the cultural economy version of the GPN. Finally, we provide a synoptic overview of the key findings of the CICERONE project organised around production network cycle, mode of governance and embedding to explain the spatiality of the creative economy in a new way.

1. Beyond clusters and ecosystems

In their case study of the creation of a collection of a high-end fashion brand (Yellow Co) which was presented at the Milan Fashion Week, d'Ovidio et al. (2023: 62) state that:

"The geography of Yellow Co is extremely concentrated for certain phases of the production network yet extremely dispersed for others. Raw materials are taken from distant locations; distributions are international, and some aspects of the exchange phase – social events, catwalks and fairs – are located in specific cities and fashion magazines' editorial offices"

Their insight is that focusing on only one phase of production is inadequate, an oversimplification, and misleading. The case study of Yellow Co was part of the CICERONE project,[1] in which we applied a basic production network framework to investigate such more complex spatial and organisational forms in the Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS[2]). Our approach goes beyond the often-used cluster and, more recently, ecosystem approaches to the CCS, which prioritise local

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[2] We use the terminology Cultural and Creative Sectors to align with current EU usage (https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-and-creative-sectors/cultural-and-creative-sectors) this closely corresponds with UNESCO's notion of the Creative economy Unesco_Institute_for_UnescoInstitute for Statistics (2009). Framework for Cultural Statistics. Paris, UNESCO., as well as previously popular terms such as the Cultural Industries (see Pratt, 1997). Critically, these terms include both the traditional and state supported culture, and commercial culture. Strictly speaking the Creative Industries refers only to commercial and for-profit activities, in contrast to the state supported and non-commercial heritage and cultural activities (which are not included in the terminology).

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linkages between sets of actors (most of which focus on the creation phase). We are thus following the suggestion posed by De Bernard et al. (2022) and Virani (2023) to examine "cultural and creative activity from a broader perspective including a wider range of actors, relationships, and geographic scales" (Virani, 2023, p. 2) by applying a production network framework which explicitly covers these issues. Our approach is characterised by widening the lens to include both more upstream and downstream activities, which may take place in very different locations (even different continents); this fundamentally alters the way how the CCS should be understood, measured, and how effective policies should be conceived.

The conceptual point of departure in the CICERONE project was the Global Production Network (GPN) as developed by Coe and Yeung (2015, 2019) which, they claim, helps to "account for the increasingly complex, networked nature of production activities, which spanned across national borders and led to uneven development in different regions and countries" (Kano et al., 2020, p. 578). Although the GPN framework has been applied to a wide range of industries (particularly within manufacturing), studies that focus on activities in the CCS have been rather thin on the ground. Exceptions are Coe (2015), who looked at film and television production and Chalaby (2017), who focused on the global media system. According to Coe (2015: 487) there is "… considerable mileage in adopting a GPN approach in order to understand dynamics across full gamut of creative industries" notably because it explicitly deals with the issue of how creative industry activities can be organised at different spatial scales (e.g. national, macro-regional, global). Along with De Bernard et al. (2022) and Virani (2023), Coe criticises cluster approaches which are "… arguably overly pre-occupied both with the actual production of creative commodities and the intra-local relations that (may) underpin such production" (Coe, 2015, p. 488).

In the CICERONE project we applied the basic building blocks of the GPN framework - phases, spatial footprint, embeddedness, and governance – in an open and flexible way to describe and explain the empirical organisation of production in the CCS. We developed a heuristic framework to explore more than thirty cases or CCS production networks in eight different countries. With the selection of these cases, the aim was to have geographic variety in the location of the creation phase as well as variety in terms of industries, business model (profit or cultural-oriented; market or state), size, and scalar reach of the network (from local to global). Part of the case studies were first and foremost explorative – mapping the concrete production networks in detail based on mostly qualitative research – part was analytical linking the format of the production network to specific variables. The latter has included looking at the contribution to local economic development, but also other aspects were related to the format of the network (e.g. autonomy of the artist; innovative drive to; resilience during the Covid pandemic).[3] CICERONE has generated a rich and diverse panorama of production networks in the CCS. Below, we will reflect both on this conceptual voyage of discovery and on the overall picture that emerges from the case studies. Our aim in this paper is to contextualise and critically assess the heuristic value of the production network framework when investigating a diverse set of CCS activities.

This exercise has not just an academic one, but also one of social relevance. The CCS provides a wide variety of goods and services whose main differentiator is their symbolic meaning, which significantly contribute variously to economic well-being, and to the quality of life, identity and belonging of many people. It is important to state that this value and meaning is not reductive to any single element: value is multivalent here, hence it might be better termed 'values'. The CCS also drives (especially local and regional) economic growth and, in addition, provides cognitive markers for often deeply rooted local heritages thus contributing to social cohesion (Seghezzo, 2009, Dessein et al., 2015; Zheng and Chan, 2014). Furthermore, the CCS thrives on a broad set of specialised skills from traditional craftsmanship to sophisticated digital skills, (Rathnayake and Grodach, 2022) and from conceptual design to management and marketing expertise (Fiorentino et al., 2010; Banks, 2015, pp. 51–60), which are hard to copy.

We start with identifying a set of interrelated key changes in the CCS to explain more in detail why a multi-scalar, political-economy approach which centres on power and embeddedness makes sense (section 2). Next, we outline the conceptualisation of the cultural economy version of GPNs (section 3). After that, we provide a synoptic overview of the key findings of the CICERONE project organised around production network cycle, mode of governance and embeddedness (section 4). Finally, we delve into the wider implications for academic research, for measuring, and for devising policies regarding the CCS (section 5).

2. The cultural and creative sectors and the cognitive-cultural economy

The rise of the Cultural and Creative Sectors (CCS) as a pillar in post-industrial, cognitive-cultural economies has been hard to miss in the first decades of the 21st century (Pratt, 1997, 2009, pp. 271–288; Reckwitz, 2020; Scott, 2012). Industries such as the computer games, for instance, have emerged as key economic and cultural actors in contemporary society. The growth of the CCS is intrinsically linked to other parts of the knowledge economy through the trade in intellectual property and exchange of (innovative/creative) know-how. Still, the role and significance of the CCS in advanced economies tends to be underestimated and underappreciated in both cultural and economic domains. This can be partly explained by the way we classify economic activities, and the means we have of measuring them. It is also a result of the pace of change outstripping our conceptual and statistical frameworks. For example, processes of digitisation have increasingly blurred boundaries between different industries as well as between the commercial and non-commercial CCS activities (Willment et al., 2025). There is then a clear need for a novel way to delineate, classify, measure and understand the functioning of the CCS. Before we present our proposal for this, we first identify key long-term shifts in the CCS.

First, technological change has created new forms of content and novel means of (re-)production, distribution, and consumption, many of which have been dematerialised (Loots, Betzler et al., 2022). This has enabled mass production of goods and services whose main differentiator is symbolic or aesthetic value. Reproduction of texts, music, and images (photo, video and film), for instance, has become easier and cheaper because of technological innovations. Amplification has enabled performances for huge crowds in stadiums. More generally the CCS has thus succeeded in becoming the key source of 'content' (which ranges from ideas to designs) that either drive or substantially articulate all production: a process termed the 'culturalisation' of industry (see Lash and Urry, 1993; Scott, 2000). In addition to the 'traditional' craft production, are various forms of digital technologies, which enable to combine hand work with, for instance, 3D printing and laser cutting (Viganì et al., 2023) which also facilitates the production in (small) series. These transformations in the field of artistic expression are intertwined with changes in the organisation of cultural production.

Second, this process of growth and change has not been solely producer-led, but significantly also demand- and audience-driven (Lipovetsky & Serroy, 2015). Indeed, it is the expansion of audiences that has been a main driver of the growth of markets for cultural goods and services. This is not simply the 'fashion cycle' of the turnover of new products and cultural forms (which in itself generates super-consumption), but has been largely generated by a series of inter-related processes such as the increase of the proportion (age cohorts) of the population engaged in cultural consumption in combination with a long-term growth of disposable income as well as an

[3] See https://zenodo.org/communities/cicerone-h2020/records?q=&l=list&p=1&s=10&sort=newest.

increasing share of that disposable income dedicated to cultural consumption (Fine, 2002; Kharas, 2017; Lorentzen, 2013, pp. 45–64). Complex amalgams of cultural content have become crucial markers of ever more fragmented identities (Trentmann, 2016).

Third, the range of what may be considered cultural, art or creative has been broadened considerably. There has always been debate about cultural value and the boundaries of cultural recognition, but the field has become far more expansive and fluid. Our very concepts of what culture is, have been challenged. The field has undergone a revolution of the expansion of new artistic forms and traditions (which we might label contemporary arts, and international indigenous arts, to distinguish them from the complementary national and imperial classical and heritage arts). With the erosion of the more traditional taste hierarchy, which laid down rigid rules what should be considered art, and which made a clear distinction between high art and popular art, forms like pop music and fashion photography became to be seen as a legitimate art forms. These changes also contributed to a terminological shift from 'arts and culture' to the cultural and creative sectors (CCS).

Fourth, there has been a shift in the way that the CCS is governed economically. Processes of commodification have turned of what were formally not-for-profit art forms and typically strict state-supported into marketable activities, funding for culture has shifted from state to market and civil society (Toepler & Zimmer, 2002; UNESCO, 2022).[4] The creative economy, then, has evolved into a multiple-funded sector that comprises state, market and civil society (e.g. through patronage). Consequently, the notion of the creative economy that came to prominence sought to embrace the whole range of cultural production forms, and not to a priori make distinctions between the for and not-for-profit, state or commercial activities (these being seen as situated variants of the (mixed) economy of creative production. According to Loots, Betzler et al. (2022), "[a]t present, there is a tripartite division between public, private, and hybrid or mixed funding, among which the boundaries are starting to blur". Often, then, we may encounter hybrids which get their funding through a (usually rather volatile) combination of state subsidies, sales, and patronage.

Fifth, the geographical reach of the products of the CCS has expanded hugely. Notably, films, music, fashion, literature, and architectural design increasingly cross borders (Hutton, 2015, Kloosterman and Koetsenruijter, 2018). We have also seen the process of internationalisation of flows of cultural products and services that have re-constituted what were ostensibly state-owned cultural industries with the development of international museums and blockbuster exhibitions that primarily draw artefacts and visitors from many countries.

Sixth, still, the crucial parts of the CCS are often strongly spatially concentrated or clustered not just in particular cities, but even in specific parts of these cities as proximity is necessary but not sufficient in generating and benefitting from agglomeration economies and communities of practice (see Asheim et al., 2007; Bathelt et al., 2004; Coe, 2001; Hutton, 2000; Kloosterman, 2008; Pinch et al., 2003; Pratt, 2004; Scott, 2005; Scott & Power, 2004; Storper & Christopherson, 1987). Finally, the context of policymaking with respect to the CCS has shifted from providing merit goods (culture as something worthwhile in itself) to a more instrumental approach. The CCS are now seen as both a potential driver of local economic development and as a contributor to the quality of place, which helps to attract skilled workers, firms, tourists and visitors (Kloosterman, 2014; Pratt, 2011; Scott, 2004; Throsby, 2010; UNESCO, 2022). This local dimension is obviously essential to grasp the CCS. We, however, position the separate, localised phases of the CCS within a wider spatial web of linkages.

As a result of these structural changes, the mode of creation, production, distribution, exchange and archiving in large swathes of the CCS has fundamentally altered, notably in the extensions of their networks of relations thereby requiring new ways of mapping, measuring, and analysing them. Having a deficient evidence base is one problem, another is understanding the configuration of the organisation of production (and consumption) in the CCS and especially its spatial articulations is vital. Clearly, such knowledge is a pre-requisite for an informed discussion of policy and regulation. To understand the contemporary CCS, we need a re-conceptualisation of its economic organisation to render visible its related activities, where they take place, which actors are involved, how these are embedded in various contexts, and, crucially, how these networks of production are governed.

3. The basic building blocks of a production network approach to the CCS

In recent years there has been a growing sophistication of our understanding of economic analyses of the creative economy (Scott, 2000; Throsby, 2001; Florida, 2002; Pratt, 2009, pp. 271–288; Hutter, 2015, Jones et al., 2015). We distance our analyses from the normative position that frames the creative economy as either like any other industry, or a particular case of a public good. Different strands of neo-classical economic thought are associated with these. Normative analyses have been dominated by atomistic conceptualisations of the firm or the individual/artist and their relationship, via price signals, to markets and audiences (Throsby, 2001, 2008). Little attention has been paid to organisations, networks or institutions, and the role of cultural vs economic value in such models (Pratt, 2009, pp. 271–288). This normative representation, in effect, renders much of the creative economy invisible, or under/partially valued (Kloosterman et al., 2022).

A sub-set of economic analysis associated with various externalities and spill overs represents an important dimension of analyses of CCS (simply measuring what is not accounted for/visible in the core economic model). Whilst these analyses have contributed to an understanding of the gross economic impact via economic multiplier analyses and satellite accounting, as well as the minimisation of transactions costs that can benefit co-location and clustering, they are still fundamentally blind to the dense networks of non-market and network relations that sustain what we know as cultural and creative clusters and ecosystems (Pratt, 2023a; Viganì, England et al. 2023; Virani, 2023). More conventional economic-geographic and sociological approaches to the CCS are primarily based on distinguishing the locations of different sectors and industries (de Bernard, Comunian et al., 2022). The analytical gaze, then, has shifted from atomistic individuals and markets to networks and institutions (de Bernard, Comunian et al., 2022). This perspective falls under the umbrella of a group of explanations termed 'institutional' (Hodgson, 1993). The locus of attention here is not the price mechanism but instead articulations of power and control of networks that link suppliers and consumers (Lampel et al., 2000; d'Ovidio, 2015; Virani & Pratt, 2016). In our research we use a variant of GPN applied to the CCS to capture this emergent focus.

Global Value Chain approaches, which sought to explore international trade flows, also diverged from neoclassical economics by highlighting the stages of intermediation and price setting and the abilities of particular actors (as a result of strategic positioning at key nodes in networks) to act as gatekeepers controlling/regulating access to markets (Gereffi et al., 1994; Pratt, 2008; Bair, 2009a). GPN approaches build on this, paying particular attention to the extensive and intricate supply chains that constitute contemporary activities, the related organisational complexity, and systems of power and control (Bair, 2009b; Coe & Yeung, 2019).

GPN approaches highlight three dimensions: the phases articulation and the governance, the embeddedness and the spatial footprint. First, governance refers to the way in which key actors organise and control inter-organisational links (e.g. the relationships among writers, publishers, distribution companies, readers/libraries) and to the way in which they capture value along the chain. (Appelbaum & Gereffi, 1994; Greco, 2016; Smith et al., 2002). Second, embeddedness entails an

[4] A consequence has been that the focus and priorities of culture and/or creative economy funding have shifted.

understanding that all activities involved in value creation and value capture are situated, shaped and deeply embedded in the social, economic and political environments of the places they are located in. Finally, the spatial footprint implies the understanding of how the network's phases are territorialised and how they intersect and engage with corresponding localities and regions.

The starting point of the CICERONE project was the production networks of concrete projects (e.g. the design of new fashion collection; the realisation of a specific dance performance; a music festival). These networks were seen as comprising analytically distinct phases of production – creation, production, distribution, exchange and archiving - which can be organised (and concentrated) in and across different places and processes, each embedded within its own multi-scalar specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts (see Fig. 1). We adapted the phases to suit the CCS where not just the creation phase is obviously important, but also the exchange phase in which gatekeepers and tastemakers play a crucial role in evaluating songs, films, paintings, design etc. In addition, creation does not start from a blank sheet but borrows ideas from existing pools of CCS products. We have thus added an Archiving phase making our network approach more relational and thereby highlight the possibilities of feedback. In our view, these phases are part of a dynamic cycle of creation, production, distribution, exchange, and archiving with ideas migrating through phases from ideation, to making, to distribution and exchange, and critically passing through archiving back to ideation thereby closing the loop (Pratt (2008).

To summarise the five phases of the CCS production cycle are:

Creation phase: The generation of new ideas (e.g. composing a song, designing fashion, creating a choreography).

Production phase: The materialisation of ideas as tangible (e.g. fashion), digital products (e.g. a game), or as a service (e.g. a dance performance).

Distribution phase: Bringing the products to end-users –individual customers, visitors or an audience - physical or digitally.

Exchange phase: CCS Products must be evaluated not just by the end-users, but also by critics, peers, and tastemakers as objective criteria are lacking. Evaluation is pivotal given a structural oversupply of products.

Archiving phase: The preservation and storage of existing products in repositories such as libraries, museums, galleries, or digital archives.

Traditional analyses of the CCS have been siloed: by art form or industry, location and production phase. The GPN approach enables a transversal and non-siloed understanding of how CCS function. Furthermore, it allows us to address the shortcomings of more conventional cluster and ecosystem approaches which tend to be heavily tilted towards the strongly spatially concentrated creation phase and neglect the broader web of multi-scalar cross-sectoral interaction possibilities (Daubeuf et al., 2020; Markusen & Nicodemus, 2020). In this sense, we seek to build upon the work of sociologists Becker (1984) and Bourdieu (1983, 1993) – who were crucial in the shift away from the western Romantic tradition focused on individual genius and instead to embrace a wider range of actors into a more comprehensive (neo-institutional) framework which highlights the spatial and the governance dimension of the CCS (Bottero & Crossley, 2011; Scott, 2000). Both Becker's art world and Bourdieu's creative field notions comprise much more than just the artists with intermediaries and 'boundary personnel' who operate at the interface of creation, production and consumption, enabling and sustaining creation by providing infrastructure, tools (e.g. instruments) and by forming communities of practice with similar aesthetic orientations (Bourdieu, 1983; Alexander, 2003; Janssen & Verboord, 2015, Brandellero and Kloosterman, 2016).

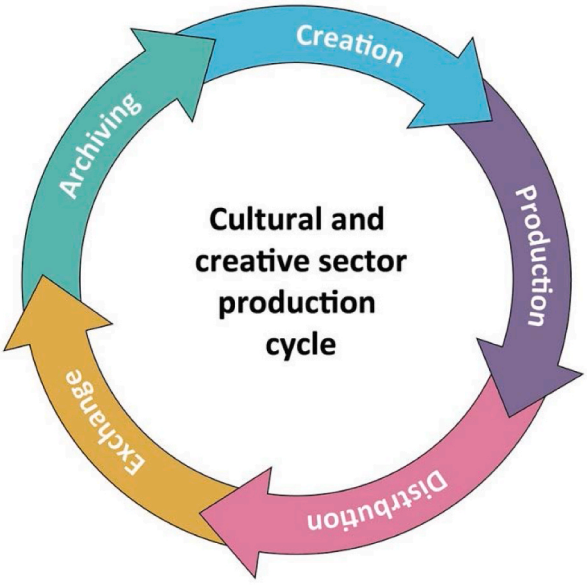

Fig. 1. The cultural and creation sector production cycle.
Source: Pratt, 2000

These intermediaries are both integral and essential in making connections in networks, they are not simply conduits, they reproduce the system (O'Connor, 1998; Nixon & Gay, 2002; O'Connor, 2013). In a globalising world, these intermediaries may be located far away from where the creation takes place as the Yellow Co fashion firm illustrates. Moreover, the locus of governance may also be located away from the place of creation and, hence, determining what should be produced and who and where will benefit from the added values that they generate. Art worlds, fields of cultural production and, hence, production networks can also display their very own dynamics. For example, Bourdieu (1993) distinguishes between "fields of large-scale cultural production", where the aim is to maximise economic value and make profit, and "fields of restricted cultural production", where the creation of cultural value as seen as the ultimate goal within the field of connousiers. While the former field may function very much like other production networks in, say, manufacturing, the latter field may function in a rather different way as key actors have a strong intrinsic motivation to create something culturally, not simply economically, meaningful.

Our approach leverages a better understanding by being more open in a conceptual sense and, hence, better able to deal with the fact that much of the production in the CCS takes place in project-based configurations where boundaries between firms, sectors and industries; and between creative and non-creative workers, self-employed and employees, freelancers and volunteers are often unclear and highly permeable (Coe, 2015; Grabher, 2002; Watson, 2008). Often these categories, represented by this fluid amalgam, are assumed to be fixed and clearly delineated, and neatly captured in existing statistics. Traditional analyses are, in effect, rendered conceptually and empirically myopic. We counter this with a perspective that highlights networks where the flows are critical in (temporarily) defining (and making visible) the 'objects' of our analyses (firms, projects, freelancers; or production, distribution, consumption and archiving) and which also does a priori assume that homo economicus is the only species that is active in the CCS.

The partners in the CICERONE project undertook extensive qualitative research in oder to empirically capture the different dimensions of the CCS production network framework, the phases, the actors involved and their aims, the location of the phases, the governance structure and the different types of embeddedness (societal, territorial, and social network embeddednes). In the next section, we present the main findings of the case studies.

4. Findings and four conceptual refinements

To operationalise the CCS GPN model already outlined we mapped production networks across different industries (architecture, archives

(including libraries and cultural heritage), artistic crafts, audio-visual media and radio, design (fashion), festivals and performing and visual arts, music, publishing) and different countries (Austria, Bulgaria, Italy, the Netherlands, Poland, the UK, Spain, and Sweden).

Our empirical research was based on case studies which are the production network of actors, firms, organisations involved in developing *projects* (a fashion collection, an architecture exhibition, a theatre performance, a music festival and so on), made of different, but interrelated phases, as presented above. In total 28 case studies were analysed, and 325 interviews were collected between 2020 and 2023. One of the strengths of this research lies in the fact that despite the great variety of case studies, they share the production network as a common unit of analysis.

By adopting an approach founded on the *network* rather than on a single actor, we sought to understand the configuration of CCS by making visible their governance and spatial footprint through an understanding their network configurations. Therefore, we were able to pay attention to the articulation of the production cycle; the distribution of control and power within the networks and at the resources mobilised by the actors/organisations; we also observed regulation and embeddedness. Finally, concerning the geography, we explored location and the impact of location choices from actors and organisations on the development patterns of the European regions.

Such an approach sought to consider agency and structure as well as their interactions, thereby heeding the view of Powell and Smith-Doerr (2003) who conceptualise networks both as relational forms and structural ones. Our analytical aim was to understand dynamics, mechanisms, relationships, etc. Useful for explaining the functioning of such sectors; the research's results have a 'substantive' representativeness of the European CCS rather than a statistical one. The research effort crystalised an understanding of how a very diverse set of cases of the CCS function. Whilst the full findings are reported elsewhere,[5] we embarked in a transversal reading with the academic aim to enrich the GPN perspective, which remained relegated to, or divided into, traditional industries. Secondly, the novelty of the results allows to contribute to innovative policy making in a field that has undergone substantial changes as described in section 2 of this paper (above). The following four points summarise the important insights of the Cicerone research and illustrate the key dimensions of the novel perspective adopted.

The production network cycle

As discussed above, the conception of the CCS that has been used in the research under examination starts from a theoretical organisation of all the tasks needed to produce a good or service (which we call a *project*) in five ideal-typical phases: 1) creation; 2) production; 3) distribution; 4) exchange and 5) archiving. As already said these phases represent the group of tasks needed respectively to 1) imagine, design and create; 2) make; 3) put on the market; 4) exhibit, advertise and showcase; 5) critique and learn from the project. The phases are only ideally separated one to the other, and their main function in a GPN analysis of CCS is to schematise and organise a chain of actions that would otherwise be impossible to analyse.

Each phase is important as it plays an autonomous function, yet it is functional for the system, representing a particular institutional form and related embeddedness. Of course, boundaries are established conceptually, but they maybe in practice blurred, as are the tasks and function that link them. We observed the blurring of the boundaries and crossing as an analytical result. Indeed, having this theoretical organisation of tasks and activity was particularly useful when the same task is performed by different actors or, vice versa, when different actions are brought about by the same company in the same place, as it allows to analytically distinguish between task, place and actor. Sometimes tasks would flow forward and backward in a stepwise process of creation and production as in the case of architectural design which is very much an iterative process (Vriesema & Kloosterman, 2022). In addition, actors and organisations may perform specific functions (e.g. creation or production) in a particular network, but they might also be involved in other networks where they play different roles. For instance, in the video-game industry SMEs specialise in creating their own games, but they also deliver specialised services to other, often larger, companies (Kolokytha et al., 2025). Exploring the network with analytically distinct phases however is very useful as it allows to more systematically map production networks.

Having such an organisational perspective is helpful when one wants to observe and analyse how different tasks are related one to another, for example inequalities in accessing and positioning in the market in the music sector emerge more clearly when tasks of creation, distribution and exchange are kept separate (Kolokytha et al., 2025). Moreover, using such a theoretical and methodological framework enables us to understand the relative roles of actors performing a gatekeeping function or intermediating between different phases. In the cultural and creative industries, cultural intermediaries play an important role in translating cultural products for the public and helping to position them on the market. In our framework, this is analysed under the exchange phase and enables us to understand the relationships between the different actors, particularly in terms of how power is exerted. The case of a fashion magazine' editor in the production network of a fashion collection is paradigmatic (d'Ovidio et al., 2023).

Finally, having a circular conception of the network pushed us to explore also a set of tasks, classified under the archiving phase, which deepened our insight in how the CCS function. Our cases confirm not only the circularity of the production process in CCS but also the iteration of relationships among phases. In many of the networks analysed, the archiving phase is both the end of a project and the starting point of a new one. In the fashion industry, for example, creative actors rely heavily on the stock of previous drawings and models as sources of inspiration for the new collection. Also, in the case of the Nederlands Dans Theater the archive becomes as source of inspirations for different generations of artists (Vriesema et al., 2023).

Network configurations and implications

A crucial element of a production network is its governance. This refers to the identification of actors involved in the network and the study of the relationships that they develop. Uneven power relations suggest the existence of a lead actor in the network, the one that has the power to organise it and to decide how the value generated is differently captured by those involved in the network. The case studies analysed in the Cicerone project present many different configurations along a continuum that spans from vertical governance structure whereby the network is led by one or possibly two lead actors to more horizontal architectures in which various network actors cooperate to organise the network of activities leading to their final product.

It is interesting to observe, in what might stand as an enrichment for the GPN literature, that the control of the network is exercised by the lead actor not only to capture a greater share of economic value but also to be able to retain innovative artistic leadership. Yellow Co (d'Ovidio et al., 2023) strictly controls a production network of a fashion collection where asymmetric relations, leaving little space of manoeuvre to the other actors of the network, allow the lead firm to capture the greatest share of economic value produced in the network. A completely different goal drives the Nederlands Dans Theater (NDT). Here the search for artistic innovation urges the theatre management to collaborate with its choreographer in the supervision of all network activities (Vriesema et al., 2023). NDT is firmly in control of the whole network by organising production, distribution, and archiving. Along these lines,

[5] The full project field work findings can be found at https://zenodo.org/communities/cicerone-h2020/records?q=&l=list&p=1&s=10&sort=newest.

the governance of production networks in CCS highlight the specific role of gatekeepers. In the fashion industry (d'Ovidio et al., 2023), intermediaries, such as specialised magazines or catwalks, can dictate trends for the fashion cycle as well as to promote the exchange of ideas and trends. Despite the rhetoric about the disintermediation due to technological development (Foster & Ocejo, 2015), the findings of the Cicerone research highlight persistent importance of tastemakers, gatekeepers, journalists, as well as events like fairs and exhibitions in influencing (controlling) the networks' dynamic (Vriesema et al., 2024).

Network governance has also implications for other dimensions of inter-firm dynamics. One example is employment. Participation in a network where the lead firm applies a work culture oriented towards collaboration and sustainable practices often leads to a diffusion of those same practices along the network, independently of the specific firms, sectors and activities (Vriesema et al., 2023) By contrast configurations oriented to a tighter control and a greater value appropriation, as observed in the already mentioned case of the fashion industry studied by d'Ovidio et al. (2023) tends to have negatively influence suppliers and other participants by affecting the quality of work in terms of employment conditions, wages, learning opportunities, training activities. Particular modes of governance across the phases of the CCS GPN can help to explain the particular distributional outcomes of various cultural and economic values across networks and places.

Embeddedness

The concept of embeddedness originates from economic sociology (Polanyi, 1944) and was later much influenced by Granovetter's writing of economics as being "in networks of interpersonal relations" (Granovetter, 1985: 504). From a GPN perspective, Coe and Yeung (2015) have developed an understanding of embeddedness as consisting of three forms – the ways in which organizational relations within networks become stable (network embeddedness) as well as the spatial influences of how these networks function (societal embeddedness) and where they operate (territorial embeddedness) (Kloosterman, 2023).

Empirical and theoretical studies have explored the effects of networks on the logic of social action and, above all, to question the positive and negative consequences that networks have on economic phenomena and processes (Powell and Smith-Doerr, 2003). The underlying idea is to understand the extent to which embeddedness matters, and how it matters, in different institutional and geographical spaces.

Combining an observation of embeddedness (in networks, society and territory) with the GPN perspective provides an innovative understanding of the dynamics and mechanisms in relation to conventional knowledge developed in both CCS and GPN debates. Indeed, traditional interpretations of production networks suggest that they are organised according to economic and financial factors. While GPN in CCS certainly highlights the importance of legal regulation, it also strongly emphasises the role of symbolic, cultural and historical components.

For example, the study by d'Ovidio et al. (2023) shows how historical traditions are valorised in the leisure boat industry: the deep-rooted tradition of boatbuilding in Liguria and Tuscany, dating back to the High and Late Middle Ages (AD 1000–1500) or even earlier, is at core of an innovative production network of yacht making. This tradition also contributes to re-affirm a strong territorial reputation which is reflected in workers/artisans self-representation as they see themselves as part of an aesthetic Italian or even Tuscan lineage which assimilated the codes of beauty and harmony.

Moreover, the embeddedness of the creation phase may depend crucially on a place-based cultural identity and a local ecosystem that includes a highly specialised labour pool, while the key actors in the exchange phase, who assess and rank the products, may be located in global cities; these represent other kinds of local ecosystems. Thus, our perspective allows the consideration of regulation at different institutional levels alongside cultural and historical elements, which are particularly important in creative and cultural production and potentially involve all activities within the network, albeit at different levels.

Furthermore, the GPN illustrates the embeddedness of individual enterprises across the entire network. It is not only individual activities or actors that are embedded in a social and/or regulatory context; all those involved in the network can be subject to the same elements of embeddedness to varying degrees, depending on the network's configuration. For example, a study of companies involved in sustainable fashion production shows that sustainability regulation (institutional embeddedness) and the fashion house's interpretation of sustainability (social embeddedness) spill over to all actors in the network (Vriesema et al., 2023). These actors then develop good sustainable fashion production practices, even in contexts where there is no environmental sustainability regulation or culture.

Ultimately, exploring embeddedness from a GPN perspective offers a different way to gain a deeper understanding of the complexity and intricacy of this phenomenon. The case of Bulgarian audiovisual production, for example, shows the mutual influence between embeddedness in local society and trans-local social embeddedness resulting from the global reach of digital communication (Tomova et al., 2025). Similarly, local regulatory and institutional frameworks must adapt to the rapid developments in the globalisation of the audiovisual sector in order for companies to expand into different countries. Rather than dis-embedding productive processes, the globalisation of the cultural sector seems to increase the complexity of the embedding mechanisms due to the importance of both local and trans-local elements.

Geography and regional development

In terms of geography, the production networks analysed in the Cicerone research display two opposite patterns: either they are extremely local, or they have a global reach, being predominantly located in Europe. We have defined as locally based those networks where the most distant phase from the creative one is located within the same region as, for instance; PRISMA (Inno et al., 2022). Conversely a global network is the one where the most distant phase from the creation one is situated at an international scale, surely beyond the national one. Longer or more dispersed production networks usually display more concentrated governance structures in which greater coordination is exercised along the network. This is the case of Yellow co. (d'Ovidio et al., 2023): the company monopolises the creation phase but it also exercises a strictly control on the production phase by setting up technical standards, procedures, periodic visits to the companies involved in the network and localised in different regions; tight working conditions are imposed reducing the operational autonomy of these companies.

In many of the cases analysed longer networks are made possible by technological advancements and specifically they are sustained by technological platforms. In the case of music, platforms have completely changed the market as the production and distribution of music is now extremely accessible to most people. It is interesting to observe that platforms in GPN CCS enable artists to take control of and manage the entire production network, implying that they have now a greater influence on every stage of production process: musicians and artists are now able to fulfil their creative roles but also take charge of the managerial and administrative roles. In a more materialist view this implies that they are now able to capture more value of their economic and creative activity and receive a full remuneration for their work (Kolokytha et al., 2025).

Exploring the geography of a CCS GPN allows further reflections upon regional development. European firms involved in production networks of the CCS have an economic impact in terms of added value and employment as well as for the stimulus to the growth of other economic activities (the case of the building of a theatre's acoustic walls illustrates that the various actors all originate from the same region, potentially allowing the boosting of local entrepreneurship and the generation of employment (Vriesema & Kloosterman, 2022).

Moreover, production networks of CCS contribute in cultural and immaterial terms because they strengthen social cohesion, ensures cultural diversity, symbolic production, local collective identity and environmental sustainability (Pareja-Eastaway & Pradel i Miquel, 2026). Such contributions to regional development are valuable in terms of the benefit to other related industries, such as tourism, agricultural, transports as well as schools, museums. It may also occur that such beneficial implications take places also in distant locales of the network, as is the case with the production of organic garments. Different, negative, implications occur when GPN in CCS are guided by cost assessments, value capture attitudes and opportunistic behaviours: in such cases benefits for the territories are much more limited as this depends on their strategic importance for the networks in terms of physical and immaterial resources they can use for their scope.

Ultimately, a good example that encapsulates the main issues emerging from the research fieldwork is provided by the network of the EBU Music Exchange (Tomova et al., 2025) where the combination of phases differentiation, embeddedness, governance and territorialities entangle in an intricate manner posing challenges to theoretical elaboration and empirical investigations. Here, both intermediation and archive are performed by the same actor while the activities are territorialised in multiple scales where cultural elements together with formal regulatory frameworks influence the whole network activities.

5. Conclusions

We began this paper by noting that normative analyses have failed to appreciate the contribution of the CCS to economic and social development. Whilst GPN offered a useful framework, a specific localised version associated with the CCS was lacking: this was developed in this paper. We have shown that by adopting a lens of a CCS ecosystem we can both create a visibility for data collection, and a framework for analysis and evaluation. Whilst the full findings of the research that this paper reports on give a detailed picture, our aim here was to highlight some wider insights which will help frame future analysis of the CCS and underpin an improved evidence base for policy making.

The production network approach has significantly contributed to a novel understanding of how the CCS functions. It revealed a rich understanding of how the whole production network hangs together from creation to production, distribution, exchange, and archiving; and not just focusing on clustering and agglomeration economies in the creation phase, but position these within the broader network of organisation, institutions and power. It also contributed to a more thorough understanding of the governance structure of production networks as they are not just embedded in broader contexts, they also have their own organisational structures which themselves shape the field. The wide variety in spatial footprint and mode of governance illustrated in the cases has also highlighted new dimensions of variation (founded on questions of embedding and power). On a more general level, a production network approach also underlines the fundamental hybridity of

Categories	Dimensions (theory)	Dimensions (operationalised)
Production network cycle	The organisation of the tasks required to produce a good or service, articulated in five ideal-typical phases: (1) creation; (2) production; (3) distribution; (4) exchange; and (5) archive.	These phases represent the group of tasks needed respectively to 1) imagine, design and create; 2) make; 3) distribute goods, services and activities; 4) exhibit, assessment and evaluation/critique; 5) archiving of the project (physical or digital).
Network governance, configurations and implications	The distribution of control and power within networks, and the resources mobilised by the actors involved.	The identification of the actors involved in the network and the analysis of the relationships they establish: which actor(s) determine and/or control the how the network is organised and for what purpose?
Embeddedness	The extent to which economic activities are inserted into, intertwined with, and shaped by non-economic factors (social networks, cultural practices, and institutional framework at different levels).	Embeddedness is examined in three ways: (a) how actors develop stable relationships within networks (*network embeddedness*); (b) the broader societal influences of the networks (*societal embeddedness*); and (c) the territorial contexts in which they operate (*territorial embeddedness*).
Geography and regional development	The impact of actors' participation in networks on the development of the regions in which they are located.	The spatial distribution of actors involved in the network and its effects on local development, (employment dynamics, firm demography, improvements in local socio-economic conditions…).

Source: own elaboration

Fig. 2. Overview of categories, dimensions (theory) and dimensions (operationalised) of a production network approach to the Cultural and Creative Sectors
Source: own elaboration

the CCS with all kinds of combinations of market, state and civil society in different phases. These unique combinations are inherently context-dependent (not random, but structured: notably via the delineation of the market, public policies vis-à-vis the CCS, and attitudes among citizens). The functioning of the CCS, then, is articulated with embeddedness and governance. We have summarised the four dimensions of our approach in Fig. 2.

Using such a lens has enabled us to highlight the role of connection, intermediation and flows between activities and places in the CCS. Previously, researchers have lacked a full understanding of the whole process of cultural production, its articulation and embedding. Our analysis has also contributed to challenge the notion of the dualism of 'core (artistic/creative)' and 'supporting activities' in the CCS in a more fundamental way thereby highlighting an inter dependent system of production. Both spatial footprint and power within the production network offer strategic windows on the how CCS function. Exploring networks can lay bare "the central importance of power and value dynamics" (Coe, 2015, p. 488). The sensitivity to rich actors, rich places, and embeddedness in our production network approach translates into a fundamental openness towards the myriad real-life articulations of the CCS from the local folk music festival to the transnational media firm (see de de Bernard et al., 2022:345). Although the phases can be neatly described in analytical terms, our cases have also emphasised the need for an open understanding to grasp real-life production networks as they are typically cyclical and iterative "… where multiple inputs, feedback loops, and a pervasive 'value-creating ecology' replaces a simple stage-wise process" (Throsby, 2010, p. 25).

It is this articulation of scale and scope, the production cycle embedded in the cultural ecosystem, across the range of creative industries that produces what we argue are the particularity of the key analytical dimensions of the creative economy. It is these formations create a lens through which we can better understand and interrogate the operations of the CCS. Our research provides a foundation upon which we have provided an initial articulation of an iterative and heuristic model of the creative economy. This is critical in that it highlights the strategic importance of specific visibilities (and the specific location of the lack of information, insight and evaluation of many of these at the current time). This insight provides a clearer conception of the necessary evidence base that is needed for policy making (and where the strategic needs for its repair are), and a foundation for the re-design of policy instruments (and institutions) that are appropriate to articulate the mechanisms and organisations that we have identified.

This also implies a critical appraisal of the basic (Fordist) building blocks (firms, workers, wage, motivation, division of labour market-state-civil society), as well as the Romantic view of cultural production, which are still prevalent in contemporary social and economic discourses. Our production network approach has clearly shown that these building blocks are anything but set in stone in the CCS where boundaries of industries, firms, types of workers, and between market-state-civil society are highly porous and fluid. More generally, we propose to go beyond existing taxonomies of firm, industry, worker, and market-state-civil society, and develop a much more sensitive lens to look at contemporary real-life forms of production.

Our insights also shed a fresh light on the issue of the data sources. Currently, there is a lack of relevant quantitative data to capture the role of the CCS in contemporary societies. Many activities in or directly related to the CCS – notably the flows of goods and services through the different phases of production – only partly, if at all, appear on the radar of official statistics. The pace of change has meant that many of the activities that characterise this rapidly evolving field have yet to register in traditional measures and taxonomies of statistical agencies. There is, hence, a deficiency of relevant information and data about the creative economy. What parts are already visible themselves illustrate the significance of the CCS as an engine of economic growth and jobs both in absolute terms and compared to 'traditional stalwarts' of the economy such as life sciences, aerospace and motor vehicle production, (Pratt & Bennett, 2023a, 2023b). Policy making and regulation as well as must be founded on, and underpinned by, a robust evidence base which takes the broader context of the production networks, their linkages, their spatial footprints and modes of governance into account. We recommend the establishment of a CCS Observatory at a European scale to collect new, and collate existing, data within in a conceptual framework based on the CCS GPN.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Robert C. Kloosterman: Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Andy C. Pratt:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Marianna d'Ovidio:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration. **Lidia Greco:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Resources, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Project administration.

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