

The cultural and creative sector as production networks: Rethinking value, power and embeddedness across scales

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1. Introduction

Contemporary everyday life is deeply shaped by cultural and creative products. We live in buildings designed by internationally renowned architectural practices, wear clothes made from fabrics sourced across multiple countries, listen to music through digital platforms that connect artists and audiences worldwide, and visit exhibitions or performances that circulate across cities and continents. These products and experiences are often valued for their symbolic, aesthetic or cultural qualities, and are frequently associated with the creativity and talent of artists, designers or creators.

Yet behind every cultural and creative product lies a complex web of relationships connecting people, organisations, technologies and places. Cultural and creative goods and services are not simply the outcome of individual creativity; they are produced, circulated, evaluated and preserved through networks that stretch across multiple spatial scales and involve a wide variety of actors (Grodach et al., 2017; Kloosterman et al., 2019). Understanding how these networks operate, and how value, power and resources are distributed within them, has become increasingly important in a world characterised by growing interdependencies and uneven forms of development.

This special issue comes as a result of the CICERONE project (Creative Industries, Cultural Economy pROduction Network) which took place between 2019 and 2023, was funded by the European Commission Horizon 2020 programme and was coordinated by the University of Amsterdam.¹ The project was carried out by a multidisciplinary and geographically diverse European research consortium encompassing seven European universities, a Bulgarian think tank and a Brussels-based policy design research centre. The project explored the organisational architectures underpinning the production of cultural, creative and symbolic value through the lens of the Global Production Network (GPN) in different cultural and creative industries. This special issue

brings together the project's contribution examining how cultural goods and services are generated through interconnected production networks and how these networks shape processes of value creation, governance, embeddedness and territorial development. For some of the papers in this issue, additional research also took place beyond the lifetime of the project.

Before discussing the contributions of this issue, it is useful to briefly clarify the two key concepts that underpin the collection: Cultural and Creative Sector and Global Production Networks.

The terminology used to describe cultural and creative activities has evolved significantly over the last decades (Kloosterman et al., 2019). The terminology used to describe activities related to the production and consumption of cultural goods and services has long been the subject of both scholarly and policy debates. The labels adopted over time are not merely descriptive, but also, they reflect different analytical perspectives and political agendas concerning the role of culture, creativity and markets. Broadly speaking, the notion of *cultural industries* emerged to acknowledge the plurality and industrial organisation of cultural production, moving beyond romanticised understandings centred on individual artistic creation. Since then, a variety of concepts—including *creative industries*, *cultural and creative industries*, and *creative economy*—have been introduced in both academic and policy debates, each highlighting different dimensions of the phenomenon (Pratt, 2005).

The contributions gathered in this special issue adopt the broader notion of *Cultural and Creative Sector* (CCS). First, this concept acknowledges the diversity of activities characterised by cultural, symbolic and creative value, encompassing both market-oriented and publicly supported organisations. Such a perspective is important because it resists reducing culture to its economic and commercial dimensions alone, recognising instead the plurality of values, motivations and forms of organisation that characterise cultural production. Second, the notion of a *sector* highlights the existence of a coherent field of

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activities that combines material and immaterial dimensions and that deserves to be addressed through dedicated industrial, cultural and statistical policies. Finally, the term aligns with the current terminology adopted by European institutions,² which increasingly recognise the CCS as a strategic domain for social, cultural and economic development.

The second conceptual pillar of this special issue is the Global Production Network (GPN) approach. Developed within economic geography and related fields, GPN offers a relational perspective on production by focusing on the networks of actors, activities and institutions involved in the creation of goods and services. Rather than analysing production as a linear sequence of stages, the GPN perspective examines how economic activities are organised across space, how governance and power are distributed within networks, and how different forms of territorial and social embeddedness shape development outcomes. Originating from the debate on Global Value Chain, the GPN perspective can be seen as a conceptual framework which is capable of grasping the different geographical and social dimensions of the processes of economic globalisation (Henderson et al., 2002). A central concern of this approach is the production, circulation and capture of value: who creates value, who appropriates it, and how these processes generate uneven patterns of development across places and actors (Coe & Yeung, 2019).

While the CCS has been widely analysed in terms of its contribution to local development, urban regeneration and innovation, much of the literature has remained anchored in conventional units of analysis such as firms, industries or spatial clusters (Amin & Cohendet, 2011; Pratt & Jeffcutt, 2009). These perspectives, while valuable, tend to overlook the complex relational configurations through which cultural and creative activities are organised, and through which value is created, circulated and captured across multiple contexts.

This special issue builds on the premise that the CCS is better understood as dynamic and multi-scalar networks connecting actors, ideas, resources and markets across space, and across scales. As it draws on the empirical and conceptual work developed within the CICERONE project, this special issue adopts a production network perspective that shifts attention from isolated stages - most notably creation - towards a more integrated understanding of how cultural and creative production is organised across interconnected processes. This approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how cultural and creative processes are structured, governed and embedded within broader socio-economic and institutional environments.

2. What the GPN approach brings to the CCS understanding

The Global Production Network (GPN) framework provides a powerful analytical lens to advance this shift. Rather than treating territories as passive backdrops for economic activity, GPN understands them as integral components of the network itself—actively shaping, and being shaped by, the organisation of production (Coe, 2013; Coe & Yeung, 2019). From this perspective, cultural and creative industries are constituted through a set of interconnected dimensions that include the configuration of production phases, the spatial footprint of activities, the governance structures through which networks are coordinated, and the multiple forms of embeddedness that anchor actors and processes in specific socio-cultural and institutional contexts.

A central analytical contribution of the production network approach lies in unpacking cultural and creative activities into a set of interconnected phases through which value is generated, circulated and evaluated. Building on the empirical work developed within the CICERONE project, these phases include creation, where ideas and concepts are developed; production, where these ideas are materialised into cultural goods or services; distribution, through which products reach

audiences and markets; exchange, where their value is assessed by users, critics and intermediaries; and archiving, which ensures preservation and provides a reservoir of references for future recombination. While analytically distinct, these phases are deeply interrelated and often overlap in practice, particularly in cultural and creative industries characterised by project-based and iterative forms of organisation (see Fig. 1)

Applying GPN to the CCS makes it possible to trace how value is generated and captured across different nodes of the network, how power is distributed among actors, and how local ecosystems are articulated with wider circuits of production and circulation (Coe, 2013). It also foregrounds the role of intermediaries, institutions and infrastructures that mediate access to resources and markets, and that shape the conditions under which creative activities can develop and scale (Gill & Pratt, 2008).

While the GPN framework offers a useful starting point, its application to the CCS also reveals important nuances. In many CCS contexts, production networks do not always operate as fully global systems, but demonstrate uneven degrees of globalisation, operating rather as uneven multi-scalar and selectively connected configurations, where local, national and international linkages coexist. In this sense, what is often described as a Global Production Network may, in practice, function as a Production Network characterised by uneven and differentiated degrees of globalisation. Recognising this uneven nature of the global is crucial for capturing the diversity of organisational forms and spatial articulations that characterise cultural and creative activities.

3. Why the CCS analysis requires a twist to GPN

At the same time, the application of GPN approach to the CCS requires important conceptual adaptations. Unlike many sectors, the CCS is characterised by the centrality of symbolic and cultural value, the prevalence of project-based and fluid forms of organisation, and the importance of intrinsic motivations alongside economic imperatives (Caves, 2000; Grabher, 2002; Lange, 2018). Processes of evaluation and legitimisation are not governed solely by market mechanisms, but also by critics, peers and other forms of cultural intermediation, which play a crucial role in defining what counts as valuable.

Moreover, phases such as exchange and archiving acquire relevance in the CCS, as they shape both the recognition and the long-term circulation of cultural products and practices. The role of public institutions is also especially salient, not only as regulators but as funders, enablers and, at times, co-producers of cultural value. These features call for a more flexible and process-oriented interpretation of GPN, capable of capturing the specific logics through which cultural and creative production is organised, valued and legitimised.

This reconceptualization is most explicitly articulated in the contribution by Kloosterman, Pratt, d'Ovidio and Greco, which provides a systematic application of a production network approach to the CCS

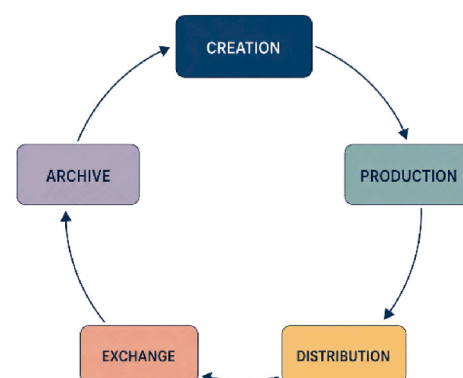


Fig. 1. Production network of the CCS (adapted from Kloosterman et al., 2026).

² See <https://culture.ec.europa.eu/cultural-and-creative-sectors>.

(2026). Moving beyond cluster and ecosystem perspectives, the article argues for a shift in the unit of analysis—from location to organisation—thereby making visible the broader system of activities through which cultural value is produced and circulated. Drawing on the CICERONE project, the authors develop a heuristic framework based on the articulation of production phases, governance structures, embeddedness and spatial footprint, offering a transversal and non-siloed understanding of the CCS. In doing so, the contribution not only advances the analytical foundations of this special issue but also demonstrates how production networks can serve as a powerful tool to capture the complexity, hybridity and multi-scalar nature of cultural and creative production.

4. Policy relevance

These analytical shifts have direct implications for policymaking. Understanding the CCS through a production network perspective highlights the limitations of interventions that focus narrowly on local ecosystems without considering their position within broader networks. Territorially grounded policies aimed at fostering creativity, innovation or entrepreneurship increasingly interact with global dynamics of production, distribution and value capture. Policy interventions have to therefore be designed having in mind how local actors are embedded within, and dependent upon, production networks. This means moving beyond the policies that aim to strengthen the capacity of actors to engage strategically with external firms or organisations, and capture value from network participation.

In this sense, processes of strategic coupling and decoupling become central (Yeung, 2016): territories seek to position themselves within global networks in ways that maximise local benefits, while navigating constraints imposed by existing power relations and governance structures. Importantly, the relationship is bidirectional. Changes in the configuration of global production networks—such as the emergence of new platforms, intermediaries or market logics—reverberate at the local level, reshaping opportunities for firms, workers and institutions. Consequently, effective policy-making means considering not only local capabilities and their development, but also the governance structures, lead firms and institutional arrangements that influence how value is created and captured across production networks. A network perspective thus provides a more robust basis for designing policies that are sensitive to these multi-scalar interdependencies and that address not only growth, but also the distribution of value and opportunities within the CCS and capable of coordinating interventions across different territorial and governance scales. Such an approach not only provides a new perspective that highlights the complexities of the CCS (see Kloosterman et al., 2026) but also extends the remit of the CCS policy. It goes beyond addressing only innovation and growth, and includes issues of inclusion, resilience, labour conditions, and the equitable distribution of value and opportunities within and across territories, which are increasingly central in shaping a sustainable CCS development.

5. Overview of the contributions

This special issue brings together a set of contributions that contribute to understand how the CCS is organised, governed and transformed through production networks. While each article focuses on a specific industry or analytical dimension, they collectively highlight how value creation, power relations and forms of embeddedness are unevenly distributed across interconnected systems operating across multiple spatial scales.

The audiovisual industries provide a particularly rich ground for exploring how production networks unfold across phases and contexts. Focusing on film, television and radio, Tomova, Andreeva-Popyordanova and Andreeva (2025) analyse how these networks are configured and embedded within specific socio-political environments. Their contribution advances the concept of multi-scalar

embeddedness by distinguishing and interrelating societal, territorial and network dimensions, while highlighting the role of public institutions and regulatory frameworks in shaping governance structures and value distribution.

A different, yet complementary, perspective emerges from the analysis of inequalities in the music and games industries. Kolokytha, Gmeiner, Henriksson and Janowska (2025) identify key dimensions such as market access, gender and working conditions, showing how these are produced and reproduced across different phases of the production network. In doing so, the article demonstrates the explanatory strength of a production network perspective in uncovering the structural mechanisms underpinning uneven outcomes.

Focusing on processes of innovation, Kloosterman and van Kempen (2026) shift the attention towards contemporary dance, unpacking the production network of a modern performance. Their analysis foregrounds the relational and processual nature of innovation, showing how it emerges from coordinated interactions among diverse actors across multiple phases, and how governance arrangements, funding structures and embeddedness shape the conditions for experimentation and risk-taking.

The articulation between local ecosystems and broader networks is further explored through the case of the fashion industry in Bilbao. Pareja-Eastaway and Pradel i Miquel (2026) examine how different organisational trajectories engage with production networks, foregrounding the role of institutional intermediaries and governance structures in mediating strategic coupling, access to global markets and value capture. Their findings highlight persistent tensions between strong territorial embeddedness and the capacity to scale.

At the upper end of the value spectrum, the luxury segment offers a particularly revealing lens on territorial inequalities. The contribution by d'Ovidio et al. (2026) examines high-end fashion and yacht manufacturing to show how value is created and captured within highly globalised and hierarchical networks. The analysis reveals how certain territories emerge as privileged nodes of control and branding, while others remain confined to less visible and less remunerative phases of production. Ultimately, they show how different governance architectures in luxury production networks generate different outcome in terms of local development, depending on the strength of the local production systems involved in the network and on the balance between symbolic and material value.

6. Concluding contribution of the special issue

The SI contributions reposition the CCS within production network debates, showing that this sector is not only locally embedded but also deeply shaped by global configurations of value, power and governance. By foregrounding the relational and multi-scalar nature of cultural and creative production, the special issue advances a more nuanced understanding of how development trajectories and inequalities are co-produced across interconnected networks such as in the case of luxury economy (see d'Ovidio et al., 2026) or music (see Kolokytha et al., 2025).

At the same time, it contributes to CCS studies by moving beyond cluster-based and sectoral approaches, highlighting the importance of intermediaries, institutional arrangements and processes of evaluation and legitimisation (see for example Pareja-Eastaway & Pradel i Miquel, 2026). In doing so, it opens new avenues for research and policy, pointing towards the need for more integrated frameworks that can account for the complexity, diversity and unevenness of cultural and creative economies in an increasingly interconnected and uneven world, where understanding how value, power and cultural meaning are co-produced across networks becomes essential.

More broadly, this special issue underscores the need to rethink established analytical boundaries between economic and cultural processes by treating the CCS as site where symbolic, social, and economic forms of value are simultaneously negotiated. Rather than

understanding this sector as exceptions or peripheral to wider economic dynamics, the contributions of this issue demonstrate how they illuminate broader transformations, including shifting forms of coordination, labour organisation and territorial development. This perspective not only enriches debates on production networks and regional development but also positions the CCS as critical arena through which questions of inclusion, resilience and alternative development futures can be examined.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Marianna d'Ovidio: Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Olga Kolokytha:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. **Montserrat Pareja-Eastaway:** Conceptualization, Formal analysis, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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Data availability

The authors do not have permission to share data.

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