The term ‘cultural intermediaries’ is good to think with. It has been a productive device for examining the producers of symbolic value in various industries, commodity chains and urban spaces, highlighting such issues as the blurring of work and leisure, the conservatism of ‘new’ and ‘creative’ work, and the material practices involved in the promotion of consumption (e.g. Bovone, 2005; Entwistle, 2006; McFall, 2004; Moor, 2008; Negus, 2002; Nixon and Crewe, 2004; Smith Maguire, 2008; Wright, 2005). In addition, cultural intermediary research offers an important complement to the study of cultural production, within which questions of agency are typically focused on consumers, and questions of power, on institutions. The concept of cultural intermediaries usefully prioritizes issues of agency, negotiation and power, moving the everyday, contested practices of market agents to the front for the study of the production of culture (Garnham, 2005; Havens et al., 2009; Smith Maguire and Matthews, 2010).

Research on cultural intermediaries has generally followed two different (although not incompatible) directions: cultural intermediaries as exemplars of the new middle class, involved in the mediation of production and consumption (following Bourdieu, e.g. 1984, 1996); and cultural intermediaries as market actors involved in the qualification of goods, mediating between economy and culture (following developments in actor-network theory and new economic sociology, e.g. Callon et al., 2002; Muniesa et al., 2007). Engagements within and between these streams of work have resulted in conceptual developments—for example, du Gay’s (2004) discussion of devices and dispositions, and Cronin’s (2004) elaboration of multiple regimes of mediation. Nevertheless, the lack of a common hymn sheet has necessarily led to some confusion: research that deploys the term may fall into either or both of these camps—or neither.

Furthermore, ‘cultural intermediaries’ has also been used as a descriptive catch-all for seemingly any creative or cultural occupation or institution. This diluted use of the term, in combination with a perceived expansion in the real ranks of those doing this sort of work, have given rise to complaints that ‘cultural intermediaries’ is an overly-inclusive, analytically-neutered term—a conceptual muddle that fails to assist in unpacking the division of labour involved in the construction of cultural goods (Hesmondhalgh, 2006; Molloy and Larner, 2010). In short, the provocation: are we all cultural intermediaries now?

By way of a response, let us consider what cultural intermediaries do. They construct value, by framing how others (end consumers, as well as other market actors including other cultural intermediaries) engage with goods, affecting and effecting others’ orientations
towards those goods as legitimate—with ‘goods’ understood to include material products as well as services, ideas and behaviours. In this most generic rendition of what cultural intermediaries do, the provocation appears not entirely unwarranted. After all, we all have a hand in the formation of value—the ‘varied impulses and articulations through which value is formed, added and circulated’ (Amin and Thrift, 2004: xv) are not restricted to cultural intermediaries alone. However, the work of cultural intermediaries is not common to all, because of its expert orientation. In the struggle to influence others’ perceptions and attachments, cultural intermediaries are differentiated by their explicit claims to professional expertise in taste and value within specific cultural fields. Furthermore, cultural intermediaries are not a monolithic occupational group, nor do they legitimate particular goods, services and practices just as they please. They are differentiated by their locations within commodity chains (and the actors and stages of cultural production that they negotiate with and between). They vary by their degree of professional authority (and the other cultural and symbolic resources at their disposal to both influence other actors’ orientations and negotiate the influence of others). And, the goods/services/behaviours that they frame and the devices through which that framing is accomplished also range widely (each good and device carrying its own accrued degrees of credibility and durability, which must be negotiated).

Cultural intermediaries impact upon notions of what, and thereby who, is legitimate, desirable and worthy (and thus, by definition, what and who is not). This is why cultural intermediaries matter—not only for the material practices of cultural production, but also for Cultural Studies research on those material practices. That is, research on cultural intermediaries’ impact on the formation of value for particular products or practices offers a window onto the contested construction of cultural legitimacy more broadly: a research programme that combines Bourdieu’s concern with the production of the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate culture with the insights from new economic sociology (usefully summarized in McFall, 2009) as to how such boundary-producing work is pragmatically accomplished.

The identification of a multiplicity of cultural intermediaries within cultural fields underlines the need to explore and detail the lines along which they differ. We need (indeed, we continue to need; Nixon and du Gay, 2002: 498; du Gay, 2004: 102) greater empirical attention to the stratification and differentiation of cultural intermediaries with regard to their devices, dispositions, locations within regimes of mediation, and impacts. Hence, our focus in this Special Issue on context. Here, we propose that concerted attention to cultural intermediaries as contextualized market actors offers the most promising way to drive forward our understanding of what cultural intermediaries do and why they matter.

**Cultural Intermediaries in Context**

Properly put, the aim of this Special Issue is not to put cultural intermediaries in context, but to put context (back) into considerations of cultural intermediaries. Context may be a useful analytical device, but it is also an empirical, lived reality. Considering cultural intermediaries as contextualized market actors (cf. Blair, 2003) is to acknowledge that cultural intermediaries make and are made by categories of cultural legitimacy. Such an approach requires a sensitivity to markets and value as pragmatic accomplishments, and regards context as constitutive of agency, not as an external determinant of action (in other words, cultural intermediaries are not merely the passive bearers of their contextualizing categories; Willmott, 1994).
Considering cultural intermediaries ‘in context’ requires foregrounding questions about the objective and subjective conditions of their work. These conditions will include a cultural intermediary’s personal and professional habitus, formed through his or her place within the conditions of existence (Bourdieu, 1984: 171)—for example, class habitus as generative of particular practices and tastes; or the relative social prestige and professionalization of a cultural intermediary occupation and an actor’s specific location (e.g. seniority) within it. In addition, the distance between the cultural intermediary’s habitus and the dominant value scheme of the particular market will be relevant to, for example, his or her adequacy as a proxy (Ennis, 2005, in Moor, 2008) for, or accuracy as a reader of, the intended market. The conditions of cultural intermediaries’ work will also include their locations within, and the social and historical specificity of, their cultural fields and occupational fields, the commodity chains or circuits (e.g. du Gay et al., 1997; Leslie and Reimer, 1999) within which they are located, and the devices that are dominant, emergent and residual (Williams, 1977) at a given time within those fields and chains. Such devices will include a cultural intermediary’s operational definitions of the goods and market in question (including idealized models and measurements of consumers and competitors; Slater, 2002), conventions of quality (Truninger, 2011), and judgement devices such as rankings and personal and practitioner networks (Karpik, 2010). These and a host of other devices are necessary conditions of cultural intermediaries’ work: they are the material and discursive constructs that make it possible for cultural intermediaries to ‘do’ the framing of goods, mobilizing the attachment of intended receivers to goods (McFall, 2009; Miller and Rose, 1997), and attempting to make those social relations (of influence, attachment, framing) durable (Latour, 1991). But at the same time, devices ‘act or they make others act’: devices may assist cultural intermediaries, but they may also push them (Muniesa et al., 2007: 2). Even from such a preliminary and incomplete outline, it should be clear that there are a density of contextualizing conditions at play in enabling and constraining cultural intermediaries’ expert roles in value formation processes.

Below, we outline three dimensions of investigation that highlight the contextual specificity of cultural intermediaries, what they do and why they matter. First, framing: all cultural intermediaries are involved in the framing of goods. What is available for framing, and how, to whom and with what degree of constraint they frame goods will reflect their particular locations within networks of human and non-human actors. Second, expertise: what differentiates cultural intermediaries from other actors involved in framing goods are their claims to authority; the bases for that authority will reflect the specific stocks of professional and cultural capital and subjective dispositions and preferences that cultural intermediaries have at their disposal. Third, impact: cultural intermediaries’ framing work is intended to influence others’ estimations of goods as legitimate and thus lead to attachments; the weight and durability of that influence will reflect the particular devices (including their expertise) through which cultural intermediaries act.

Each of these dimensions suggests a range of empirical entry points for investigating both ‘family resemblances’ (Nixon and du Gay, 2002: 498), and their specific manifestations, which vary relative to the contextual reality of particular cultural intermediaries. These are not the only dimensions of relevance, and they are mutually interdependent. However, as analytical devices, they are especially well-suited to our task of introducing the Special Issue articles from Liz Moor (examining the wax and wane of influence for the occupation of social marketing in the UK), Giselinde Kuipers (comparing French, Italian, Dutch and Polish buyers of content for television companies, and their professional and cultural differences and continuities), Clayton Childress (exploring the negotiated use of a new market-measuring
device by US trade publishing acquisition editors), Sarah Baker (considering the role of British retro furniture retailers in the revaluing of goods), Richard Ocejo (contrasting cocktail bartenders as cultural intermediaries with their ‘service occupation’ counterparts, neighbourhood bartenders in the US), and Benjamin Woo (investigating the roles and ethos of Canadian ‘nerd’ gaming subculture retailers and event organizers). A social marketer, television buyer, acquisitions editor, retro furniture dealer, cocktail bartender and a gaming store owner: it’s either the start of a funny joke, or the focus of a Special Issue on cultural intermediaries!

Framing
To be a cultural intermediary is to be involved in the framing of goods (products, services, ideas, behaviours) as legitimate and worthy points of attachment for intended receivers. A cultural intermediary’s location within specific cultural and occupational fields and commodity chains or circuits affords a certain set of opportunities and constraints. Thus, the thrust of a context-led analysis is to unpack the conditions and networks within which that framing takes place: first (but not only) in terms of those intended receivers. Much attention along these lines has been directed at the end consumer as receiver and the interactive service work of the cultural intermediary, in the literature on cultural intermediaries and in other discussions of immaterial and affective labour (e.g. Hardt and Negri, 2004; Lazzarato, 1996; Witz et al., 2003). Examples of this sort of intermediary—directly engaged in interacting with consumer perceptions of and attachments to goods—include retailers (Baker and Woo) and frontline service workers (Ocejo). However, even in these instances, the cultural intermediary is always also situated in networks of supply and distribution, which involve having goods framed for him or her and, in turn, making their choices credible to others (managers, investors, distributors and so forth).

Kuipers’ interviews with television content buyers in four European countries provide a richly detailed demonstration of the importance of locating cultural intermediaries vis-à-vis the human actors to and for whom they frame goods. Noting commonalities in cosmopolitan dispositions and differences in orientations to their markets and tastes across her interviewees, Kuipers makes the case that, for television buyers, the imagined consumer is as likely to be themselves or their local chain of command (the national television companies) as it is to be the local consumer. Television buyers are the ‘consumers’ of audio-visual producers’ goods, and in turn produce particular frames to render their choices credible to other cultural intermediaries in the supply chain, including program managers, financial managers and schedulers. Similarly, Childress’ account of US trade publishing acquisition editors locates them at a point further ‘upstream’ from the end consumer, at which the cultural intermediary’s choices must be made credible to editorial colleagues, PR functionaries and so forth, in terms of aesthetic and market value. In locating these intermediaries within the commodity chains of audio-visual and literary content and formats, Kuipers and Childress underline the multiple human actors implicated in the formation of value for cultural goods.

However, as Moor reminds us in her examination of social marketing, there are a diversity of non-human actors contextualizing cultural intermediaries’ work, which also require attention. These will include the particular goods available to frame, as well as the established and emerging tools, scripts and protocols to effect that framing, the competencies required to employ those devices, and the means through which such competencies are developed and made credible (e.g. qualifications). To this end, Childress’ research provides a case in point of how devices enable and constrain cultural intermediaries’ work of framing, offering
insight into how the acquisition editors strategically engage with BookScan, a market measurement device that offers data on book sales. Contrary to the expectation that such devices necessarily reduce cultural production to a simple logic of sales, Childress highlights cultural intermediaries’ agency in negotiating when and how to rely on such devices. For example, editors may use BookScan data to simplify decisions on sales-driven manuscripts, or to construct post-hoc rationalizations for their aesthetically-driven choices by creatively deploying the data for constructing profit and loss projections and identifying competitors.

Thus, framing as a material practice must be situated in terms of its location in particular networks of human and non-human actors, in order to understand the specific devices and constraints negotiated by cultural intermediaries in their attempts to influence how goods are perceived and practiced. The papers in the Special Issue ably demonstrate the power of detailed qualitative research and historical and ethnographic methods to provide insight into how that influence is exerted and concretized. In addition to the deployment of field- and occupational-specific devices, cultural intermediaries also accomplish their framing and exert influence through their claims to expertise.

Expertise
Claims to expertise distinguish cultural intermediaries from others involved in the framing of goods and the formation of value. Furthermore, different forms of expertise will differentiate cultural intermediaries involved in the same commodity chain, and help to explain the degree of asymmetry of influence in relations between cultural intermediaries, and between cultural intermediaries and other actors. (Research that traces successive framings and negotiations along a commodity chain remains rare, and thus we as yet lack an adequate, contextualized grasp of contestations and resistance to framings from within commodity chains; see Méadel and Rabeharisoa, 2001 for an exception). A context-led analysis is concerned with the derivation and performance of expertise, specific to a cultural intermediary’s location. The papers in the Special Issue highlight at least two components of expertise, grouped loosely as professional (more or less reliance on abstract, standardized devices and qualifications) and personal (more or less reliance on subjective preferences and tastes). Moreover, they suggest that the personal is necessarily professional; that is, all cultural intermediaries rely, more or less, on personal dispositions and cultural capital as the basis of their professional credibility. Indeed, the balance between the professional and the personal may give rise to variation within a single cultural intermediary occupation (e.g. Kuipers’ four ideal types of television buyers).

The professional expertise of cultural intermediaries is a contingent accomplishment. Cultural intermediaries display some aspects of new modes of corporate professionalization, for which occupational legitimization is cast in commercial terms rather than in ethical terms, and demonstrated competence is accepted alongside or ahead of qualifications (Muzio et al., 2011). However, while cultural intermediaries largely lack the hallmarks of the established professions (Baker, for instance, highlights the lack of regulated, institutionalized points of entry to the occupation of retro retailer), they invest in a ‘professional’ disposition and vocational approach to their work, casting it (à la one of the world’s oldest professions...the clergy) as a service to the sacred—that is, the aesthetically good and culturally legitimate (cf. Wilensky, 1964). Ocejo’s research on cocktail bartenders provides a clear case for how professional expertise is constructed in both established and new ways, demarcating cultural intermediaries from their service work counterparts—here, the neighbourhood bartenders. Both make and serve drinks, but cocktail bartenders have recourse to particular devices for making credible their claims to expertise in framing—rather than simply serving—alcoholic
drinks: accreditation programmes, an abstract body of expert knowledge (mixology), and sets of aesthetic principles (including heritage, the handcrafted and ‘balance’). In this way, professional expertise can be understood as the outcome of devices, which in turn serves as symbolic capital (Schinkel and Noordegraaf, 2011): a device to add weight and credibility to cultural intermediaries’ attempts to influence others’ perceptions of what are (and are not) legitimate choices and tastes.

In addition to professionalizing devices, expertise is also, crucially, the outcome of the subjective conditions of cultural intermediaries’ work: their habitus, which affords a particular aesthetic orientation and forms of cultural capital. For example, Baker examines how retailers of retro goods work to refashion goods (that might otherwise be considered as ‘old fashioned’ or ‘used’) as worthy and desirable expressions of good taste. In accomplishing this work, the retailers draw on their class position, which is typically lower than that of their customers: this class position serves as both a device for imbuing their goods with working class authenticity, and a form of competence with regard to successfully accessing and operating within house clearances. At the same time, retailers’ passion for retro and their intricate knowledge of the field and trade serve as means for making themselves and their wares credible to more affluent consumers. As a source of expertise, cultural intermediaries’ affective investments in the goods being framed is echoed in Woo’s ‘nerd’ retailers, who are always already fans, equipped with a mastery of arcane trivia and personal gaming collections to legitimize their sincere investment in the field. Moreover, Woo’s retailers identify with their market; they are their own ideal consumer. Similarly, Moor gives an example of social marketers specializing in specific minority and ‘problem’ populations. Here, expertise takes the form of a personal (ethnographical if not biographical) insight into and grasp of the cultural norms and dynamics of the intended market.

In different ways, all of the articles demonstrate how authority and credibility are linked to the relative congruence between a cultural intermediary’s habitus, and the dominant schemes of value and appreciation at work in their particular fields and markets. Through that congruence, cultural intermediaries develop their distinctive expertise in the form of a ‘feel for the game’ (Bourdieu, 1990): the ability to read the market of receivers, appraise aesthetic worth (or potential), identify with the brand or company, and so forth. These various forms of expertise, in combination with the range of devices employed in the framing of goods, will shape the relative capacities of cultural intermediaries to impact upon the formation of value and constitution of categories of cultural legitimacy.

Impact
All cultural intermediaries are implicated in the construction of legitimacy, although the primacy of that intended impact will vary between different cases. The scale at which impact is accomplished will also vary. By virtue of their cultural field, occupation and position in a commodity chain, cultural intermediaries will be involved at different scales in their work of framing goods as legitimate, from face-to-face interactions ‘upstream’ (e.g. Childress’ acquisition editors) and ‘downstream’ (e.g. Ocejo’s mixologists), to the scale of the institution or field (e.g. Moor points to developers of training programmes in social marketing). A context-led analysis is concerned with disentangling how that impact is made durable—not, as Moor reminds us, to simply list the various devices at play, but to differentiate between their relative approaches, contributions and degrees of ‘success.’

Cultural intermediaries are differentially equipped to build networks with devices, routines, measurements and other materials in order to make their impact durable (Latour, 1991), such
that it extends beyond their particular interactions and accomplishments and takes on the
quality of a convention. For example, Woo highlights that while the gaming retailers and
event organizers have relatively limited agency (compared to the ‘nerd’ scene’s primary
culture producers) in determining what goods are made available, they nevertheless build a
coherent (if precarious) network via their retail spaces. Through their inventory selections,
patterns of product placement within the store, and inclusion of tables for customers to trial
new games, retailers frame particular goods and spaces for fans, and others for the public: a
spatial and material concretization of the retailers’ working definitions of fans and non-fans,
and what is legitimate to the nerd subculture. However, in focusing on impact one should not
assume success on the part of the cultural intermediary. Again, Woo provides a useful
example of how failure to effect an intended impact (e.g. a poorly attended screening) may
lead to employing other devices (such as a reflexive staff meeting focused on trying to
understand the nature of the failure).

Turning from the ‘how’ to the ‘what’ of impact, we have made the case that cultural
intermediaries are involved in the framing of goods as legitimate and that, in turn, implicates
them in wider processes of constructing categories of cultural legitimacy. The articles in the
Special Issue provide a germane reminder that such categories are not synonymous with a
traditional bourgeois cultural canon. Certainly, there are cultural intermediaries invested in
value schemes that continue to rest on juxtapositions of elite and popular, restricted and mass,
artistic and commercial. For example, against the mass, commercial products they sometimes
select, acquisition editors and television buyers frame some choices—those that reflect their
tastes—as better. As the articles demonstrate, cultural legitimacy is being negotiated with
regard to the goods specific to any number of cultural fields, including—in the case of
Moor—the values and practices of everyday life.

Moor looks at the development of social marketing in the UK since the 1970s, during which
time marketing concepts (devices) extended beyond their originally intended use for
engineering purchases towards the mobilization of particular behaviours, as in the case of
health promotion. Social marketers’ intended impact is not directed at consumer purchases,
but consumer behaviour more broadly—but it does this through the same devices as
conventional marketing, attempting to reduce the distance between demand and supply, tastes
and goods. For social marketing, it is about bringing into alignment the practices and values
of particular (problem) populations, and state agendas with regard to productivity, citizenship
and sustainability. In her historical research, Moor suggests how social marketing was
brought into being and made durable (e.g. via devices for marking and reproducing
membership, such as journals, conferences, academic qualifications), such that its
practitioners could then enlist additional actors (e.g. training programmes), specify and codify
their expertise and confer authority on their utterances (publication and circulation of
benchmark criteria and guidelines) and, on the whole, effect an asymmetry in relations such
that the social marketer could ‘frame’ particular behaviours as legitimate (e.g. socially
responsible drinking, self-care through diet and exercise) with authority and durability.

Cultural intermediaries are implicated in constituting and circulating categories of legitimate
culture and thus, possibly, in challenging and changing them. We need to take seriously the
cultural production of legitimacy—to regard notions of what is good and desirable as
arbitrary, and thus as material accomplishments that involve interdependent networks of
(human and non-human) actors, rather than as monolithic or static canons. This is not simply
about definitions of highbrow, middlebrow and lowbrow culture; this is more broadly about
constructing the boundaries around ‘established’ (cf. Elias and Scotson, 1994) or legitimate
culture, which may be built with notions of the elite and restricted culture, but may also be made through notions of trendiness, authenticity, morality and so forth. On this, the literatures on cultural intermediaries, cultural omnivorousness (e.g. Johnston and Baumann, 2010; Warde et al., 2007) and cosmopolitanism (e.g. Beck, 2002; Lamont and Aksartova, 2002) could usefully benefit from closer links, to explore how cultural intermediaries are actively engaged in constructing, and not simply exemplifying, new canons of good taste. The impact of cultural intermediaries thus extends beyond the framing of specific goods. On the one hand, they contribute to the wider reproduction of ‘legitimacy’ as a dominant convention for the stratification of culture (and thereby the inclusion or marginalization of particular groups, and cultural forms and practices). And on the other, they contribute to the expanding definition of culture itself—or what Moor calls the work of culturalization—whereby new areas and aspects of everyday life are identified as ‘cultural’ problems and thus brought into the sphere of interventions via particular devices, forms of influence and cadres of experts.

In closing, we note that while the ‘cultural turn’ has generated significant and nuanced accounts of the agency of consumers, and compelling analyses of the macro-structures of consumer culture, the market remains—in our scholarship and our popular imaginaries—by and large removed from our considerations of culture. We would suggest that Cultural Studies, with its own repertoire of devices and conventions organized around questions of power, negotiation and agency, is particularly well-suited to the production of more adequate, rich and ethnographic accounts of the market as a lived, social practice, and of the ‘empirical intricacies of agency’ (Muniesa et al., 2007: 1) for market actors. However, beyond a broad critique of the petite bourgeoisification of consumer culture, research on the work of cultural intermediaries has yet to fully exercise its pragmatic potential to ‘test’ (and perhaps destabilize) the boundaries around cultural legitimacy (cf. Overdevest, 2011). This is a potential that resonates with the heritage of Cultural Studies (Williams, 1961) and its forward momentum (Grossberg, 2010; Oswell, 2006). With an eye to both what they do and why they matter, research on cultural intermediaries offers a timely direction for developing Cultural Studies’ grasp of cultural economic processes, and the political dimensions of the market as culture.

References


