Organizing counter-cultures: challenges of structure, organization and sustainability in the Independent Filmmakers Association and the Radical Film Network

STEVE PRESENCE

The Radical Film Network (RFN) was conceived in Bristol and established in London in 2013 in recognition of the growth of organizations working in progressive and experimental film culture in the UK. Since then the RFN has grown rapidly, and now consists of more than one hundred organizations across four continents, from artists' studios and production collectives to archives, co-ops, distributors, film festivals and exhibition venues. This essay reflects on the RFN's development in relation to the Independent Filmmakers Association (IFA), a London-based organization which sought to represent politically engaged and aesthetically innovative film culture in the 1970s and 1980s, and which largely inspired the formation of the RFN.

Despite the almost four decades separating them, the RFN today faces many of the same questions and challenges that were addressed by the IFA: what constitutes oppositional film culture; how should a counter-cultural network be organized; what roles should different participants – filmmakers, artists, academics, activists – play within the culture; should activist infrastructures pursue the support of state institutions or remain independent of them? Of course individuals and organizations are profoundly shaped by their historical contexts, and several key

Screen 60:3 Autumn 2019
© The Author(s) 2019. Published by Oxford University Press on behalf of Screen.
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/), which permits unrestricted reuse, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.
doi:10.1093/screen/hjz022

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

differences distinguish the 1970s and 1980s from today. Yet while any assessment of the RFN and IFA must clearly take these differences into account, in many ways the question of building networks for counter-cultures is more important than ever. Although the internet and digital cameras and projectors have broadened access to production and exhibition in ways unimaginable in the 1970s, making and showing radical work is arguably harder than before. The new platforms are almost completely dominated by commercial interests, and the sources of support that used to make an alternative culture viable scarcely exist. In this context, network-building is critically important. Indeed, as Manuel Castells has argued, 'a central characteristic of the network society is that both the dynamics of power and the resistance to domination rely on network formation and network strategies of offense and defense'.[1] Today, more than ever, it is essential that those interested in challenging existing power structures cultivate strong networks of their own.

In analysing the IFA's response to these questions, this essay also contributes to a growing body of scholarship that is 'rediscovering' the radical and experimental film culture of the 1970s in much the same way as scholars at that juncture returned to the workers' films of the 1930s.[2] Yet aside from a few notable exceptions,[3] analysis of the IFA has been strikingly absent, despite its central role within 1970s independent film culture. I will address that omission from an emphatically forward-facing perspective: I am interested in what lessons this period contains for those building radical film cultures today. My argument combines a conceptual framework derived from network theory with detailed empirical analysis of a variety of primary and secondary sources – including the extensive IFA archive at Sheffield Hallam University – as well as several semi-structured interviews with ex-IFA members (many of whom are now active in the RFN). I also draw on my personal experience of the extensive local, national and international debates that have occurred throughout the period of the RFN's development to date. To be fully transparent, I should note that I am the convenor of the RFN and write as a participant in the events discussed (though my arguments here are my own and do not reflect those of the network overall). However, as Des Freedman has recently argued, academic research can be both scholarly and politically committed.[4] This essay is indeed written in the spirit of a committed scholarship which, while rigorous in its examination of evidence, is also committed to 'the re-ordering of the social world along progressive lines'.[5]

Developing a theoretical framework for analysing cultural networks is a formidable task given the range of approaches to network analysis that now exist across multiple disciplines, from ethnography and social movement studies to cultural, management and organizational studies. From this body of work I borrow ideas appropriate for analysing what I argue are three essential properties of cultural networks: their identity, their internal organization, and the external relationships they establish with other networks and organizations. These three core properties do not

1 Manuel Castells, 'A network theory of power', *International Journal of Communication*, no. 5 (2014), pp. 773–87.

2 Publications include Laura Mulvey and Sue Clayton (eds), *Other Cinemas: Politics, Culture and Experimental Film in the 1970s* (London: IB Tauris, 2017); Patti Gaal-Holmes, *A History of 1970s Experimental Film: Britain's Decade of Diversity* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015); Dan Kidner and Petra Bauer (eds), *Working Together: Notes on British Film Collectives in the 1970s* (Southend-on-Sea: Focal Point Gallery, 2013). Several events have also taken place in this process, including Bristol Radical Film Festival 2015, which marked the fortieth anniversary of the 1975 First Festival of Independent British Cinema; 'Community Video Then and Now: Looking Backward to Look Forward', a symposium on community video, (2014); and a Marc Karlin retrospective at the Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, curated by Dan Kidner (2012).

3 Especially Simon Blanchard and Claire Holdsworth, 'Organising for innovation in film and television: the Independent Filmmakers Association in the long 1970s', in Mulvey and Clayton (eds), *Other Cinemas*, pp. 279–98. See also Colin Perry, *Into the Mainstream: Independent Film and Video Counterpublics and Television in Britain* (Bristol: Intellect, forthcoming).

4 Des Freedman, 'Put a ring on it! Why we need more commitment in media scholarship', *Journal of the European Institute for Communication and Culture*, vol. 24, no. 2 (2017), pp. 186–97.

5 Ibid., p. 195.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

operate in isolation but interact with and influence one another in an ongoing process of negotiation and change. Furthermore, it is also important to attend to the ways in which human agency shapes network structures. Criticizing what they call a 'structural determinist' tendency, network theorists Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin argue that

> network analysis all too often denies in practice the crucial notion that social structure, culture, and human agency presuppose one another; it either neglects or inadequately conceptualizes the crucial dimension of subjective meaning and motivation – including the normative commitments of actors – and thereby fails to show exactly how it is that intentional, creative human action serves in part to constitute those very social networks that so powerfully constrain actors in turn.[6]

6 Mustafa Emirbayer and Jeff Goodwin, 'Network analysis, culture and the problem of agency', *The American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 99, no. 6 (1994), p. 1413.

I use this framework to analyse the IFA and RFN in turn, noting some key contexts for each body before examining the development and intersection of their respective identities, internal organization and external relationships. In doing so I clarify some of the fundamental challenges facing (counter-)cultural networks and explore what the RFN might do to learn from, rather than repeat, the lessons of (radical) film history.

The IFA, writes its former organizer Simon Blanchard, is 'only conceivable if you understand that [it] sat within the wider context of post-60s cultural ferment and much broader social, trade union, political agitation and upheaval'.[7] In the UK in the early 1970s, the events of 1968 were a recent memory, and high-profile struggles for racial and gender equality and against nuclear armament, war and imperialism were raging around the world. Furthermore, in addition to increased extra-parliamentary activity associated with the New Left, faith in social democratic structures was relatively high: voter turnout was between seventy and eighty per cent throughout the 1970s, trade union membership peaked at thirteen million and the Labour Party boasted 750,000 members.[8]

7 Simon Blanchard, interview with Peter Thomas, 24 November 2004. I am grateful to Professor Julia Knight and Peter Thomas for allowing me access to the transcript of this interview.

8 Aliyah Dar, 'Elections: turnout', *House of Commons Library*, 3 July 2013, Standard Note: SN/SG/1467; Simon Lewis, 'How union membership has grown – and shrunk', *The Guardian*, 30 April 2009; Richard Keen and Vyara Apostolova, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, 21 March 2017, House of Commons Briefing Paper, Number SN05125.

Increasing access to film production and exhibition technologies combined with this political backdrop to fuel the development of a militant leftist film culture and an experimental avant garde. As film courses became increasingly common in academia (often as an adjunct to literature courses with a similar focus on textual analysis), the formal qualities of cinema were subject to intense scrutiny and a culture of debate emerged among the journals and magazines of the period – perhaps most notably in *Screen* – that stimulated an unprecedented interaction between the political and aesthetic avant gardes. This energetic cinematic counter-culture also coincided with an uncertain industrial context: film and television policy was in flux and facing calls for nationalization, and a new television channel was on

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

the horizon.[9] Emerging at this historical juncture, the IFA was driven by the possibility of creating a space for alternative and experimental practices within mainstream audiovisual culture, and those involved were determined that the cultural establishment would acknowledge and support their work.

Finally, the IFA cannot be understood without acknowledging that it was operating, for much of its lifetime, in a period when funding for politically and aesthetically radical film activity was available on a scale unimaginable today. Indeed the IFA's history can be plotted according to its funding trajectory. A first phase, characterized by the founding of the organization and efforts to secure funding and shape the emergence of the fourth television channel, ends in the early 1980s with its first BFI grant and the birth of Channel 4. A second phase, from the early to mid 1980s, is dominated by the encounter with Channel 4 and the funded expansion of independent film culture. The third and final phase, from the late 1980s to spring 1990, saw the withdrawal of funds and the consequent collapse of most alternative film groups, including the IFA.

To define their identities, cultural networks must make what ethnographer Alain Mueller calls 'symbolic cuts' around the subject/s with which they are concerned.[10] Referred to as 'boundary-making processes' by sociologists Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, symbolic cuts are essential to the formation of network identities: they facilitate members' sense of belonging and self-identification, foster community-building and assist in the formulation of network objectives.[11] Importantly, because such cuts are symbolic – in the sense that they are conceptual, produced via the subjective activity and argument of the individuals involved – they are also sites of conflict and debate, and subject to change. The concept of independence was the driving force behind the symbolic cut that delineated the IFA's identity. Recalling the IFA's first meeting in November 1974, Laura Mulvey notes that central to discussions about what to call the new association was a desire for it to be as inclusive as possible.[12] In the mid 1970s, 'independent' was an ideal umbrella term that encompassed multiple approaches to alternative filmmaking without being limited to them, and was yet to be associated with the commercial independent production sector that emerged in the 1980s. Following an early attempt to define the IFA that emphasized its inclusivity in terms of filmmakers,[13] by the time of the IFA's inaugural conference in May 1976 the association was pitching itself as an organization open to 'all those involved in producing film meaning [...] not only independent film producers but also distributors, exhibitors, film teachers, critical workers and film technicians'.[14] By emphasizing a holistic understanding of film culture over a narrower focus on production, the IFA's symbolic cut encompassed all those involved in the independent film movement, thus strengthening ties within the culture and securing the IFA's position as its representative.

The IFA also specifically appealed to the three main categories of alternative filmmaking in the 1970s: political, experimental and low-

9 Blanchard and Holdsworth, 'Organizing for innovation in film and television'.

10 Alain Mueller, 'Beyond ethnographic scriptocentrism: modelling multi-scalar processes, networks and relationships', *Anthropological Theory*, vol. 1, no. 16 (2016), p. 112.

11 Michèle Lamont and Virág Molnár, 'The study of boundaries in the social sciences', *Annual Review of Sociology*, no. 28 (2002), p. 170.

12 Laura Mulvey, interview with Peter Thomas (2003). I am grateful to Professor Julia Knight and Peter Thomas for allowing me access to the transcript of this interview.

13 IFA meeting minutes, 10 January 1975. IFA archive, Adsetts Centre, Sheffield Hallam University (hereafter Adsetts Centre).

14 IFA conference discussion paper, May 1976, p. 8. IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

budget art cinema, though these were theorized differently at different times and were rarely so neatly differentiated in practice.[15] On one hand, the IFA asserted that 'the aesthetic avant-garde and the political vanguard have developed separately' and emphasized that the association was for those whose work was either or both 'aesthetically and politically innovatory in form and content'.[16] On the other, the IFA also stressed the need for economic independence and the 'ideological and artistic limitations' imposed by financiers, and in doing so appealed to those involved in independent film culture but who were not necessarily driven by politics and who 'wanted to keep within the mainstream of the established film cultures'.[17] In invoking these three factors – aesthetics, politics and economics – the IFA yoked together these different groups, fostered a 'consciousness of the sector' among those involved, and created a powerful shared identity among a previously disparate community.[18]

Yet such a broad constituency also made it difficult for the IFA to reach consensus. As Claire Holdsworth notes, the filmmakers, programmers, artists and academics involved comprised a diverse spectrum of opinion:

> there were Maoists, Trotskyists, members of the socialist organization Big Flame, members from groups founded after the civil unrest in Paris during 'May 1968' [...] those who supported or sought greater state funding and others who desired total autonomy from the state, and some who defined themselves as artists interested in the processes of film or the possibilities of 'video art'.[19]

This meant it was harder for the IFA to function as an overtly political or activist network outside of the few, key struggles around which its members could unite. Thus, as Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey argued at the time, 'the term "independence" has made it difficult to [...] assist a wider social movement [...] to further the interests of the majority in economic, political and cultural terms'.[20]

Another significant facet of the IFA's identity concerned its relationship to London and the rest of the UK. The IFA was founded in London, and throughout its lifetime most of its individual and organizational membership was based in the capital.[21] This is unsurprising, given London's historic position as the centre of the UK's moving-image industry, and yielded distinct practical advantages, but it also spurred the IFA's desire to resist the 'dominance of the metropolitan centre', which became a strong element of its identity.[22] That the IFA's committed approach to developing a 'pan-national' film culture directly shaped its subsequent influence on Channel 4 exemplifies the dynamic between the identity of cultural networks and their external relationships. Alan Fountain, the former IFA organizer in Nottingham who subsequently became the first commissioning editor of Channel 4's Independent Film and Video Department (IFVD), acknowledged that his

15 See, for example, Peter Wollen, 'The two avant gardes', *Studio International*, no. 190. Paul Marris, meanwhile, described the IFA's three constituencies as 'the beginnings of a militant documentary tradition [...] an emergent tradition of a kind of avant-garde film oriented essentially to the institution of the art world [and] an [...] arthouse tradition'. Paul Marris, interview with Peter Thomas (2004). I am grateful to Professor Julia Knight and Peter Thomas for allowing me access to the transcript of this interview.

16 IFA conference discussion paper, May 1976, pp. 3–6.

17 Ibid., pp. 1–2.

18 Mulvey, interview with Peter Thomas.

19 Blanchard and Holdsworth, 'Organising for innovation in film and television', p. 283.

20 Simon Blanchard and Sylvia Harvey, 'The post-war independent cinema: structure and organisation', in James Curran and Vincent Porter (eds), *British Cinema History* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1986), p. 241.

21 Sylvia Harvey, 'The "Other Cinema" in Britain: unfinished business in oppositional and independent film, 1929–1984', in Charles Barr (ed.), *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: BFI, 1986), p. 237–39.

22 Mulvey, interview with Peter Thomas.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

department's 'very strong commitment to the regions' stemmed directly from the IFA's work in this area.[23]

A final defining aspect of the IFA's identity was its commitment to exhibition. Screenings and events were coordinated centrally and were deemed vital in order to grow the audience for independent film and to foster the relationship between the different strands of the culture.[24] Major events such as the 'First Festival of Independent Cinema' in 1975 and touring programmes in 1977 and 1978 explicitly sought to bring together 'the avant-garde on one side, the overtly political film on the other, plus a lot in the middle'.[25] With the emphasis at these events on discussing the work as much as showing it,[26] exhibition played a key role in staging the debates that delineated the IFA's symbolic cut and facilitated its members' sense of self-identification with the culture and the organization. As one member noted of the 1975 festival, 'though media coverage of the event was almost non-existent, the establishment of group recognition was an invaluable step in bringing the common problems and wide-ranging aesthetics into contact'.[27]

The internal organization of a cultural network includes its communication platforms, decision-making structures and the nature of the ties between network nodes – strong or weak,[28] traded or untraded,[29] formal or informal.[30] These internal aspects of networks can be usefully understood as 'mobilizing structures' – a concept derived from social movement studies to analyse how activist groups attempt to coordinate collective action and sustain themselves. While both the IFA and RFN fit comfortably within social movement scholars' definitions of social movements,[31] network-building requires mobilizing structures suited to establishing ties with other existing organizations (as opposed to a single organization mobilizing individual activists). Described as 'meso-mobilization',[32] network organizations need mobilizing structures capable of preserving the coherence of the overarching network identity while also permitting the flexibility and political pluralism to accommodate a range of other diverse groups.[33] Underpinning all elements of a network's internal workings is a 'structuring principle': an often-unacknowledged inclination or bias towards one kind of organization over another, typically framed as a dualism between the formal structures of social democracy and the decentralized, direct democracy of anarchism.[34] This is a useful generalization, albeit too binary: network organizations exist on a spectrum between those two poles, and are rarely so straightforwardly social democratic or anarchist in orientation. Nevertheless, identifying an organization's 'structuring principle' is a useful way of overcoming this binary while understanding and acknowledging its general tendencies.

The structuring principle underpinning the IFA was broadly social democratic. The IFA was a subscription-based organization throughout its lifetime, with members paying an annual subscription of £1 from the

23 Ieuan Franklin and Justin Smith, 'Interview dossier', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, vol. 33, no. 3 (2013), p. 466.

24 IFA Regional Digest, March–June 1975. IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

25 David Hopkins, Programme for the First Festival of Independent British Cinema, 11–18 February 1975, Arnolfini Gallery, Bristol, <http://fv-distribution-database.ac.uk/PDFs/ICW750211.pdf> accessed 12 June 2019. See also the programme for the Bristol Radical Film Festival 2015, which marked the fortieth anniversary of the 1975, <http://www.brff.co.uk/2015-festival/> accessed 21 June 2019.

26 For example Rod Stoneman, former IFA regional organizer in the South West, emphasized the importance of discussion at screenings: '[it] was an important part of the ethos: it wasn't just "I'm going to send you something to stick on a projector"; it was more "I'm going to introduce a film, you're going to look at it, and then we're going to talk about it"'. Cited in Franklin and Smith, 'Interview dossier', p. 470.

27 IFA Regional Digest, March–June 1975.

28 Mark Granovetter, 'The strength of weak ties', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 78, no. 6 (1973), pp. 1360–80.

29 Michael Storper, 'The resurgence of regional economies, ten years later; the region as a nexus of untraded interdependencies', *European Urban and Regional Studies*, vol. 2, no. 3 (1995), pp. 191–221.

30 Kathy J. Kuipers, 'Formal and informal network coupling and its relationship to workplace attachment', *Sociological Perspectives*, vol. 52, no. 4 (2009), pp. 455–79.

31 See, for example, David A. Snow, Sarah S. Soule and Hanspeter Kriesi, 'Mapping the terrain', in Snow, Soule and Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2004), pp. 1–16.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

inaugural meeting in November 1974, to £12 and £25 for individual and organizational membership in 1990.[35] The IFA's fundamental framework also remained the same throughout: a National Executive group of elected officers – secretary, treasurer and various representatives – oversaw the various subcommittees and regional branches that subsequently developed.[36] Two factors would have assisted the smooth adoption of this formal framework, which does not appear to have been subject to much discussion other than a brief note, taken at the IFA's first meeting, that the structure of the association 'should be as open and flexible as possible'.[37] First is the broader political context in which, as noted, participation in both extra-parliamentary and social democratic organizations was high. Second is the concentration of IFA membership in London.[38] Social movement research has shown how local interaction among shared communities builds strong, informal ties characterized by high levels of friendship and trust.[39] Furthermore, when those in management positions are trusted by other members of the organization, levels of organizational identification and internalization increase.[40] Thus, with the majority of its members based in London, regular contact would have facilitated high levels of confidence in the executive, and trust that such organizational structures would be respected and maintained responsibly.

However, as noted, the IFA also immediately set about working outside of London. The organization of screenings, the establishment of regional branches and the production of a newsletter were the three main mobilizing structures used to build the IFA in the nations and regions. Although its membership was unevenly distributed, by the mid 1980s IFA-affiliated groups nevertheless existed throughout the English regions and in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland,[41] while conferences in 1976, 1977, 1980 and 1981 sought to unite the membership nationally. By 1977 this internal structure had effectively established the IFA as the national body for independent film culture, but it had yet to formulate any formal objectives. Thus, at the 1977 conference, the IFA adopted a constitution with seven 'aims and objectives': 1) to facilitate the exchange of information and ideas within the independent sector; 2) to campaign for funding; 3) to increase access to production, distribution and exhibition equipment and infrastructure; 4) to establish minimum rates for independent film exhibition; 5) to work with organizations similar to the IFA in the UK and overseas; 6) to build relationships with the film and television workers unions, the ACTT (Association of Cinematograph and Television Technicians); 7) and with policymaking bodies, especially the BFI and Arts Council.[42]

The IFA was successful on several of these fronts, though such an ambitious set of objectives, coupled with a rapidly expanding independent film culture, also presented challenges for its internal organization. As I discuss below, the independent sector grew rapidly in the late 1970s and 1980s, fostered by the IFA, new technologies and new funding streams. Yet despite the IFA's efforts to keep pace with these

32 Jürgen Gerhards and Dieter Rucht, 'Mesomobilization: organizing and framing in two protest campaigns in West Germany', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 98, no. 3 (1992), pp. 555–96.

33 Sidney Tarrow, *Power in Movement: Social Movements, Collective Action and Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), p. 145.

34 Ibid., pp. 165–56.

35 IFA meeting minutes, 9 November 1974; IFVPA Newsletter, December 1989–January 1990. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

36 From 1975 onwards, London meetings were referred to as meetings of the London branch, with regional IFA branches at various times in the following areas: East Midlands, West Midlands, Merseyside North West, North East, South Wales, South West and Yorkshire. From 1980, the executive committee was also made up of elected representatives from the regions rather than being elected at the AGM. Margaret Dickinson, 'Part 1: A short history', in Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels: Oppositional Film in Britain, 1945-1990* (London: BFI, 1999), p. 73.

37 IFA meeting minutes, 9 November 1974.

38 Membership fluctuated, but ranged between 100 and 300. IFA files suggest there were around fifty filmmakers at the first meeting, with membership between 100 and 120 in June 1975, 142 in 1976, 270 in 1977 and 190 in 1981. Indeed the IFA was so concentrated in London that members initially resolved to meet monthly; even as late as 1981, ninety-five of the IFA's 190-strong membership were based in the capital.

39 Donatella Della Porta, 'Recruitment processes in clandestine political organisations: Italian left-wing terrorism', *International Social Movement Research*, no. 1 (1988), pp. 155–69; Roger Gould, 'Multiple networks and mobilization in the Paris Commune, 1871', *American*

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

Sociological Review*, no. 56 (1991), pp. 716–29; Doug McAdam, 'Recruitment to high risk activism: the case of Freedom Summer', *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 92, no. 1 (1986), pp. 64–90.

40 Kuipers, 'Formal and informal network coupling'.

41 Dickinson, 'Part 1: A short history', pp. 69–70.

42 IFA conference minutes, February 1997. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre,.

43 Dickinson, 'Part 1: A short history', pp. 68–70.

44 In particular, Simon Hartog's energy and enthusiasm for the IFA has been acknowledged by several former members. See Murray Martin, interview with Julia Knight (2006); Blanchard, interview with Peter Thomas, 24 November 2004; Marc Karlin, Claire Johnston, Mark Nash and Paul Willemen, 'Problems of independent cinema', *Screen*, vol. 21, no. 4 (1980), p. 43.

45 IFA Newsletter, Spring 1978. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

46 IFA National Executive Yearly Report, 1981. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

47 Dickinson, 'Part 1: A short history', p. 72.

developments – encapsulated in the two revisions to its name, first to incorporate video in 1983 (IFVA), then photography in 1986 (IFVPA) – its membership failed to grow in proportion with the sector.[43] With most of the work done by just a few core members,[44] the IFA lacked the resources required to function effectively and its mobilizing structures suffered as a result. In 1978 the East Midlands IFA branch even suspended its dues in protest at the executive's 'total lack of organization'.[45] The situation improved from 1981, when funding was secured for two paid IFA administrators, but this caused uneven levels of development, and the London branch was chided for 'overdoing it' by meeting every fortnight, a pace which the regions could not match and which therefore risked undemocratic decision-making on behalf of the London-based National Executive.[46]

These problems were compounded by the emergence of new network organizations from within what was originally the internal constituency of the IFA. The Black Media Workers' Association formed in 1981 and the National Organisation of Workshops (NOW) and the Association of Black Film and Video Workshops (ABW) formed in 1984. That these more focused network organizations emerged as the movement expanded is unsurprising: with independent film an established sector, groups within it felt the need to coalesce around issues specific to them. However, as the titles of some of these new groups indicated, they were often established exclusively for those seeking support under the Workshop Agreement (discussed below) to organize and make films 'around their own experience of discrimination'.[47] Thus, instead of strengthening the position of disadvantaged communities within the constituency of the IFA, these new network organizations fragmented the sector and created competition for resources that undermined the potential for intersectional solidarity within the wider movement. This diluted the internal coherence of the IFA and weakened its claim to represent the sector overall.

External relationships are a defining property of cultural networks and may form with a range of entities, from other similar networks to educational institutions, trade unions and charities or even, as in the IFA's case, a television channel. These relationships are context-dependent, so what might seem an impossible relationship in one context may be entirely feasible in another; they develop for a variety of reasons and can have significant consequences (positive and negative) both for cultural networks and the individuals involved on both sides. However, the process of relationship-building and its impact – especially on individuals – commonly takes place over an extended period and is difficult to measure, so it is rarely considered part of the impact of culture networks. Yet as Mario Diani notes, such exchanges can have significant developments on 'individuals' (activist) careers and, indeed, their lives at large'.[48]

48 Mario Diani, 'Networks and participation', in Snow, Soule and Kriesi (eds), *The Blackwell Companion to Social Movements*, pp. 339–59.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

The IFA's effort to build relations with the cultural establishment was one of its most defining features. Though often framed in terms of gaining support and acknowledgement for independent film culture, these efforts frequently stemmed from the need to address the lack of funding for the association and its members' work. 'The major problem', as one member of the executive put it, 'remains where it has always been: at the bank'.[49] Indeed, as soon as the IFA was founded, in addition to establishing subcommittees to liaise with the BBC and lobby the Annan Committee,[50] it also swiftly wrote to inform the BFI of its existence and (unsuccessfully) to request funding. The IFA continued to demand funding – and to complain of the need for it – until 1981, when it finally received the first of many major BFI grants which subsequently rose to as much as £30,000 per year. Unsurprisingly such 'core funding stability [...] made a huge difference' to the organization, which henceforth benefitted from two part-time workers, office space and budgets for printing and publicity.[51]

Nevertheless, the IFA was relatively late in accessing the various available funding sources by that point. By the late 1970s, partly because of IFA members' vociferous lobbying and partly because of the wider contexts underpinning developments such as Channel 4, levels of funding for independent film were extraordinarily high. Even before the arrival of Channel 4 in 1982, significant funds were available from the BFI, the Arts Council, the Regional Arts Associations and local government, especially the Greater London Council (GLC) and the Metropolitan County Councils.[52] Thus by 1977 the East Midlands branch of the IFA was able to announce its existence with a £2500 grant from East Midlands Arts. By the mid 1980s, London-based groups, such as the feminist distributor Circles, were receiving annual revenue grants of between £25,000 and £30,000 from the GLC.[53] Yet the arrival of Channel 4 was the most significant aspect of this funding landscape. By 1981 the IFA knew that the new channel would have a department dedicated to independent film and video and that its commissioning editor would be drawn from IFA ranks.[54] By 1984 the IFVD had spent £3.5m commissioning independent work for its flagship series *The 11th Hour* (1982–89).[55] A further £4.3m was allocated between 1982 and 1987 to the forty-one workshops enfranchised by the Workshop Agreement: an arrangement between Channel 4, the BFI and the ACTT that provided long-term funding to not-for-profit, community-based film groups that worked across production, distribution and exhibition ('integrated practice'), and which broadcast the best work.

Clearly, this period was one of considerable success for the independent film movement, but it was short-lived:

> By 1984 many IFA activists were working for, or funded by, the new Channel 4 [...] It was a victory, a vindication of all that energy invested in discussion, writing and lobbying over the preceding decade. But it proved a limited and temporary victory [...] Within ten

49 IFA Regional Digest no. 2, 1977. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

50 The Annan Committee was set-up in April 1974 to review the funding and regulation of the British broadcasting industry. See Sylvia Harvey, 'Channel 4 television: from Annan to Grade', in Stuart Hood (ed.), *Behind the Screens: The Structure of British Television in the Nineties* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1994), pp. 102–32.

51 Blanchard, interview with Peter Thomas, 24 November 2004.

52 Julia Knight and Peter Thomas, *Reaching Audiences: Distribution and Promotion of Alternative Moving Image* (Bristol: Intellect 2012), p. 20.

53 Marris, interview with Peter Thomas.

54 IFA National Executive Yearly Report, 1981, p. 7.

55 IFVA, *Views: The Magazine of the Independent Film and Video Makers Association*, no. 2 (1985). Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

years the IFA and nearly all the other structures which promoted oppositional filmmaking were gone.[56]

56 Dickinson, 'Part 1: A short history', p. 62.

The history of this final phase of the IFA contains several lessons relevant for counter-cultural networks seeking to develop relationships with external organizations today. One is the extent to which extra-network ties can result in the movement of individuals involved between the network and the external organization with which the network has a relationship. Several individuals involved with the IFA subsequently obtained high-profile positions at, for example, the BFI, the Arts Council, Channel 4 and the GLC.[57] The movement of people via these ties could be criticized as the means through which the Establishment creams off the 'best' activists from social movements and thus maintains its dominance. Yet this is also a means through which grassroots movements influence the direction of funders and policymakers, and should be understood as one of the IFA's major achievements.

57 Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, p. 217.

The period also demonstrates some of the challenges that arise as movements grow and institutional agendas change. Some of the older IFA members felt, for example, that its leftist identity was being undermined by new members less interested in politics than in using the IFA as a means to support their own practice.[58] The pull of new funding sources exacerbated these issues: as the Arts Council began funding artists' film and video, for example, the aesthetic avant garde was increasingly segregated from other filmmakers, undermining the IFA's efforts to maintain unity and coherence among its diverse constituency and encouraging a less communal, more artist-centred approach to film production.[59] The IFA's relationship with the ACTT, meanwhile, though integral to the Workshop Agreement, also meant that those eligible for membership of both organizations sometimes chose the union over the IFA, further eroding the latter's membership.[60]

58 Frank Abbott, 'The IFA: Film Club/ Trade Association' [1983], in Dickinson (ed.), *Rogue Reels*, pp. 168–70.

59 Duncan Reekie, *Subversion: The Definitive History of Underground Cinema* (London: Wallflower, 2007), p. 170.

60 Dickinson, 'Part 1: A short history', p. 73.

Furthermore, the very meaning of independence was being transformed by the massive expansion of small-scale independent producers that resulted from Channel 4's remit to commission all of its programming externally. As Duncan Reekie put it, 'to be an independent filmmaker was no longer an act of conscious political autonomy or radical opposition; it was to be a freelancer in the deregulated media industry'.[61] These changes demonstrate the extent to which external relationships can influence both cultural networks and the contexts in which they operate, often in ways that are beyond the control of the network. In hindsight, vigilance about the changes underfoot within the IFA's constituency may have helped to develop more resilience among its membership. Instead there was little discussion about these changes while funding was available, and no time to discuss them when the funding began to be withdrawn.

61 Reekie, *Subversion*, p. 3.

The negative impacts of funding – or more particularly the way in which it was made available and then withdrawn – on most of the groups that received it is perhaps the most pertinent lesson for cultural activists

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

today. Prior to accessing funding, most groups, including the IFA, were acutely aware that the absence of funding (and thus resources and labour) limited their activities and effectiveness. Once funding was available, however, those groups that accessed it found that it transformed them and the wider culture in which they were operating. The pool of activist labour that had given birth to most independent film groups, including the IFA, was eroded by the introduction of wage labour and could not simply be revived when the money was later withdrawn. The introduction of funding thus transformed many precarious yet independent activist groups into grant aid-dependent organizations. Furthermore, funding significantly increased administrative workloads as groups liaised with funders and grant bodies, developed payroll systems and established monitoring procedures. So despite the increased support that many groups received, the increased workload meant that they remained under-resourced and could not sustain the growth that the funding facilitated.[62]

The introduction of funding also fundamentally altered the nature of the culture more broadly. Blanchard not only emphasizes the 'huge amount of time' he spent communicating with the IFA's funders but also that the introduction of funding had 'moved [the IFA] from being an essentially very loose, affiliational label' to something from which its members expected a service.[63] This shift, from a looser network structure to that of a more traditional service organization, was part of a process of professionalization taking place throughout independent film culture, which ultimately slowed it down and dampened its critical faculties. As Fountain would later reflect, 'when the money's there, it changes things': the political activity reduced, the conferences and magazines slowed down, and those involved gradually switched into 'a mode of just getting on with the work'.[64]

By 1985 the funding crisis was on the horizon, with too many groups dependent on too few funding sources, most of which were under threat from what the IFVA presciently described as 'the most profound changes to affect the arts for many years'.[65] These changes comprised what was effectively a central government directive to replace grant aid with various forms of more market-oriented incentive funding in accordance with the 'new realism' of Thatcherite ideology.[66] Some of the criticisms of the independent sector at that time – that groups had an unrealistic expectation of state funding for their work and that they lacked the business and marketing skills required to generate income of their own – were justified, though several reports by the Association evidence attempts to address these issues.[67]

Yet the fact remains that most independent film organizations were engaged in non-commercial work and that self-financing was simply not an option. Injecting substantial amounts of funding into a culture that developed from the enthusiasm and commitment of grassroots artists and activists was, in retrospect, a predictably destructive act. For the few good years of the early to mid 1980s the independent sector thrived, and

62 Knight and Thomas, *Reaching Audiences*, pp. 57–57, 194–96.

63 Blanchard, interview with Peter Thomas, 24 November 2004.

64 Franklin and Smith, 'Interview dossier', p. 463.

65 IFVPA, Funding and Development Division report for October 1988–December 1988, p. 1. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

66 Ibid., p. 1.

67 Jo Dungey and Jon Dovey, *The Videoactive Report* (London: Videoactive/IFVA, 1985), and Arora Krishan and Justin Lewis, *Off the Shelf: A Video Marketing Workbook* (London: Recreation and Arts Group, London Strategic Policy Unit and IFVA, 1987). Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

those involved made a living from their work and produced quality, innovative work that reached hundreds of thousands of people. Yet the funded expansion of the sector also rendered it unable to survive without grant aid, and the so-called independent sector – utterly dependent on grant aid by the end of the 1980s – collapsed when the funding streams dried up. The BFI withdrew its funding for the IFVPA in March 1990, after which it was wound down.

The period in which the RFN has developed is distinct from that of the IFA on several fronts. The internet and digital technologies have profoundly altered every aspect of audiovisual production, distribution and exhibition, and the organizational infrastructures underpinning cultural production have changed accordingly. Technologically speaking, it is easier than ever to produce and exhibit militant and experimental cinema, and to communicate with (and build) an international radical film community. The RFN is therefore considerably more international in scope than was the IFA. Though the IFA was in touch with several overseas groups and involved in efforts to organize internationally, these proved unsustainable.[68] By contrast, digital communications have enabled the RFN to adopt international ambitions almost immediately, and the network currently consists of more than 133 organizations from some twenty-four countries.

It is important to note, however, that technology's relationship to social, cultural and political change is dialectical rather than deterministic. Technological change is inextricably interwoven with and shaped by its social and political context,[69] and digital technologies have thus been integral to the ascendance of neoliberalism over the last twenty-five years. As workers' rights have been curtailed and public services cut, technological developments have enhanced the ability of capital to find new markets and exploit increasingly freelance, precarious labour. Accompanied by decades of neoliberal consensus within the British political establishment and elsewhere, the context of much of the 'digital revolution' has included a sharp decline in both voter turnout and membership of political parties and trade unions.[70] This loss of faith in social democracy has been accompanied by the rise of anarchism as a popular part of the UK radical left from the 1990s onwards. Direct action, consensus-based decision-making and other markers of anarchist philosophy and organization have informed radical campaigns ranging from the poll tax rebellion and the anti-roads movement to the major global protests against capitalism at the end of the millennium.[71] As evidenced by more contemporary movements such as Occupy, anarchism remains a prominent part of the radical left and has shaped the RFN's development in several ways.

One of the major cultural differences in the contexts of the RFN and the IFA concerns the two avant gardes, which once more operate largely in isolation from one another. Following the retrenchment of funding

68 The most significant of these efforts was the European Federation for Progressive Cinema (EFPC). Despite a promising start following a major conference in Stockholm in 1976, in which Ann Lamche was elected as the representative for the UK, the EFPC appears to have foundered. As Stephen Crofts noted in his report from the conference, such an organization requires a 'sound base of national organisations for independent cinema upon which it can draw'. Despite the IFA's successes, there were too few such national organizations to maintain and coordinate at an international level. IFA Newsletter, October 1976, p. 20. Source: IFA archive, Adsetts Centre.

69 Brian Winston, *Technologies of Seeing, Photography, Cinematography and Television* (London: BFI, 1996).

70 Keen and Apostolova, *Membership of UK Political Parties*, p. 8; Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, 'Trade union membership 2016: statistical bulletin' (2017), <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/trade-union-statistics-2016> accessed 14 June 2019.

71 Similar developments in North America have also resulted in the rise in anarchist-inflected practices in radical film culture in the USA and Canada. See Chris Robé, *Breaking the Spell: A History of Anarchist Filmmakers, Videotape Guerrillas and Digital Ninjas* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2017).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

streams in the 1980s, artists' film and video survived and prospered in gallery spaces. The political avant garde, however, was again 'out in the cold'.[72] Though a handful of (usually male) auteur filmmakers, such as Adam Curtis and John Pilger, could secure television commissions, and current affairs series such as *Critical Eye* (1990–94) provided space for some more radical voices in the early 1990s,[73] most overtly political filmmaking was an underground activity. Thus, for most of the decade, political filmmaking consisted mainly of video-activist groups such as Undercurrents and Conscious Cinema and a handful of activist filmmaker-scholars, many of whom subsidized their radical practice with income from teaching and research. Both groups exhibited their work in collaboration with community and activist groups in makeshift venues – community centres, pubs, squats, festivals – outside the established structures of distribution and exhibition.[74]

By the turn of the millennium, as digital technologies made film production and exhibition less costly and complex, a dramatic growth in politically engaged film culture was underway, albeit without much interaction between the two avant gardes. Universities became a bastion of support for radical film culture in this period, and have remained so despite increasingly operating on market principles.[75] As public funding for culture has declined and the importance of impact metrics for research has increased, universities have become more involved in supporting festivals and other community-facing activities.[76] Film is no exception, and radical film groups will often have a relationship, typically via sympathetic academics, with a local university.

Just as the concept of independence shaped the IFA's identity, the notion of 'radicalism' is at the heart of the RFN. Like the IFA, discussions regarding the RFN's name revolved around the desire for it to be as inclusive as possible in relation to both left political positions and film practices. Yet although the neutrality of the term 'independence' had acted in the IFA's favour in terms of garnering support from the cultural establishment, that support was deemed unrealistic in the context of the RFN given the altered funding landscape. Combined with an awareness of how apolitical and commercial interpretations of independence also troubled the IFA during its lifetime, the founding members of the RFN opted for a more pointedly political term.

'Radical' was selected for several reasons. First and foremost it signifies a commitment to radical politics without aligning with a particular political philosophy or tradition. It is also appropriate etymologically – derived from the Latin for 'root', this resonates with the bottom-up, grass-roots approach of many of the organizations involved. More significantly, 'radical' can refer to a broad range of practices, from aesthetic experimentation to applying political ideas to processes of production, distribution and exhibition. This was deemed especially important given the context of the diverging aesthetic and political avant gardes: 'radicalism' was felt to be a banner under which activists

72 Michael Chanan, 'Common endeavours', in Holly Aylett (ed.), *Marc Karlin: Look Again* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2015), p. 28.

73 Steve Presence, 'Maintaining a critical eye: the political avant-garde on Channel 4 in the 1990s', in Johnny Walker and Laura Mee (eds), *Cinema, Television and History: New Approaches* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2014), pp. 85–101.

74 Steve Presence, 'The contemporary landscape of video-activism in Britain', in Ewa Mazierska and Lars Kristensen (eds), *Marxism and Film Activism: Screening Alternative Worlds* (Oxford: Berghahn, 2015), pp. 186–212.

75 Michael Bailey and Des Freedman (eds), *The Assault on Universities: A Manifesto for Resistance* (London: Pluto, 2011).

76 Laura Ager, 'Universities and festivals: cultural production in context' (Dissertation: University of Salford, 2016).

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

working in the artists' film and video tradition could unite along with the militant tendencies of the political avant garde.

As much as it is political, the concept of radicalism is also ambiguous and provocative, and as such is an ideal locus for the 'symbolic cut' that defines the RFN's identity. Such an ambiguous, provocative and political word encourages among members both self-identification and reflection, community-building and critical enquiry. Indeed, the question 'what is radical film?' has been discussed at almost every event in the RFN's history, and the many possible responses to it are reflected in the diversity of organizations within the network. Most groups articulate various strands of anarchist, feminist or socialist politics, either explicitly or implicitly in terms of their practices and values. Others, such as Cinéma Humain in Vienna or SIMA in Los Angeles, emphasize social justice and human rights over, say, the 'conflict between labour and capital' that underpins Berlin-based video-activism group, *Labournet.tv*. Unlike the opposing uses of the term 'independence' during the IFA's lifetime, the RFN's identity is broad enough to include a range of ideological perspectives while still being unequivocally associated with the values and tradition of the left.

In contrast to the IFA, the internal workings of the RFN are considerably less rigid. There is no application process: organizations join via invitation or request, individuals by joining the mailing list and following the network on social media. There is no membership fee and thus no income beyond what can be acquired from funding sources. The RFN's mobilizing structures reflect this looser approach. At the inaugural RFN conference in Birmingham in 2015, members elected to borrow the organizational model of the radical environmentalist group Earth First!, in which voluntary 'working groups' are formed to carry out particular tasks.

So far this model has proved fairly successful. Working groups have emerged to map the exhibitors within the network, to arrange exhibition events – such as *#PeoplePower*, a series of coordinated screenings across six British cities in response to the 2015 election result – and to organize subsequent RFN conferences: in Glasgow in 2016, Tolpuddle in 2017, Dublin in 2018, Nottingham in 2019, Tirana in 2020 and Genoa in 2021. This model requires no central control and enables groups to emerge on an informal, organic basis, adopting the structure that best suits them. The working group for the Glasgow conference, for example, formed its own 'nested network' within the RFN,[77] RFN Scotland, which continues to run events in Scotland and liaise with the wider network, while following the recent Nottingham conference two working groups emerged to develop the RFN in India and Nigeria. Yet such models are still unusual, and with no oversight it is difficult to keep track of the different groups' activities (or the lack of same), and the extent to which new groups understand themselves as part of this structure is unclear.

77 Thomas P. Moliterno and Douglas M. Mahony, 'Network theory of organization: a multilevel approach', *Journal of Management*, vol. 37, no. 2 (2011), pp. 443–67.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

Moreover, while the Glasgow conference was coordinated by a substantial working group, sometimes organizational labour falls on just one or two enthusiastic members: the Tolpuddle conference was coordinated by just two members working from Plymouth and Berlin respectively, for example, and the Dublin conference was managed by a single individual. Both events were highly successful, yet with no funding on which to draw, no one was paid for their labour, which was considerable. Running major events in one's spare time is stressful, and places activists at risk of exhaustion and burnout that is obviously not conducive to sustainable organizations.

The communication platforms adopted by the RFN fit within its informal, decentralized structure. Groups and individuals communicate with one another primarily via the RFN mailing list, announcing festivals and events, relevant jobs, updates and calls for films or for collaboration on various projects. The RFN's website and social media accounts on Facebook and Twitter (run by another, informal international working group), maintain the network's online presence and complement activities announced on the mailing list. In the UK, an annual conference has so far provided the principal means through which members meet, share their work and discuss the network's development face-to-face, supplemented by one or two smaller meetings in different locations. The first RFN conference held outside the UK took place in New York City in 2017, as a result of which the network's international mobilizing structures were altered to include several RFN stewards in Canada, the USA and Latin America that would act as local organizers in their respective regions. Once again, though, with no one person responsible for overseeing these roles, their success has so far been limited.

The internal structure of the RFN derives from the anarchist-inflected principle that has characterized many left activist organizations since the early 1990s. For example, reflecting on his memories of the IFA following the RFN's inaugural conference, Michael Chanan wrote that:

> One of the questions back then was were you 'organised'? – that is, who did you belong to? [...] the dominant model of political activity in the extra-parliamentary left, notwithstanding the fresh wind of feminism, was still Leninist and centralist, defined by Communist Party practice or differentiation from it, and unfortunately prone to splits and sectarianism. Thankfully it seems that kind of factional politicking has gone – the model in evidence at Birmingham was the twenty-first century anarchist style of consensus employed by movements like Occupy, and the mood was open and congenial. There was much discussion about how the new network should be organised – as loosely as possible. It remains to be seen how robust this will be, but that also depends on the wider political arena.[78]

Relatively few organizations in the network explicitly identify as anarchist, however, and many more identify with socialist politics. Nevertheless, the decentralized, non-hierarchal ethos within the network

78 Michael Chanan, 'Radical film in Birmingham', *Putney Debater*, 13 February 2015, <http://www.putneydebater.com/radical-film-in-birmingham/> accessed 14 June 2019.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

and its resistance to forming central committees or executives reflects the influence of anarchism within contemporary radical film culture.

Yet this mode of organizing is also a necessity for a network that operates on both national and international levels, has no localized headquarters and no core income or resources. In this sense, the kind of federation-building or 'meso-mobilization' with which the RFN is engaged is qualitatively different from that of the IFA, which benefited from the majority of its membership and executive committee being based in London, and which was an exclusively national organization. By contrast, the RFN is widely distributed across the UK and more than half of the organizations affiliated to it are based overseas. A loose, decentralized and inclusive internal set-up is most appropriate given the diverse, international coalition of radical film groups that comprise the network. Aside from a request that affiliated groups acknowledge their membership of the RFN and link to the main website (thus increasing the visibility of all the other groups), members of the network retain their autonomy, and participate and contribute to it as much or as little as they like. This approach can accommodate a broad range of ideologies, traditions and political configurations irrespective of their localized roots, and thus enables the flexibility and political pluralism required by a network of the RFN's size and scope.

However, this mode of internal organization also has various well-known limitations, many of which Jo Freeman described in her famous article on informal organizations in the women's movement.[79] As noted above, with no individual or group responsible for the RFN as a whole, monitoring developments and coordinating working groups can be difficult and there is little accountability should things go wrong. Furthermore, much of the administrative labour that maintains the network's mobilizing structures is done informally by volunteers outside of any working group or democratic process. Freeman argues that this is an inevitable consequence of so-called 'structureless' organizations, and that such volunteers comprise unaccountable elites that may consciously or unconsciously impose their will on the rest of the group. Moreover, for Freeman, the absence of formal structures in social movement organizations limits their political efficacy by preventing effective coordination and management.

79 Jo Freeman, 'The tyranny of structurelessness', <http://www.jofreeman.com/joreen/tyranny.htm> accessed 14 June 2019.

These are legitimate concerns, though they are not an inevitable consequence of this system: more effective management of working groups to account for 'invisible' administrative labour and to maintain coordination between them is perfectly possible within this structure. Yet despite these and other limitations, such as the slow pace of project development or less efficient procedures, this mode of organization is arguably desirable as well as necessary. As the IFA discovered, adopting more formal policies or established democratic procedures would exclude those groups that operate more slowly than such procedures allow, and alienate others that are arranged more formally. Paid RFN workers would make the network more efficient, but they would have

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

material interests in the RFN's longevity that would not necessarily align with the interests of its members. Moreover, as we saw with the IFA, introducing that kind of funding stream into the RFN could quickly render it dependent on grant aid to survive, thereby attaching its life cycle to the agenda of its funders rather than the interests of its members. In fact, as Knight and Thomas suggest, radical organizations may stand more chance of survival in the long term by remaining independent of funders and maintaining an informal, voluntary (albeit sometimes dysfunctional) approach.

Despite the absence of core funding for the RFN, for most of its life the network has derived some form of support from the Higher Education (HE) sector. Shortly after the RFN was founded, for example, much of the initial development work (from late 2013 to the inaugural conference in early 2015) was supported by the University of the West of England in Bristol. The venue for the 2015 conference was provided by Birmingham City University and Vivid Projects, an RFN-affiliated gallery in the city, and the University of Glasgow hosted the 2016 (Un)conference, which took place alongside a major city-wide radical film festival that coordinated numerous groups and individuals throughout region, with funding support from Creative Scotland, Film Hub Scotland and the Scottish Trades Union Congress. Dublin Institute of Technology supported the conference in Ireland in 2018, and the University of Nottingham hosted the 2019 conference. University College London and the University of Leicester have also provided meeting spaces at various points. Further support from the HE sector came in 2015 in the form of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) grant, for four additional events as part of a two-year project to explore the RFN's potential for sustainability and development.

There are several reasons why the RFN's principal external relationship has been with the HE sector rather than cultural funders such as the BFI or Arts Council. The first involves Emirbayer and Goodwin's call in 1994 to attend to the role of human agency and subjectivity in network analysis: the RFN was originated by academics, who therefore naturally looked for support from that sector. Yet, as Emirbayer and Goodwin argue, subjectivity and social structure presuppose one another. Those academics saw the need for the RFN because they run a radical film festival (Bristol Radical Film Festival) that is partly derived from their teaching and research and has occasionally been supported by their institution. Their agency, therefore, was also bound up with the context of a social structure in which universities have become patrons of festivals and other public-facing events (even, to some extent, counter-cultural ones).[80]

80 Ager, 'Universities and festivals'.

At the same time, cultural funders such as the BFI and the Arts Council have adopted strict rules regarding both the activities they will support and the regions and nations to which that support is allocated. Today, for example, the BFI has separate funds for production, distribution and exhibition, and exhibition initiatives (apart from major

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

film festivals) are funded on a regional basis under its Film Audience Network. The Arts Council, meanwhile, divided into three separate bodies for England, Scotland and Wales in 1994, and exclusively funds artists' film and video production. Therefore, aside from any problems associated with the overtly political nature of the RFN, the network is ineligible for any core funding from either the BFI or the Arts Council because of its national (and international) scope, and because it aims to support organizations working in all genres across production, distribution and exhibition. The latter is a conscious continuation of the IFA's 'integrated practice' policy to support 'all those involved in producing film meaning', and is important because none of these sectors is commercially viable, so facilitating communication and cooperation across the culture as a whole is an important part of ensuring that culture can function effectively. Nevertheless, the current structures of cultural funding do not support such a holistic approach.

The RFN has been able to leverage so much support from the HE sector partly because universities can still provide institutional support for progressive political projects. Despite the increasing regulation and exploitation of academic labour, the nature of academic work demands a degree of intellectual autonomy and independence, and this can include doing political work or supporting that done by others.[81] Furthermore, many ex-IFA members are now established film studies scholars, and their participation in the RFN has also assisted in securing the support of the sector. For a network such as the RFN, with no resources of its own on which to draw, academics' ability to secure venues and donate labour has been vital.[82]

This is one reason why the AHRC funding has been significant. Crucially, however, aside from the redevelopment of the RFN's website, the funding has covered only those costs associated with the events in the project. In other words, the financial contribution was to the project rather than the network. This is an important distinction, because it has enabled the project funding to enter the RFN without disrupting the internal organization of the network: the funded project is managed by a 'working group' alongside the others.

Of course the funded project has also been of significant value to the network overall. The funded events that took place – a one-day symposium during Liverpool Radical Film Festival in November 2015; three events at Sheffield Doc/Fest in June 2016, including a public panel discussion of RFN filmmakers' work; a three-day conference in New York City prior to the Workers Unite! Film Festival in May 2017 – have provided substantial exposure to the RFN and brought together hundreds of its members from around the world. Such face-to-face meetings are especially important for a network that is as widely distributed as the RFN, and that therefore cannot benefit from the informal and unplanned meetings of its members. Having such a widespread membership, however, also makes it difficult to meet regularly in the same physical space, which poses its own challenges – lots of new faces at each annual

81 Rosalind Gill, 'Academics, cultural workers and critical labour studies', *Journal of Cultural Economy*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2013), pp. 13–30, and Mike Wayne, *Marxism and Media Studies* (London: Pluto, 2003), p. 18.

82 Although there are activist spaces which can be secured for little or no fee – such as the May Day Rooms on Fleet Street, which provided the venue for the first meeting of the RFN – these are rare and not usually large enough to host major conferences.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

conference can make continuity difficult, for example. Moreover, the funding undoubtedly provided a period of added continuity to the network, in the sense of having advance knowledge that future events within the project will be taking place. It is also worth noting here that, while Marc Karlin cautioned against the IFA becoming merely ‘a series of conferences’,[83] one should not underestimate the value of these events. As mobilizing structures, they not only sustain the life of the network but also constitute the crucible from which so much other subsequent activity stems. In lieu of the kind of funding that was available to the IFA, conferences are especially important for the RFN.

83 IFA Newsletter, October 1976, p. 4.

Emirbayer and Goodwin argue that attending to the role of agency in network formation also helps to show how human action ‘serves in part to constitute those very social networks that so powerfully constrain actors in turn’.[84] While the influence of the HE sector on the RFN has been considerable and largely positive, it has also created inequalities and power imbalances within the network and in radical film culture more broadly. Academics can often use language that may appear elitist and obfuscating, especially to those unfamiliar with it, while salaries and travel and accommodation expenses are privileges rarely afforded to artists, activists and community groups. On the other hand, critique of these privileges has sometimes given way to an anti-intellectualism and a dismissal of the value and contribution of scholarship to the network and the culture of which it is a part. Members have discussed these issues in depth, and strategies for countering inequities of time, money and resources, as well as intellectual and cultural differences, have developed dialectically. The Glasgow conference responded to the overly academic tone of the Birmingham conference by adopting an ‘unconference’ approach, in which delegates participated in the schedule design during the event itself. Subsequent events have in turn responded to the perceived lack of structure of the Glasgow conference, and tried to find other ways of integrating the academic and practitioner communities in the network. ‘Debrief’ sessions, in which members reflect on the structural and power dynamics in the network, are becoming common features of meetings and events.

84 Emirbayer and Goodwin, ‘Network analysis, culture and the problem of agency’, p. 1413.

A final lacuna in the RFN’s external relationships, certainly in comparison with the IFA, is its relationship with the trade union movement. In fact, the RFN is in the process of formulating this relationship, which was the principal reason why its 2017 conference was located in a field in Dorset: the conference took place in a marquee (and a vintage mobile cinema bus) during the annual Tolpuddle Martyrs Festival, a major event in the UK trade union movement calendar, and featured a plenary discussion with RFN members and representatives of several trade unions in an effort to nurture closer relationships between the RFN, cultural groups more broadly and the unions. That it is too early to assess the success or otherwise of this emergent relationship highlights one of the difficulties involved in researching contemporary film cultures: they are live, unfinished endeavours and as such are subject to change.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

As Marx said, people make their own history, but under circumstances not of their own making.[85] The significance of this insight for the two organizations analysed in this essay is hard to overstate: both the IFA and the RFN are inextricable from the historical contexts in which they emerged. From the shifting meanings of ‘independence’ and ‘radicalism’ to centralized or distributed organizational structures and the strategies and serendipities underpinning external relationships, every aspect of these two bodies has been profoundly shaped by their respective historical conditions. Yet while cultural networks are inextricable from the contexts in which they exist, those contexts do not determine them. People do indeed make their own history. The major impact of the IFA on British film culture was not pre-ordained, but hard fought and won by those involved. Likewise the achievements of the RFN thus far, though entwined with the circumstances in which it is operating, should be credited to those involved, and the future of the network is up to them.

85 Karl Marx, *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* (1852), *Marxists Internet Archive*, <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1852/18th-brumaire/ch01.htm> accessed 14 June 2019.

The context in which the RFN is operating is significantly different to that of the IFA, as one might expect from the forty years that separates them, and the RFN should not and cannot aspire to replicate the IFA’s achievements. Indeed, another lesson this history makes clear is that opportunities do not increase with the passage of time. It is hard to imagine the RFN negotiating a deal with a mainstream television channel, for example, and the levels of funding available to radical film organizations during the IFA’s lifetime are inconceivable today. However, the advantage of the methodology applied in this essay is that an analysis of both organizations within the same theoretical framework makes their histories commensurate. Questions relating to network identity, internal structure and external relations remain central to contemporary cultural networks. Positioned thus, it has been possible to assess the advantages and limitations of the IFA’s and the RFN’s respective approaches to these questions without losing sight of their complex historical underpinnings and the reasons *why* those approaches were selected over others.

The concept of independence and the alliances it facilitated was central to the IFA’s formation and successes, but also created faultlines within the organization and its broad constituency of interest groups. The IFA’s internal workings matched the political moment, suited its geographical base in London, and proved an effective structure with which to lobby the cultural establishment, an activity which dominated the organization as the possibility of securing a relationship with Channel 4 became a reality. The subsequent flood of funding into the sector, partly as a result of the IFA’s efforts, marked the culmination of its success and the beginning of its decline. The movement fragmented, came to depend on the funding that had fuelled its expansion, and collapsed when it was withdrawn.

Starting from a lower base, with little prospect of funding or external support beyond the HE sector, the RFN’s identification with ‘radicalism’ arguably creates a more coherent political orientation within the network,

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019

but also potentially limits its prospects of securing external ties with other, more mainstream cultural institutions. Yet as the history of the IFA shows, establishing relationships with more powerful organizations can be hazardous. While a lack of funding and resources are often perceived to be the primary factors limiting radical film organizations, obtaining external support can eradicate previously independent groups' ability to sustain themselves. Paradoxically, the RFN's lack of core funding, coupled with its global spread and decentralized structuring principle based on project-based working groups, may prove both more precarious and more sustainable.

Downloaded from https://academic.oup.com/screen/article-abstract/60/3/428/5571241 by UWE Bristol user on 24 September 2019