

DIS.ORDERING DISTRIBUTION

Infrastructures, Formats and Practices
in the Circulation of Culture

Edited by Cornelia Storz, Vinzenz Hediger
and Matthias Krings

Sponsored by the
ASA section on Organizations,
Occupations and Work

RESEARCH IN THE
SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

VOLUME 94

DIS.ORDERING DISTRIBUTION

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

Series Editor: Michael Lounsbury

- Volume 63: The Contested Moralities of Markets
- Volume 64: Managing Inter-organizational Collaborations: Process Views
- Volume 65A: Microfoundations of Institutions
- Volume 65B: Microfoundations of Institutions
- Volume 66: Theorizing the Sharing Economy: Variety and Trajectories of New Forms of Organizing
- Volume 67: Tensions and Paradoxes in Temporary Organizing
- Volume 68: Macrofoundations: Exploring the Institutionally Situated Nature of Activity
- Volume 69: Organizational Hybridity: Perspectives, Processes, Promises
- Volume 70: On Practice and Institution: Theorizing the Interface
- Volume 71: On Practice and Institution: New Empirical Directions
- Volume 72: Organizational Imaginaries: Tempering Capitalism and Tending to Communities Through Cooperatives and Collectivist Democracy
- Volume 73A: Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Organizational Paradox: Learning from Belief and Science, Part A
- Volume 73B: Interdisciplinary Dialogues on Organizational Paradox: Investigating Social Structures and Human Expression, Part B
- Volume 74: Worlds of Rankings
- Volume 75: Organizing Creativity in the Innovation Journey
- Volume 76: Carnegie Goes to California: Advancing and Celebrating the Work of James G. March
- Volume 77: The Generation, Recognition and Legitimation of Novelty
- Volume 78: The Corporation: Rethinking the Iconic Form of Business Organization
- Volume 79: Organizing for Societal Grand Challenges
- Volume 80: Advances in Cultural Entrepreneurship
- Volume 81: Entrepreneurialism and Society: New Theoretical Perspectives
- Volume 82: Entrepreneurialism and Society: Consequences and Meanings
- Volume 83: Digital Transformation and Institutional Theory
- Volume 84: Organizational Wrongdoing as the “Foundational” Grand Challenge: Definitions and Antecedents
- Volume 85: Organizational Wrongdoing as the “Foundational” Grand Challenge: Consequences and Impact
- Volume 86: University Collegiality and the Erosion of Faculty Authority
- Volume 87: Revitalizing Collegiality: Restoring Faculty Authority in Universities
- Volume 88: Routine Dynamics: Organizing in a World in Flux
- Volume 89: Defining Web3: A Guide to the New Cultural Economy
- Volume 90: Sociological Thinking in Contemporary Organizational Scholarship
- Volume 91: Spaces for Creativity and Innovation Within and Across Organizational Boundaries
- Volume 92: Necessity Entrepreneurship: Getting Beyond the Binary
- Volume 93: Decolonizing Management and Organization Studies: Why, How, and What

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS ADVISORY BOARD

Series Editor

Michael Lounsbury

University of Alberta, Canada

RSO Advisory Board

Howard E. Aldrich, *University of North Carolina, USA*

Shaz Ansari, *Cambridge University, UK*

Grace Augustine, *University of Bath, UK*

Silvia Dorado Banacloche, *University of Massachusetts Boston, USA*

Christine Beckman, *University of California, Santa Barbara, USA*

Marya Besharov, *Oxford University, UK*

Eva Boxenbaum, *Copenhagen Business School, Denmark*

Ed Carberry, *University of Massachusetts Boston, USA*

Lisa Cohen, *McGill University, Canada*

Jeannette Colyvas, *Northwestern University, USA*

Erica Coslor, *University of Melbourne, Australia*

Gerald F. Davis, *University of Michigan, USA*

Rodolphe Durand, *HEC Paris, France*

Robert Eberhart, *University of San Diego, USA*

Fabrizio Ferraro, *IESE Business School, Spain*

Peer Fiss, *University of Southern California, USA*

Joel Gehman, *George Washington University, USA*

Nina Granqvist, *Aalto University School of Business, Finland*

Stine Grodal, *Northeastern University, USA*

Michael Grothe-Hammer, *Norwegian University of Science and Technology, Norway*

Markus A. Hoellerer, *University of New South Wales, Australia*

Ruthanne Huising, *ESSEC Business School, France*

Sarah Kaplan, *University of Toronto, Canada*

Brayden G. King, *Northwestern University, USA*

Matthew S. Kraatz, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA*

Tom Lawrence, *Oxford University, UK*

Xiaowei Rose Luo, *Insead, France*

Johanna Mair, *Hertie School, Germany*

Christopher Marquis, *Cambridge University, UK*

Renate Meyer, *Vienna University, Austria*

William Ocasio, *University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA*

Nelson Phillips, *University of California, Santa Barbara, USA*

Paul Spee, *University of Queensland, Australia*

Paul Tracey, *Cambridge University, UK*

Kerstin Sahlin, *Uppsala University, Sweden*

Elke Schüßler, *Leuphana University, Germany*

Sarah Soule, *Stanford University, USA*
Madeline Toubiana, *University of Ottawa, Canada*
Eero Vaara, *University of Oxford, UK*
Marc Ventresca, *University of Oxford, UK*
Maxim Voronov, *York University, Canada*
Milo Wang, *Arizona State University, USA*
Filippo Carlo Wezel, *USI Lugano, Switzerland*
April Wright, *University of Warwick, UK*
Shipeng Yan, *Hong Kong University, China*
Enying Zheng, *Peking University, China*
Tammar B. Zilber, *Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Israel*

RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF
ORGANIZATIONS VOLUME 94

**DIS.ORDERING
DISTRIBUTION:
INFRASTRUCTURES,
FORMATS AND PRACTICES
IN THE CIRCULATION
OF CULTURE**

EDITED BY

CORNELIA STORZ

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

VINZENZ HEDIGER

Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany

and

MATTHIAS KRINGS

Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany



United Kingdom – North America – Japan
India – Malaysia – China

Emerald Publishing Limited
Emerald Publishing, Floor 5, Northspring, 21-23 Wellington Street, Leeds LS1 4DL.

First edition 2025

Editorial matter and selection © 2025 Cornelia Storz, Vinzenz Hediger, and Matthias Krings.
Individual chapters © 2025 The authors.
Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited.

Reprints and permissions service

Contact: www.copyright.com

No part of this book may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, transmitted in any form or by any means electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise without either the prior written permission of the publisher or a licence permitting restricted copying issued in the UK by The Copyright Licensing Agency and in the USA by The Copyright Clearance Center. Any opinions expressed in the chapters are those of the authors. Whilst Emerald makes every effort to ensure the quality and accuracy of its content, Emerald makes no representation implied or otherwise, as to the chapters' suitability and application and disclaims any warranties, express or implied, to their use.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-83662-947-4 (Print)

ISBN: 978-1-83662-946-7 (Online)

ISBN: 978-1-83662-948-1 (Epub)

ISSN: 0733-558X (Series)



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

CONTENTS

<i>About the Editors</i>	ix
<i>About the Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Foreword: Research in the Sociology of Organizations</i>	xv
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xvii

Dis/Ordering Distribution: A Short Introduction <i>Cornelia Storz, Vinzenz Hediger and Matthias Krings</i>	1
--	---

SECTION I INFRASTRUCTURES, FORMATS, AND RULES: HOW THEY MATTER IN DISTRIBUTION AND PRODUCTION

The Power of Recommendations: Sculpting Culture in the Digital Era <i>Dana Oz, Moritz von Zahn, Maximilian Lowin, Shachar Reichman and Oliver Hinz</i>	11
--	----

Platform Distribution of Music: How Afrobeats Artists Build Audiences Through Social Media and Streaming Algorithms <i>Bakar Abdul-Rashid Jeduah</i>	23
--	----

Digital Platforms' Geographic Distribution Strategies: The Role of Color in Geotargeting <i>Egbert Amoncio</i>	39
--	----

Empires of Distribution: Hollywood, Nollywood, and the Case for Distribution Studies <i>Vinzenz Hediger</i>	55
---	----

SECTION II DISTRIBUTION AS A FORCE SHAPING PRODUCTION: THE CASE OF MEMES

Beyond Spreadability and Virality: Distributing Internet Memes in Limited Circles and Circular Motions <i>Jana Zündel</i>	79
---	----

Nigerian Afrobeats: From Memes to Streams? <i>Tom Simmert</i>	97
---	----

**SECTION III CULTURAL ENTREPRENEURS
IN THE PLATFORM BUSINESS**

Streaming Nollywood Before Netflix: iROKOTv and the Global Distribution of Nigerian Cinema <i>Sonia Campanini</i>	117
---	-----

Brokers, Platforms, and the Global Distribution of Afrobeats Music <i>Ute Röschenthaler and Tom Simmert</i>	131
---	-----

ABOUT THE EDITORS

Cornelia Storz is Professor of Innovation and Entrepreneurship at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her research focuses on how incumbents and entrepreneurs innovate, how universities stimulate knowledge creation, and how organizations are facilitated by their institutional environment. Her works have been published in *Research Policy*, *The Journal of Technology Transfer*, *Long Range Planning*, *Small Business Economics*, *Socio-Economic Review*, *Asia Pacific Journal of Management*, and others. She was Guest Editor of a special issue on “Path Dependence and Emergence of New Industries” of *Research Policy*. Her research has been supported by the German Research Foundation and others, and she has been invited as a Visiting Scholar at the Stanford Graduate School of Business, Keck Graduate Institute, Hitotsubashi University, and RIETI.

Vinzenz Hediger is Professor of Cinema Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt where he directs the DFG Research Training Program “Configurations of film” (www.konfigurationen-des-films.de) and the BMFTR area studies project CEDITRAA Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia (<https://ceditraa.net>). He is a Co-founder of NECS European Network for Cinema and Media Studies (www.necs.org), the founding editor of the *Zeitschrift für Medienwissenschaft* (www.zfmedienwissenschaft.de), and a member of the Mainz Academy of Sciences and Literature. His publications include *Films That Work. Industrial Film and the Productivity of Media* (with Patrick Vonderau, Amsterdam University Press 2009, open access at oapen.org), *Accidental Archivism. Shaping Cinema's Futures with Remnants of the Past* (with Stefanie Schulte Strathaus, meson press, open access), and *Films That Work Harder. The Circulations of Industrial Film* (with Florian Hoof and Yvonne Zimmermann, Amsterdam University Press 2023, open access).

Matthias Krings is Professor of Cultural Anthropology at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz. He has specialized in the study of African popular culture, media and visual anthropology, the anthropology of the body, and religion. His current research focuses on skin color-based categorization practices beyond racialization and on the global mainstreaming of African popular music (recently labeled “Afrobeats”). Among his publications are edited volumes about *Global Nollywood*, *Tanzanian Bongo Media Worlds*, and *Distributed Productivities*. His most recent book, *African Appropriations: Cultural Difference, Mimesis, and Media*, was published by Indiana University Press. He has done extensive fieldwork in Nigeria and Tanzania.

This page intentionally left blank

ABOUT THE CONTRIBUTORS

Egbert Amoncio is a Postdoctoral Researcher at Goethe University Frankfurt and a Research Fellow at WIPO, where his work on the creative industries – spanning product designs and films – creates unique synergies across both affiliations. His research leverages artificial intelligence (AI) techniques, particularly computer vision, to analyze economic, managerial, and organizational themes. By detecting visual similarities in colors, shapes, and patterns that would have otherwise gone unnoticed with traditional methods, he offers novel insights into design innovation and dynamic optimal distinctiveness in cultural products like South Korean films. His work also extends to understanding the value and protection of traditional knowledge in global IP systems. Combining advanced AI applications with real-world challenges, his multidisciplinary approach bridges creativity, innovation, and development, driving forward how we understand and measure the impact of creative industries in today's economy.

Sonia Campanini is a Film and Media Scholar whose research focuses on the archiving, restoration, curation, and circulation of global film cultures. From 2015 to 2022, she was Assistant Professor for Film Culture at the Institute for Theatre, Film and Media Studies at the Goethe University Frankfurt, then Visiting Professor of the Fonte Foundation at the Film University Babelsberg Konrad Wolf. She is currently Postdoctoral Researcher in the interdisciplinary project CEDITRAA Cultural Entrepreneurship and Digital Transformation in Africa and Asia, within which she is conducting her current research on the production and circulation of Nigerian and South Korean film cultures.

Oliver Hinz studied Business Administration and Information Systems at TU Darmstadt in Germany. He worked as a Research Assistant (2004–2007) and received his PhD in October 2007. His work has earned numerous awards, including the dissertation prize of the Alcatel-Lucent-Stiftung, the Erich-Gutenberg-Prize, the Schmalenbach Prize for young researchers in 2008, and the Science Prize 2017. From 2008 to 2011, he was Assistant Professor at Goethe University Frankfurt and joined TU Darmstadt as Chair of Information Systems in 2011. Since 2017, he has been Chair of Information Systems and Information Management at Goethe University. He has been a Visiting Scholar at institutions like MIT, Microsoft Research, HEC Paris, and Wharton. His research is published in leading journals such as *Information Systems Research*, *MIS Quarterly*, and *Journal of Marketing*. According to *Wirtschafts Woche*, he ranks among Germany's top management researchers. Since October 2023, he serves as Editor-in-Chief of *Business & Information Systems Engineering*.

Bakar Abdul-Rashid Jeduah is a Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies of the University of Mainz (Germany), and member of the CEDITRAA research project. He obtained an MA in Anthropology at Aarhus University (Denmark) and a PhD in Sociology from Universities of Milano and Torino (in 2024). His research interests are in the anthropology of globalization; digital and cultural sociology; digital African cultures; and popular music, dance, and social media. His PhD research dealt with the intersection of African popular culture and social media practices; specifically, with the emergence of contemporary African music and dance cultures such as Afrobeats, on social media platforms, and how these cultures are shaping global intercultural practices.

Maximilian Lowin studied Business Informatics at TU Darmstadt in Germany. There, he completed his Master's degree in 2019 with the academic title Master of Science. During his studies, he spent an exchange semester at Chalmers University of Technology, Gothenburg, Sweden, and focused mainly on artificial intelligence (AI) and human user interfaces. Since January 2020, he has been working as a Research Assistant at the Chair of Information Systems and Information Management at Goethe University, Frankfurt, Germany. His research focuses on applying AI in various domains such as smart living, multi-stakeholder recommender systems, and clinical decision-support. He completed his Doctorate on the topic of data-driven decision-making and is currently working on research projects on recommender systems, sustainable heating, and large language models. Besides, he works as an AI consultant for BrAIniacs GmbH and integrates AI applications for various organizations and companies.

Dana Oz is an MSc student in Industrial Engineering at Tel Aviv University. With a background in Statistics, her research spans deep learning, natural language processing, and recommendation systems. She has extensive experience as a researcher in machine learning applications for large-scale datasets, consumer behavior analysis, and profit-maximizing recommendation systems. She has served as a lecturer for online business experiments and as a teaching assistant for convolutional neural networks. Currently, she works as a Machine Learning Engineer at Transmit Security, where she focuses on implementing generative artificial intelligence applications. Her expertise includes implementing statistical and machine learning techniques for real-world applications in academia and industry.

Shachar Reichman is the Head of the Technology and Information Management Department at Tel Aviv University School of Management. His research focuses on two related topics: (1) how the vast quantities of data that are generated in online environments and, specifically, data created by "crowds," such as posts on social media platforms and data from search engine logs, can be utilized to improve consumers' experiences and businesses' performances and (2) exploiting the structure of networks of networks (or complex networks) to support the decisions of consumers and managers. His prior research has been published in *Journal of Marketing Research*, *Operations Research*, *MISQ*, *Management*

Science, *Journal of Interactive Marketing*, and *Proceedings of ICIS*. He received his PhD from Tel Aviv University School of Management and was a Postdoctoral Associate at MIT Sloan School. He holds BSc and MSc degrees in Industrial Engineering from Ben-Gurion University.

Ute Rösenthaler was a Lecturer at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, and previously at Goethe University Frankfurt. Her extensive oeuvre includes works in the fields of economic, legal, social, and media anthropology, as well as memory culture and migration studies. These include internationally acclaimed studies on cult associations in Cameroon (“Purchasing Culture”), intellectual property rights in Africa (“Copyright Africa”), trade networks in the global South (“Africa’s Agency in China’s Tea Trade,” “A History of Mali’s National Drink”), various facets of African entrepreneurship, product histories, advertising, and photography. An accomplished ethnographer, she has lived in Cameroon, Mali, and Nigeria, and her transregional research has taken her to China, Malaysia, and South Korea.

Tom Simmert is a Research Fellow at the Department of Anthropology and African Studies at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, where he received a PhD in 2024. His dissertation “Afrobeats: Digital Music from Lagos to the World” explored the entrepreneurial spirit of Nigerian musicians, the construction and globalization of a digital music industry and the reversal of established hierarchies in transatlantic cultural flows.

Moritz von Zahn is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the Institute of Information Systems at Goethe University Frankfurt, where he also earned his PhD. Prior to this, he completed his Bachelor and Master of Science at Karlsruhe Institute of Technology. His research primarily builds upon quantitative empirical methods and studies the application, development, and impact of artificial intelligence and recommender systems. He has published his research in journals such as *Information Systems Research* and *Marketing Science*. He frequently visits and collaborates with institutions such as the University of Tel Aviv, Boston University, and ETH Zurich. In his recent projects, he explores the use of causal machine learning and feature-based explanations to solve business and societal problems in real-world settings.

Jana Zündel is a Postdoctoral Researcher at the DFG Research Training Group “Configurations of Film” at Goethe University Frankfurt, Germany. She studied media culture in Weimar (2008–2011) and Bonn (2012–2015). Her dissertation (completed in 2021) was published as “FernsehserienimmedienkulturellenWandel” in 2022 (Herbert von Halem Verlag). She was a Research Assistant in the Department of Media Studies at Bonn University (2017–2021) and scholarship holder in the Structured Doctoral Program of the Bonn Faculty of Arts (2018–2021) and the Goethe Research Academy for Early Career Researchers (2024–2025); her research and teaching focuses on digital media cultures and meme studies, television studies, series and streaming platforms, and film analysis and historiography.

This page intentionally left blank

FOREWORD: RESEARCH IN THE SOCIOLOGY OF ORGANIZATIONS

Research in the Sociology of Organizations (RSO) publishes cutting-edge empirical research and theoretical papers that seek to enhance our understanding of organizations and organizing as pervasive and fundamental aspects of society and economy. We seek provocative papers that push the frontiers of current conversations, that help to revive old ones, or that incubate and develop new perspectives. Given its successes in this regard, RSO has become an impactful and indispensable fount of knowledge for scholars interested in organizational phenomena and theories. RSO is indexed and ranks highly in Scopus/SCImago as well as in the *Academic Journal Guide* published by the Chartered Association of Business schools.

As one of the most vibrant areas in the social sciences, the sociology of organizations engages a plurality of empirical and theoretical approaches to enhance our understanding of the varied imperatives and challenges that these organizations and their organizers face. Of course, there is a diversity of formal and informal organizations – from for-profit entities to nonprofits, state and public agencies, social enterprises, communal forms of organizing, non-governmental associations, trade associations, publicly traded, family owned and managed, private firms – the list goes on! Organizations, moreover, can vary dramatically in size from small entrepreneurial ventures to large multinational conglomerates to international governing bodies such as the United Nations.

Empirical topics addressed by RSO include the formation, survival, and growth of organizations; collaboration and competition between organizations; the accumulation and management of resources and legitimacy; and how organizations or organizing efforts cope with a multitude of internal and external challenges and pressures. Particular interest is growing in the complexities of contemporary organizations as they cope with changing social expectations and as they seek to address societal problems related to corporate social responsibility, inequality, corruption and wrongdoing, and the challenge of new technologies. As a result, levels of analysis reach from the individual to the organization, industry, community and field, and even the nation-state or world society. Much research is multilevel and embraces both qualitative and quantitative forms of data.

Diverse theory is employed or constructed to enhance our understanding of these topics. While anchored in the discipline of sociology and the field of management, RSO also welcomes theoretical engagement that draws on other disciplinary conversations – such as those in political science or economics, as well as work from diverse philosophical traditions. RSO scholarship has helped

push forward a plethora of theoretical conversations on institutions and institutional change, networks, practice, culture, power, inequality, social movements, categories, routines, organization design and change, configurational dynamics, and many other topics.

Each volume of RSO tends to be thematically focused on a particular empirical phenomenon (e.g., creative industries, multinational corporations, and entrepreneurship) or theoretical conversation (e.g., institutional logics, actors and agency, and microfoundations). The series publishes papers by junior as well as leading international scholars and embraces diversity on all dimensions. If you are scholar interested in organizations or organizing, I hope you find RSO to be an invaluable resource as you develop your work.

Professor Michael Lounsbury
Series Editor, *Research in the Sociology of Organizations*
Canada Research Chair in Entrepreneurship & Innovation
University of Alberta

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This volume would not have been possible without the unwavering dedication and exceptional support of Grete Schönbeck. Our deepest gratitude goes first and foremost to her, whose steadfast commitment and invaluable guidance accompanied us through every stage of this journey with professionalism and warmth. We would like to extend our gratitude to all those who contributed to the development of this volume via comments and discussion, in particular the participants of our workshops and conferences (“CEDITRAA-Opening Conference,” *Dis.Ordering Distribution. Infrastructures, Formats and Practices in the Circulation of Culture*): Charles Acland, Tabitha Adler, Joey van Angeren, Kevin Bauer, Casandra Chistinean, Alessandro Jedlowski, Bertram Lang, Ramon Lobato, Izuu Nwankwo, Alexander Peukert, Artemis Saleh, Sagorika Sinha, Mirjam Tröster, Solomon Waliaula, and Usaku Wammanda. For editorial support we thank Johannes Maiterth. Special thanks go to Michael Lounsbury, who has not only encouraged us to pursue two issues on cultural entrepreneurship within the RSO framework but also provided our research with invaluable theoretical and empirical insights along the way. This project was generously supported by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF01UC2113A) and would not have been realized without Interdisciplinary Centre for East Asian Studies at Goethe University Frankfurt and the Georg Forster Forum at Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz.

This page intentionally left blank

DIS/ORDERING DISTRIBUTION: A SHORT INTRODUCTION

Cornelia Storz^a, Vinzenz Hediger^a and Matthias Krings^b

^aGoethe University Frankfurt, Germany

^bJohannes Gutenberg University Mainz, Germany

“Distribution” can be defined as the delivery of a finished product to a point of sale. As such, it is an indispensable part of every value chain. Distribution requires infrastructures: ships, trains, trucks, communication networks, storage facilities, inventories, and similar. It also requires formats: few innovations have changed the global economy as much as the introduction of the Twenty-Foot Equivalent Unit ISO container did, in allowing for the streamlining of trade flows worldwide regardless of the items delivered (Levinson, 2006). And, finally, distribution requires rules: technological and legal standards as well as agreements that secure and stabilize the frictionless circulation of goods. But with regard to the structure and quality of the artifacts in question, distribution appears to be neutral – merely the intermittent stage in the value chain, where the finished product is delivered to the point of sale or the site and occasion of consumption.

In the case of cultural goods, given the underlying infrastructures, formats, and rules, distribution can be said to actively shape the artifact, however. The rise of cinema in the early 20th century, for example, was contingent on the definition of a global standard of delivery for the 35-mm film strip that could be run through every projector in every picture house around the world (“rules”). The size of the individual frame and the aspect ratio of 35 times 24 mm projected at a rate of first 18 and later 24 images per second defined for every practitioner what a moving image was (“formats”) (Kuhn & Westwell, 2020). At the same time, the technological standard and the concomitant global delivery infrastructures created the

**Dis.Ordering Distribution: Infrastructures, Formats and Practices in the Circulation of Culture
Research in the Sociology of Organizations, Volume 94, 1–8**

Copyright © 2025 by Cornelia Storz, Vinzenz Hediger and Matthias Krings

Published under exclusive licence by Emerald Publishing Limited

ISSN: 0733-558X/doi:10.1108/S0733-558X20250000094001

conditions for the economies of scale allowing producers to acquire the venture capital necessary to move to the large-scale feature-film productions designed to attract a potentially limitless number of paying customers beginning in the mid-1910s (“infrastructures”) (Belton, 1990).

In this volume, we discuss the relationship between distribution and production by using empirical evidence largely from two of the most virulent centers of cultural production worldwide: Africa and Asia. In particular, we analyze how cultural entrepreneurs interact with global distribution platforms, and the implications here of for the production of cultural artifacts. We assume that digital platforms are not only a distribution device at the end of the value chain, thus investigating the ways in which they are also transforming *how* such cultural artifacts are produced. Our analysis examines these phenomena at the three levels just sketched out: infrastructures, formats, and rules.

Infrastructures refer to the foundational technologies such as servers, datacenters, or cloud services that support the operation of a digital platform and indeed allow it to operate in the first place. Infrastructures provide both the necessary physical and virtual resources. Regarding digital distribution, *formats* refer to the specific ways in which data and content are structured, encoded, and presented on a platform (such as file types, data standards, user interface design elements, or the shape and size of digital material), and thus provide distinct meanings and facilitate interpretation (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2006).¹ *Rules* encompass the supporting algorithms, protocols, and governance structures (such as community guidelines or legal standards). Thus, they shape the behavior of digital users and cultural entrepreneurs alike. As stakeholders try to maximize their success by adapting their content to distributional platforms like Netflix and TikTok, production and distribution are becoming more interrelated than in the nondigital past. Dana Ozandher colleagues, Bakar Abdul-Rashid Jeduah, and Egbert Amoncio each document how infrastructures, formats, and rules impact the production of cultural artifacts, and how they inform the production of cultural content in terms of music and film.

The interplay of infrastructures with formats and rules has a decisive role in shaping outcomes. Infrastructures and formats point to a broader logic, one not specific to digital environments; rather, it can be traced back to different areas of endeavor and earlier forms of cultural production. In that sense, it can be argued that cultural meaning is not so much a matter of expression or of textual structures and iconography as it is one of infrastructures and formats of distribution. To return to the example cited above: the meaning of a film is determined as much by powerful standardized formats and by the economic logics instituted by them as it is by the artistic vision of a particular director and/or producer. The rich stories and anecdotes of directors struggling to impose their vision on the apparatus of the film industry eloquently speak to these dynamics.

With the approach to distribution adopted henceforth we are also revisiting one of the founding ideas of media theory, namely Marshall McLuhan’s (1964) claim that “the medium is the message.” That is to say, the meaning of any given media content cannot be understood independently of the study of the technologies and formats used to convey said meaning. However, the respective

contributions to this volume come together in giving this idea what might be called a “site-specific turn.” With the onset of the second wave of globalization following the end of the Cold War, Arjun Appadurai (1996) argued that “culture” is not a matter of limited physical locations, linguistic homogeneity, and the relative isomorphism of symbolic practices but rather of global flows, and that furthermore it should best be understood through an interlacing set of “scapes”: ethno-, techno-, finance-, media-, and ideoscapes. In the spirit of world-systems theory, Appadurai’s work seemed to suggest that these various scapes transcend the established frames of reference vis-à-vis economic and cultural policy, particularly the nation-state.

However, at the intersection of “meaning” being understood as shaped by the medium rather than an isolated message and of a dynamic interpretation of “culture” as a matter of global flows, more recent studies like Ramon Lobato’s (2019) *Netflix Nations* suggest that digital platforms with global audiences reinforce, as much as they transcend, nation-state frameworks of cultural production, policy, and perception. This implies that the study of cultural production – including that of space in and through culture – requires a focus on the specific nexus of infrastructures, formats, and rules in any given instance. Memes, for example, are a good illustration of how distribution and production become interrelated and, despite the promises of global networks, local and regional dynamics also remain in play. When memes become popular, meaning widely distributed, cultural producers may need to incorporate them into new content (either as homage, parody, or direct reference), which also sees the audience in question become a co-creator here. Jana Zündel reflects on the role of memes in the production of cultural artifacts, while Tom Simmert shows how the network effect of distribution platforms may influence the production of cultural goods such as songs given that they are increasingly being produced with “meme-ability” in mind. Taken together, digital platforms lead to an inherent strong relationship between distribution and production. However, there are two important qualifications to be made: places matter, and so does history.

First, place matters in complex ways. The above-mentioned new forms of space, created through digital platforms, have often given rise to the impression that the latter open up unlimited opportunities regarding both forms of distribution and of production (Nambisan, 2017). However, cultural entrepreneurship – while transcending boundaries – is still wedded to local production and local distribution sites. When we argue in the following that the opportunities available to cultural entrepreneurs have been substantially transformed by digital platforms’ emergence, let it not be forgotten that dependence on the local environment – in terms of networks, distributors, established practices – has by no means disappeared. Sonia Campanini and Ute Rösenthaller and Tom Simmert discuss these phenomena in their respective contributions.

Second, throughout this volume, we highlight how digital platforms have transformed the contemporary landscape, with the underlying infrastructures, formats, and rules substantially shaping cultural production and the creation and design of its artifacts. But digital platforms do not simply fall from heaven; as many economic historians have shown, organizational phenomena are path dependent

(Storz & Schäfer, 2011). Indeed, important structures and institutions would be set up long before the digital world first emerged, ones continuing to participate in the shaping of cultural production today. The economic historian Douglas Gomery (1984), in his analysis of the Hollywood studio system, argued that distribution – while “the least glamorous branch of the film business” – actually “provides the economic basis for market control” (p. 69). Hollywood studios are, in fact, distributors providing films with access to the global market before they are producers.

We see this also in the rich literature on “complementary assets,” which provide core benefits supporting a given organization’s competitiveness (Teece, 1986). Specifically, distribution is an asset that enables incumbents to stay in particular markets and to bar entry to competitors. It is no surprise, then, that no viable rival to the big Hollywood studios would emerge after 1925. To this day, they remain the only firms capable of producing and marketing the most profitable of all media formats, the blockbuster film. When Netflix morphed from a mail-based home-video distributor into the world’s first major streaming platform, it carefully avoided challenging the Hollywood studios on their main turf and opted for the cultivation instead of what may be called a “global in-between space” – that is, one lying between globalized Hollywood blockbuster films and national film and television production, picking up and producing films from a number of different countries around the world for relatively low sums of money and giving them a chance to find a global audience independently of the Hollywood studios’ own distribution networks. Meanwhile, regional film industries like the various video ones in Nigeria owe their rise to the repurposing of preexisting marketing networks (including piracy ones for American films), reaching global resonance once they scale up from these ground operations to regional satellite TV and digital platforms. In each case, a specific type of interplay between infrastructures, formats, and rules helps explain these dynamics (see Vinzenz Hediger’s contribution).

Our title “Dis/Ordering distribution” is programmatic. We want to complicate the popular understanding of “distribution” as a largely neutral if indispensable element in every value chain. Explored instead is the extent to which distribution has crucial implications for the concept of “culture” and the artifacts it yields. With a view to the study of these phenomena, we return to one of Appadurai’s original intuitions, namely that in an age of globalized networks of communication and trade, we can no longer uphold the idea of “cultural artifacts” being defined by physical location, linguistic homogeneity, and the relative isomorphism of symbolic practices. Instead, we propose to rethink the relationship between culture, place, and space on the basis of the triad infrastructures, formats, and rules. The respective contributions to this volume can also be understood as building blocks in a new approach to cultural analysis, one where the focus is no longer on spatially isolated and distinct objects – language, artworks, material objects, rituals, and behavioral patterns – but on the practices behind the mobilization of forms, ideas, goods, and people instead.

The contributions are grouped into three thematic sections. The first, *Infrastructures, Formats, and Rules: How They Matter in Distribution and Production*, focuses on our identified triad, including historical path dependencies

of key relevance. This initial section's respective papers stress how distribution is not neutral: promotion is, indeed, an important branch of business by which distribution platforms shape consumer behavior.

Oz et al. focuses on algorithms as rules and, in particular, on recommendation algorithms ("The Power of Recommendations: Sculpting Culture in the Digital Era"). Recommender systems (RSs) calculate personalized recommendations that influence consumer decisions and how widely the content in question is distributed. Through the sophisticated algorithms employed by platforms like Amazon and Netflix, user behavior is carefully analyzed to offer such personalized recommendations. Consequently, RSs possess the ability to elevate specific products or content to the status of "winners," granting them increased visibility, consumption, and commercial success. As a result, these winners act as influential forces, shaping product-development trajectories, creative content, and broader cultural trends. Their conceptual contribution examines, accordingly, the intricate interplay between RS algorithms, user behavior, and content production, also highlighting the potentially harmful outcomes here such as the risk of cultural homogenization.

The second contribution in this section by Jeduah ("Platform Distribution of Music: How Afrobeats Artists Build Audiences Through Social Media and Streaming Algorithms") shows how algorithms – and particularly RSs – can be understood as tools that turn platform environments into "ecosystems." Drawing on case studies from Ghana and Nigeria, his paper reveals how producers adapt their cultural artifacts to reach new audiences abroad, and how this has created innovative forms of collaboration between local and international musicians as well as given rise to the greater use of remixes. The third contribution in this section by Amoncio ("Digital Platforms' Geographic Distribution Strategies: The Role of Color in Geotargeting") analyzes differences in the visual presentation of respective items of content on digital platforms, with a particular focus on Netflix. Using a triple difference-in-differences approach, his study examines identical films in Netflix's South Korean and US catalogs, and dissects how "geotargeting," as manifested in such visual differences as color schemes, affects user perception. Results reveal that while geotargeting in general leads to refined user outlooks, only specific color schemes are able to drive this. His contribution hereby adds to the literature on digital platforms, specifically on effective geographic distribution strategies and the nuanced role of visual localization in enhancing user engagement and satisfaction.

In the fourth contribution, Hediger ("Empires of Distribution: Hollywood, Nollywood, and the Case for Distribution Studies") looks at the emergence and transformation of Hollywood's global distribution system with a particular view on the geographic location of production versus distribution. He starts from the observation that studio headquarters were located in New York until 1975, with Hollywood serving as a production outpost or "movie colony" on the West Coast, in exploring the dynamics that led to the distribution headquarters relocating to Los Angeles in the 1970s. He then compares Hollywood's distribution history to that of the film industry in one of the world's most important postcolonial nation-states, Nigeria. Tracing the relative failure of the latter's film policy in the 1980s

back to a lack of consideration having been given to the issue of distribution, the author discusses how the independent video industries that emerged in the 1990s – now known collectively as “Nollywood” – became successful because they entered production from the distribution side. Teasing out the methodological and theoretical implications of the two case studies, he argues for the primacy of distribution studies over production ones.

The second section, *Distribution as a Force Shaping Production: The Case of Memes*, focuses on one distinct aspect to such dynamics. While memes – “units of popular culture that are circulated, imitated, and transformed by individual Internet users, creating a shared cultural experience” (Shifman, 2013, p. 367) – have long been in existence, what is unprecedented is how they have by now become ubiquitous practice in contemporary media culture. Memes are a fascinating element of cultural artifacts and illustrate how closely production and distribution are linked: they can dictate trends in cultural production by highlighting specific themes, genres, or styles that resonate with one’s target audience. For example, if a particular meme format becomes popular, cultural entrepreneurs may adapt their content to fit with it, knowing it is more likely to be shared. Also, they may shift strategy: producers often create content with an awareness of its “meme-ability” – designing moments, visuals, or dialogs that are likely to be excerpted and circulated as memes. Cultural entrepreneurs and distributors monitor these developments to gauge trends, audience preferences, and the potential for content going viral.

Zündel (“Beyond Spreadability and Virality: Distributing Internet Memes in Limited Circles and Circular Motions”) introduces us to the intricacies of memes in her contribution. She shows that their deliberate use to promote content is a key strategy in increasing the success of platform distribution. Also highlighted is how corporations do not focus on ensuring individual memes going viral but rather on the repetition of this form of content in circular motions. Simmert (“Nigerian Afrobeats: From Memes to Streams?”) documents how music labels may benefit from the “memefication” of their catalogs on streaming platforms, and how musicians and labels try to produce content that can be easily “memefied.” Empirically, his paper demonstrates a relationship between the memefication of songs on TikTok and their subsequent success on streaming platforms. The author focuses on Afrobeats (contemporary pop music from West Africa) in Nigeria, where the independent label Mavin Records has seemingly benefited from the memefication of its music catalog on TikTok. Through digital ethnography, content analysis, and the scrutiny of platform data, he examines the performance of selected Mavin Records artists’ songs on both TikTok and streaming platforms in investigating the strategic initiatives employed by the label and its artists to curate content specifically designed for this mode of distribution.

The third section, *Cultural Entrepreneurs in the Platform Business*, brings the physical space back to the fore. Its approach is driven by the notion that cultural entrepreneurship on digital platforms is still bound to local production and local distribution sites. The respective contributions here document how cultural entrepreneurs like artists and musicians use their networks and modes of data

collection to promote their work, and why and how they decide to use networked modes of production.

Campanini (“Streaming Nollywood Before Netflix: iROKOTv and the Global Distribution of Nigerian Cinema”) follows the entrepreneurial story of Mary Remmy Njoku and Jason Chukwuma Njoku as they make their way in the Nigerian film and media industry, highlighting how the entanglements between distribution and production are laid bare by the eponymous platform’s nature. Rösenthaller and Simmert (“Brokers, Platforms, and the Global Distribution of Afrobeats Music”) focus on the distribution and circulation of Nigerian Afrobeats in South Korea and beyond. Based on digital ethnography and field research in the two countries, their joint contribution explores the question of how African pop music has spread in South Korea since the turn of the millennium in conjunction with the development of digital technologies. While the distribution of music has been revolutionized by digital platforms, a further consequence has been a complex network of diverse stakeholders – artists, producers, platform owners, users – coming into being. They emphasize how global streaming platforms have steadily increased their dominance over local offerings and come to exert greater control over the distribution of music. As it turns out, however, none of these professional players can claim full authority vis-à-vis the value chain because users also play a significant – and growing – role in shaping patterns of distribution.

NOTE

1. To take the example of the synthesizing of raw data into an image, the so-called rendering of formats creates a “conformity between localized technical performance and its specification in global technical standards” – rendering, in other words, “produces territory” (Geoghegan, 2021, p. 1093).

REFERENCES

- Appadurai, A. (1996). *Modernity at large: Cultural dimensions of globalisation*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Belton, J. (1990). Historical paper: The origins of 35mm film as a standard. *SMPTE Journal*, 99(8), 652–661. <https://doi.org/10.5594/j02613>
- Geoghegan, B. D. (2021). The bitmap is the territory: How digital formats render global positions. *MLN*, 136(5), 1093–1113. <https://doi.org/10.1353/mln.2021.0081>
- Gomery, D. (1984). Corporate ownership and control in the contemporary US film industry. *Screen*, 25(4–5), 60–70. <https://doi.org/10.1093/screen/25.4-5.60>
- Kaghan, W. N., & Lounsbury, M. (2006). Articulation work, collective mind, and the institutional residue of organizational artifacts. In A. Rafaeli & M. G. Pratt (Eds.), *Artifacts and organizations: Beyond mere symbolism* (pp. 259–277). Lawrence Erlbaum Associates Inc.
- Kuhn, A., & Westwell, G. (2020). Aspect ratio. In *A dictionary of film studies*. Oxford University Press. <https://www-oxfordreference-com.proxy.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/view/10.1093/acref/9780198832096.001.0001/acref-9780198832096-e-0038>
- Levinson, M. (2006). *The box. How the shipping container made the world smaller and the economy bigger*. Princeton University Press.
- Lobato, R. (2019). *Netflix nations: The geography of digital distribution*. DOI: 10.18574/nyu/9781479882281.001.0001.

- McLuhan, M. (1964). *Understanding media: The extensions of man*. McGraw-Hill.
- Nambisan, S. (2017). Digital entrepreneurship: Toward a digital technology perspective of entrepreneurship. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 41(6), 1029–1055.
- Shifman, L. (2013). Memes in a digital world: Reconciling with a conceptual troublemaker. *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication*, 18(3), 362–377.
- Storz, C., & Schäfer, S. (2011). *Institutional diversity and innovation. Continuing and emerging patterns in Japan and China* (with guest contribution of Marcus Conlé and preface of Richard Whitley). Routledge.
- Teece, D. J. (1986). Profiting from technological innovation: Implications for integration, collaboration, licensing and public policy. *Research Policy*, 15(6), 285–305.