

## EDITORIAL: DISTRIBUTION

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## Editorial: Distribution

As a concept and topic for the study of culture, ‘distribution’ can point to a variety of flows of objects. These may range from material goods and media formats to ephemeral opinions, but can also include power structures, the dissemination of knowledge or the traveling of cultural works and theoretical concepts. Distribution is thus ideally situated to grasp changing landscapes of cultural production, academia, and knowledge institutions. This issue of *On\_Culture* sets out to explore the concept of distribution across disciplines, opening the scope from media studies and global history to the study of culture at large. How is distribution conceptualized, how is it structured, and which agents can influence the direction of movement? Distribution triggers associations to hierarchical systems and traditional forms of supply. It, however, also allows to broaden the scope to non-linear processes of circulation, to egalitarian forms of sharing and mobilities against the grain. By combining it with broader issues such as agency, collectivity, digitality, or knowledge production, the issue seeks to capture distribution in its multiplicity of (political) implications, contexts, infrastructures, and applications.

In recent years, media studies have shifted questions of distribution into sharper focus, especially in regard to media productions and the emergence of digitally distributed audiovisual content. Points of interest have not only been the narrative innovations this entailed, but also the power structures which these new networks of content dissemination inevitably include.<sup>1</sup> This complex also includes the establishment of new economies that rely on self-distribution and emerging media ecologies. Moreover, content has become accessible through transmedial story-worlds that make use of multifaceted distribution systems, from toys, websites, and comics to TV series, video games, and various avenues of feature films. This poses questions of media specificity and challenges the ways we can address this specificity across formats, platforms, and materialities.

This issue of *On\_Culture* does not only feature current processes of distribution, as several historical case studies help to put the present into context. This long view enables perspectives on the continuities, breaks, and differences in researching distribution. These lasting influences may direct us to varied processes across the globe, from the history of printing, comics distribution in 1960s Europe to post-war film distribution in Japan. These processes, although different in form, all point towards revolutions

of means of distribution of knowledge, experiences, and ideologies, making clear similarities with contemporary situations – be it via algorithms, personal preference, or innovations in technology.

The contributions deal with conceptualizations of distribution in a variety of ways, beginning with Jennifer Holt's *Essay* which explores the numerous ways in which the concept of distribution is utilized in media studies and the study of culture. She emphasizes the relations of distribution patterns to platformization, data, and capital, using recent examples from the film industry that highlight the urgency of the topic. Digital distribution heavily relies on data flows, data mining, and data storage, and Holt connects these matters to frame the “Data Troubles” of the current moment expertly.

The case study of Stefan Werning's contribution “Itch.io and the One-Dollar-Game: How Distribution Platforms Affect the Ontology of (Games as) a Medium” brings together game studies, platform, and distribution studies. In his analysis, he shows the entanglement of the One-Dollar-Game and the video game distributor Itch.io. This draws our attention to the software affordances of the platform that shaped the category and highlights the dependence of distribution to the materiality of its circumstances.

Rea Amit, in his *Article* “Programming a Public Mediascape: Distribution and the Japanese Motion Pictures Experience,” turns to Japanese film distribution in the post-war years of the 1950s and '60s. He explores the programming practices of the time, charting the collectivization of cultural life experiences and media aesthetics that the Japanese format of the “program picture” afforded. Amit's research encourages a wide scope of distribution studies, taking into account the specificity of space and time, viewing practices and their relation to collectivity.

Cornelia Bogen's article “Traveling Media Structures — Adaptation and Demarcation in China's Public SARS Discourse” examines the principles governing communication about healthcare in China through the example of SARS (the first globally emerging infectious disease of the 21st century). Bogen compares Chinese healthcare discourses to healthcare communication in Europe, relying on a theory of multiple Modernities.

In his *Article*, Bennett Gilbert takes a closer look at the intellectual history of the “pre-printing” period and argues that distribution by impression, or print, is part of a very ancient metaphor for understanding communication by the making of multiples. Moreover, Gilbert points to the role of later medieval and late Scholastic philosophy

for the development of notions of communication that ultimately led to the technology of replicating texts and images for wide and continued distribution.

Jessica Burton's "A Coordinated Europeanisation of the Comics Industry through Distribution: The Politics of the Global Journey of Astérix and Tintin through the Strategic Distribution of their Magazines and Contents in the 1960s" explores the distribution channels and policies of the comics magazine format, and maps out the continentalization of the industry over a decade. Her *Article* emphasizes the importance of organic local networks, as well as the overlapping of local, national and international networks, which were instrumental to the success of the efforts to 'de-Americanize' the comics industry.

Maria Cristache, in her *Perspective* "Modernist Architecture and Visual Culture: Online Forms of Distribution," analyzes two examples of visual representation of architecture provided by *Socialist Modernism*, a digital platform that documents and aims to protect modernist architecture from Central and Eastern Europe. Her exploratory analysis shows quite plainly the relevance of the generated data by the platform for other directions of research, such as visual analysis, cultural heritage, postsocialism, and urban studies.

Marilyn Allen's *Perspective* uses a bi-column structure to showcase the distributed agency that is created when the digital continues to take over. Using voice-recognition software that interprets a text written and read by Allen, the form of her contribution playfully enables new ways of thinking about subjectivity, digitality, and the relationship of text and meaning. As always, we warmly welcome readers to contribute to this issue at any time by submitting further pieces for the *Perspectives* section.

Conceptualized as an Open Access journal from the beginning, *On\_Culture* is proof that new media distribution opportunities carry with them a great emancipatory potential. In the case of scholarly publishing, the Open Access movement allows us to pursue alternative means of knowledge distribution, shaking up traditional forms of research dissemination. Thus, the concept of distribution is not only central to the research this issue assembles, but to the journal as a whole and we hope you enjoy exploring the different avenues it offers.

Giessen, December 2019

The Editorial Team

## **Endnotes**

- <sup>1</sup> For some examples out of many, see Ramon Lobato, *Netflix Nations: The Geography of Digital Distribution* (New York: New York University Press, 2019); Marc Steinberg, *The Platform Economy: How Japan Transformed the Commercial Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019); Aphra Kerr, *Global Games: Production, Circulation and Policy in the Networked Era* (Abingdon/London: Routledge, 2017).