

**Sam Friedman**

## The hidden tastemakers: comedy scouts as cultural brokers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe

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# **The Hidden Tastemakers: Comedy Scouts as Cultural Brokers at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe**

## **Abstract**

Responsible for selecting which new artists are brought to the public attention, talent scouts carry considerable influence in framing performing arts fields. Yet their practices are hidden from public view and *how* and *why* they select fledgling producers remains unexplored in cultural sociology. This article aims to demystify the work of such gatekeepers by examining temporary comedy scouts operating at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The Fringe is the world's biggest arts festival and a central tradefair for the British comedy field. Drawing on ethnographic observation and interviews with nine comedy scouts, I examine the positions they occupy in the comedy field and, in turn, how this positioning affects which comedians they propel. I then interrogate the brokerage enacted by scouts. Centrally I argue that while some broker between artists and management, *all* scouts are implicated in mediating between artists and audiences. In particular, they act to intensify comedy taste boundaries, making judgments based on assumptions about imagined audiences and directing more legitimate comedians to privileged audiences and vice versa. In this way, scouts act as *hidden tastemakers*, intensifying the scarcity of certain tastes, and strengthening the ability of privileged audiences to use comedy in the claiming of cultural distinction.

## **1. Introduction**

In August 2010 little-known comedy magicians Barry and Stuart were spotted by an enthusiastic BBC TV producer at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. Within months the duo were hosting a BBC 1 primetime show, *The Magicians*, and within a year had sold out a national tour. The story is a familiar one at the Edinburgh Fringe, where scores of comedians are 'discovered' every year by talent scouts and launched into lucrative and high-profile careers. Although such breakthroughs are invariably constructed as the romantic triumph of raw talent, the reality is more

calculated. As Barry and Stuart's agent, Kerry<sup>1</sup>, explained to me, the duo's 'discovery' had been carefully orchestrated. She had spotted the pair a few years earlier and immediately saw that their brand of comedy magic could fill a conspicuous gap in the market. Earmarking the Fringe as the obvious launchpad, she embarked on a three-year plan. In 2008 the duo played a tiny 60-seater festival venue and, after a string of good reviews, started to sell out. The following August they moved to a 120-seater theatre and sold out the whole run. And in 2010 they moved to an even bigger venue, sold out again, and were duly 'discovered' by a television comedy scout. Kerry summed up the strategy:

There were TV execs that I could have pitched till I was blue-in-the-face in London. But if they turn up in Edinburgh and a show's been selling out for three weeks, you generate the interest anyway. I hate telling that story because it makes it sound contrived. But it is.

In many ways such manufactured success is nothing new. The Edinburgh Festival Fringe has long been a training ground for the performing arts (Shrum, 1996). Held every August for three weeks, the Fringe is the largest arts festival in the world, attracting 24,071 performers and selling over 1.94 million tickets (The Fringe Society, 2013). Yet in recent years the Fringe has changed considerably. In particular, comedy has come to dominate the programme. While in 1981 there were just 16 comedy shows, by 2013 this number had risen to 947 (The Fringe Society, 2012). This reflects similar developments in the wider British cultural field, where comedy is currently enjoying unprecedented economic growth and emerging as one of the few cultural fields to prosper in the recent economic downturn (Salter, 2009; Thompson, 2009). Amid this growth, the Fringe has emerged as the centerpiece of the British comedy field, a vast tradefair in which the majority of Britain's comedians (and many from abroad) perform for 22 days straight with the aim of attracting

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<sup>1</sup> All respondents real names have been replaced with pseudonyms

audiences, critics and – most crucially – industry professionals<sup>2</sup>. To help mediate these ambitions the Fringe has arguably generated a new type of comedy worker, the ‘temporary’ talent scout, who leave behind normal occupational duties - as agents, producers, commissioners or venue bookers - for one month of the year and decamp to Edinburgh to scour the Fringe for comedians to fill the ever-increasing slots for comedy on British TV, radio and in live venues. These scouts represent pivotal brokers in the comedy field, selecting which new comedians are brought to public attention and forming a critical link between comedy producers and comedy management.

In cultural sociology, important contributions have been made to our understanding of such gatekeepers. For example, in fashion, much research has addressed the way buyers and bookers act as intermediaries between producers and consumers (Blumer, 1969; Entwistle, 2006; Mears, 2011). In art, Velthuis (2005) has addressed the way dealers act as similarly important gatekeepers between artists and collectors. In book publishing, Thomson (2012) and Franssen and Kuipers (2013) have both provided illuminating accounts of how book proposals are selected for publication by editors. And in television, important works (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Kuipers, 2012) have examined the rhetorical strategies employed by buyers and programmers when attempting to legitimate the products they select for broadcast.

However, one emerging area so far ignored in this literature is the work of temporary talent scouts that operate at arts festivals. In the performing arts, large-scale festivals are becoming increasingly important distribution systems, acting as virtual tradefairs for their wider fields (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011). Moreover, by bringing together artists, audiences and critics in one spatially bounded setting they provide a uniquely

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<sup>2</sup> The promise of ‘discovery’ comes at a substantial price, however, with the average comic losing £7,349 a year promoting and staging a show at the Fringe (Logan, 2008).

attractive setting for talent scouts looking to identify and propel new talent. Yet the professional practices of festival talent scouts are hidden from public view and *how* and *why* they select fledging performers remains unexplored.

This article therefore aims to plug this gap by examining the work of comedy scouts at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe. The article proceeds in four steps. First I discuss the theoretical significance of comedy scouts, focusing in particular on the brokerage they carry out in the field and the cognitive templates they draw upon in making their scouting decisions. I argue that to unravel these functions it is useful to draw upon insights from both Neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory. Second, I sketch the history of the British comedy field, explaining the importance of the Fringe and why such Festivals may offer a particularly useful context from which to understand wider cultural mediation in the performing arts. Third, I begin to outline the findings of my 'go-along' ethnography with 9 British comedy scouts, starting by explaining how and why scouts select and recruit artists at the Fringe. Here I argue that while these decision-making processes involve a clutch of common strategies that reflect prevailing logics in the 'organisational field' of comedy, to understand fully *why* particular selections are made it is important to look at scouts' individual habitus, their location within the Bourdieusian 'field of cultural production', and the notions of 'talent' that flow from this homology between habitus and field. Fourth, I interrogate empirically the forms of brokerage enacted by comedy scouts. Centrally I argue that while some scouts play an important brokerage role between artists and management, they also perform a distinct tastemaking function. Drawing on strongly classed assumptions about the tastes of comedy audiences, their scouting decisions reproduce key divisions in comedy taste that arguably contribute to the wider claiming of cultural distinction.

## 2. Talent Scouts as Cultural Brokers

Contemporary cultural production invariably requires a complex process of mediation between producers and consumers. Fringe comedy scouts enact a particular form of this specialized mediation. Occupying various roles within the comedy industry for most of the year – comedy agent, venue booker, producer, TV commissioner – every August they assume a temporary but common status as a talent scout. In this way, they are different from professional scouts in other fields such as fashion (Mears, 2011) and publishing (Franssen and Kuipers, 2013) who scout for a living. Nonetheless, by assuming this fleeting role they occupy a pivotal ‘boundary spanning position’ (Hirsch, 1972) in the British comedy field. In particular, they perform *two* important brokering or mediating functions. First, they straddle the border between fledgling comedy producers, largely starting out in the comedy world, and a potentially national public of comedy consumers accessed through television, radio and national tours. And second they also broker relations between comedy producers and the more managerial branches of broadcasting and comedy management companies.

In cultural sociology, the notion of brokerage is rooted in neo-institutional theory (DiMaggio, 1987; Di Maggio and Powell, 1991; Peterson and Anand, 2004). This work locates cultural brokers within particular ‘organisational fields’ and seeks to explain how their decision-making is influenced by particular ‘institutional logics’ (Thornton and Ocasio, 2008;). Over time these logics become embedded within the field as ‘organizing principles’ that subsequently guide taken-for-granted patterns in individual behaviour (Friedland and Alford, 1991; DiMaggio, 1998; Dobbin, 2008). Brokers thus become tacit carriers of, or conduits for, certain organizational models or logics (Schneiberg and Clemens, 2008). Such logics may take the form of specific ways of operating, such as common business strategies (Bielby and Bielby, 1994), or forms of classification, such as the use of cultural ‘genres’ (DiMaggio, 1987; Negus, 1999; Hitters and van de Kamp, 2010), that over time become institutionalised principles within a field.

In the field of culture, many sociologists have argued that dominant logics often emerge as solutions to particular challenges (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991). One of

the most pressing challenges, they argue, is addressing the *uncertainty* that characterizes production in popular cultural fields (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Godart and Mears, 2009). The potential success and value of a new comedian, for example, is hard to foretell, because most of the industry's final 'products' (i.e. radio sketch shows, TV sitcoms, national stand-up tours) evolve as a collective process that unfolds well before eventual audience consumption. Gatekeeping professionals such as talent scouts are therefore employed to address and (ultimately reduce) this uncertainty by assessing comedians' worth and potential, and by deciding which to select and promote for further development. In making these selections, scouts must inevitably broker between the 'aspirations of artists for creative expression' and the goal of their 'management' who want to be able to 'predict and control' economic success (DiMaggio, 1977: 442). According to DiMaggio (1977), there are three different types of brokers, depending on the market structure of a cultural industry and the power of 'management' to exert control over producers. In sectors of production dominated by a small number of dominant cultural organizations, the function of 'centralised brokers' is largely to communicate the interests of management to artists, who in turn have little creative freedom. A key strategy for reducing uncertainty in these environments is the 'imitation' of successful strategies (Bielby and Bielby, 1994). Thus neo-institutionalists demonstrate how gatekeepers often observe how others in the same field deal successfully with the same environmental conditions and model their own practices and taste judgments on those in their industry who have already experienced success, leading to what DiMaggio and Powell (1983) term 'mimetic isomorphism'. In contrast, 'Entrepreneurial brokers' operating in 'turbulent' and highly 'competitive' sectors of popular cultural production are given much more professional and aesthetic autonomy in their selection of artists and, if they wish, are able to offer much more creative freedom to the artists they acquire. Finally, in more 'pluralistic' cultural fields, 'pure brokers' serve as an advocate for both management and creators, acting as an advocate for both but 'with ultimate loyalty to the former' (DiMaggio, 1977: 442-43).

Theoretical work on cultural brokers such as talent scouts is not just confined to neo-institutional theory, however. The work of Bourdieu (1984; 1993), for

example, has also addressed this area of cultural work, albeit conceptualizing such boundary-spanners less as brokers and more as 'cultural intermediaries'. Moreover, for Bourdieu, the decision-making processes of intermediaries are rooted in factors that stretch beyond particular institutional logics. While these field-specific norms and rules are certainly important – Bourdieu calls them the 'rules of the game' – they are always mediated by the social conditions flowing from an individual's primary socialization – from their *habitus*.

The *habitus* represents a key conceptual tool in Bourdieu's social theory, representing both a "structured" and "structuring" force in explaining social action. Bourdieu (1990: 60-61) argued that those located in neighbouring positions in social space (i.e. similar social class backgrounds) are socialised with comparable "conditions of existence" (meaning stocks of capital and distance from material necessity) and these conditions act to form the "structure" of their *habitus*. In turn, this structure goes on to generate "structuring" dispositions – most prominently in terms of aesthetic appreciation - that guide social and professional practice. This practice does not exist in a vacuum, though, but instead is mediated through the 'field of cultural production', the dynamic professional space inhabited by all cultural 'actors'. This notion of field is somewhat similar to that posited by neo-institutionalists in that it is relational and contains guiding logics that have emerged over time. However, for Bourdieu, the dominant logics that develop are best understood in terms of struggles over forms of capital (economic, cultural and social) that allow individual actors to compete for power and legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1993: 55-70). Thus dominant institutional logics are recast as 'field-specific capital', which determines one's position in the field but which, crucially, cannot be accessed equally by all. Instead the ability to acquire, master and capitalize on field-specific capital invariably hinges on the resources of capital rooted in one's *habitus*.

Moreover, for Bourdieu, the nature of field-specific capital is structured by the place of a particular field of culture within the wider field of cultural production. For example, Bourdieu (1993: 53) noted that the strategies of intermediaries in popular cultural fields such as comedy are determined by the fact that they are



firmly positioned within the 'mass' or 'large-scale' sub-field of cultural production. This constitutes the 'discredited' arm of the cultural field, where 'business is business' and intermediaries help to produce 'profane' cultural goods such as pop music, television *and comedy* for the largest possible audience and greatest economic profit (Bourdieu, 1993: 39). This involves catering to the 'popular aesthetic' or the 'taste for necessity', whereby culture provides immediate sensual gratification, relates directly to everyday life and 'imply the subordination of form to function' (Bourdieu, 1984: 32). In contrast, intermediaries in the 'restricted sub-field' mediate the production of autonomous 'high' culture, where financial profit is rejected and 'art for art's sake' constitutes the dominant ideology. The logic of production here is focused around the idea of the 'disinterested aesthetic' - derived from Kant's (1987) notion of 'pure aesthetics' - where true artistic beauty can only be deduced through the operation of a 'disinterested gaze', in which the virtue of artistic form, not function, is allowed to shine through (Kant, 1987: 234).

For Bourdieu, then, the scouting selections of individual comedy scouts are only partially shaped by logics that have become institutionalized in the comedy field. While these norms and rules are important, they are superseded by the aesthetic disposition inscribed within a scout's habitus, which subsequently compels them towards selecting artists that align with their position in the field – making, in Bourdieu's terms, 'a virtue of necessity' (Bourdieu, 1990: 54). In this way, they invariably act as personal 'guarantors' of the products they select, firmly believing in the value of what they sell (Bourdieu, 1984: 365).

Habitus is also important in the context of this article because it helps unpack the second brokering or mediating function of comedy scouts. DiMaggio (1977) fundamentally sees brokers as mediating relationships between artists and management. However, by choosing to select which artists are propelled to larger publics, comedy scouts also mediate between artists and audiences. In particular, they decide what types of artists are suitable for certain distribution channels – channels that are likely to already have well-established audiences. In this way, they become key 'tastemakers' (Mears, 2011) that play a pivotal role in 'framing'

the field of cultural consumption and shaping what forms of culture are available to certain audiences (Maguire, 2011) An important aspect of their job, to paraphrase Entwistle (2006), is therefore to ‘matchmake’ artists with the tastes of appropriate audiences. Yet as many have previously noted, brokers rarely have completely reliable knowledge about audiences (Havens 2006; Bielby and Harrington, 2004). Indeed, most must make brokering selections based on ‘imagined audiences’, on ‘gut’ instincts about the fit between types of culture and types of audiences (Blaszczyk, 2008; Kuipers, 2012; Hitters and van de Kamp, 2012). In this regard understanding how and why comedy scouts come to associate certain *types of audience* with certain *types of artist* is pivotal in unraveling this second form of brokerage. And it is habitus that arguably provides the more persuasive explanatory lens, tracing such speculative and meticulous cognitive judgments beyond one’s occupational experience to deeply embedded dispositions rooted in the totality of one’s social experience, and particularly their earliest years.

It is important to reiterate that there is much overlap between neo-institutionalism and Bourdieusian field theory. Both are keen to stress how cultural actors are embedded within, and constrained by, a dynamic professional space known as the field. Similarly, both note that this space is competitive, hierarchical and action within it is guided by a specific logic (Emirbayer and Johnson, 2008). However, it is the *source* of this guiding logic, and its cognitive apparatus, which perhaps most fundamentally divides the two theories. Whereas neo-institutionalists see one’s actions or ‘worldview’ as primarily rooted in institutional logics that actors encounter in the workplace, Bourdieu locates the professional practice of the present in the social conditions of the past, and the dispositions flowing (largely) from one’s primary socialization.

Indeed, it is this dynamic between institutional logics and habitus which this article aims to probe. Like many recent studies in cultural sociology, my analysis of comedy scouts combines insights from both neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory (Godart and Mears, 2008; Kuipers, 2011; Franssen and Kuipers, 2013). In particular, I draw upon the recent illuminating work of

Franssen and Kuipers (2013) who examine the process by which Dutch literary editors acquire translation rights. Examining each stage of the decision-making process they argue that some aspects, such as common institutional innovations like hiring literary scouts, are better understood through a neo-institutional lens, but other aspects such as competition over translation rights are better understood through a Bourdieusian stress on power dynamics. In this article, I aim to both build on this work, but also extend it by honing in more directly on the *origins* of gatekeeping decisions. Thus while I retain Franssen and Kuipers' (2013) emphasis on the procedural 'decision-making process' carried out by British comedy scouts, I am also particularly interested in the cognitive templates that they draw upon when making judgments and decisions. Centrally I ask, what underpins the aesthetic decisions of British comedy scouts - institutional logics rooted in occupational experience or the deeply embedded dispositions contained in Bourdieu's conception of habitus?

### **3. The Changing Field of British Comedy**

Before turning to my empirical data on comedy scouts, it is first important to provide some background on the historical development of British comedy. Traditionally, comedy has largely been considered a discredited art form in Britain and relegated to the inferior cultural position of entertainment rather than art (Mills 2004; Double 2007). Its lowbrow status can, in part, be traced as far back as Aristotle's (1996: 10) *Poetics*, where comedy was first discussed in terms of its opposition with tragedy; tragedy representing the transcendental goals of 'high-art' and comedy the 'low' counterpoint of vulgar entertainment. Indeed, this binary distinction has proved remarkably persistent in British culture (Stott, 2005). Comedy has thus been consistently discredited by cultural critics (Critchley, 2002). It has been assumed to have inherent deficiencies of form – particularly its emphasis on repetition and stereotyped depictions of reality (Konstan, 1995; Mills, 2008); its enduring connection to laughter and physical obscenity has underlined its relationship to the 'transgressive' body (Bakhtin, 1984; Stott, 2002); and in terms of British cultural production, its development through the Victorian Music Hall, Variety and Early Television Sitcom was consistently marked by accusations that output was banal, formulaic,

and reactionary (Bailey, 1984; Double, 2007; Wagg, 2003). For most of its history, then, British comedy has been relatively easy to locate within Bourdieu's 'mass sub field' of cultural production (for more on the history of British comedy see identifying author removed).

However, comedy's position within the British cultural hierarchy arguably altered significantly in the wake of the 'Alternative Comedy Movement' of the early 1980s. Here a number of British comedians attempted to eschew what they saw as the 'lowbrow' output that had previously dominated comedy, and instead pioneered a supposedly more 'sophisticated' approach (Wilmot 1989: xiv). Borrowing themes from high art, these 'Alt' comedians expanded the field far beyond the boundaries of pop culture, introducing new forms of critical, intellectual, political and surreal comedy (Stott 2005: 119-20). This alternative movement was also successful in attracting a strong degree of consecration from critics and academics, somewhat rehabilitating the art form and leading to the branding of alternative comedy as a distinctly 'highbrow' strand of comedy<sup>3</sup> (Wagg, 1998: 21)

In a contemporary context it is possible to see the residue of both the alternative comedy movement and the field's more lowbrow historical roots. On the one hand, forms of 'light' TV comedy continue to constitute a large percentage of the comedy produced in the UK, despite continuing to be discredited by critics and academics (Mills, 2008: 134). Likewise, a number of 'observational' stand-ups such as Michael McIntyre, John Bishop, Jason Manford and Russell Howard are experiencing unprecedented popular success, despite been criticised by critics for their 'light', 'safe' and 'inoffensive' material (Logan, 2010; Bennett, 2009).

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<sup>3</sup> It is important to note at this point that my concern in this thesis is not to explicitly address whether this high-low division of comedy is normatively just. Indeed, following Bourdieu and Passeron (1979: 4-15), my suspicion is that such a system of cultural classification is largely 'arbitrary', with no taste culture able to validly claim universal and essential value. Instead, the cultural hierarchy is a system of meaning that I believe is largely imposed by dominant groups and then 'misrecognised' as legitimate by society as a whole (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1979: Xiii).

However, whilst the renewed popularity of more lowbrow output illustrates continuities in the status of British comedy, there have also been unquestionable changes. On television, this has been greatly aided by technological shifts away from mass public service broadcasting. Whereas television comedy traditionally fulfilled a 'mass social function' and relied on securing audiences of 10 million plus, the advent of the digital age has paved the way for a new broadcasting environment where comedy can be commercially sustainable with much smaller audiences (Mills, 2008: 138). This, in turn, has led to a rise in independent production companies and a proliferation of niche channels specialising in comedy, such as BBC 3, BBC Radio 7, Dave, Paramount Comedy and Channel 4. Notably, these channels often position themselves against the main broadcasters by claiming to provide more experimental comic content. Indeed, in moves that echo wider developments in the creation of 'quality television' (Jacobs, 2001), some TV comedy-makers have deliberately subverted the lowbrow theatrical aesthetic and artificial laughter track normally associated with sitcom (Mills, 2008: 124-146). Among the most influential of these formalistic innovations has been the adoption of mock-documentary aesthetics in sitcoms such as *The Office* (BBC, 2001-2003), the development of a realist or naturalist approach in sitcoms such as *The Royle Family* (1998-Present) and finally the use of experimental narrative techniques in series like *Peep Show* (Channel 4, 2003-Present). More legitimate comedy also continues to be influential on the stand-up circuit, where the experimental aesthetic principles championed by the original 'alternative' circuit have largely prevailed. Indeed, arguably the most consistently consecrated stand-ups have been those that foreground the 'alternative' ethos of formal innovation (Hall, 2007).

Thus while Bourdieu (1984: 567) saw the field of comedy as housed entirely within the mass sub-field, trends in the recent history of British comedy reveal a contemporary field characterised by increasing complexity and diversity. Moreover, these developments have also been echoed in patterns of comedy *consumption*. In my own research (Identifying Reference Removed) I have shown that contemporary comedy taste is strikingly polarized along lines of social stratification, with those from culturally privileged backgrounds using their

appreciation of new, more legitimate comedy, as a way of drawing symbolic boundaries between themselves and those from less privileged backgrounds, who favour less legitimate comedy.

Echoing similar developments in film (Bauman, 2001) and rock music (Regev, 1994), then, the 'post-alternative' field of British comedy is now widely diverse, incorporating a complex hierarchy of legitimacy and corresponding divisions in taste. This complex historical development, increasing diversity, and recent growth, all combine to make comedy an ideal case study for understanding the contemporary work of cultural gatekeepers. In particular, as many other popular cultural fields experience similar trends of 'upward mobility' (Regev, 1994; Bauman, 2001), it is important to consider the role that gatekeepers such as scouts may be playing in this rehabilitative process, acting as tastemakers that help frame the contours of the field.

Finally, examining comedy scouts in the empirical context of the Edinburgh Fringe may also provide insights for others, particularly those wishing to understand whether such 'temporary' talent scouts are as influential in other national comedy fields or other areas of the performing arts. As features of the international comedy and performing arts worlds, festivals like the Fringe are increasingly important (Johansson and Kociatkiewicz, 2011). The temporal concentration of performers, audiences and critical media in one local setting make them virtual laboratories of performance art and essential distribution systems or trade-fairs for those looking to identify new talent. By bringing together all the key actors in a cultural field in one spatially and temporally bounded event, such festivals can thus be seen an 'embodiment' of their wider industries (Entwistle and Rocamora, 2008; 736). In this way, they provide a unique opportunity to study *in situ* the positions occupied, and practices enacted, by an emerging category of contemporary cultural gatekeeper.

#### **4. Outline of the Research**

The data I draw upon here is part of an ethnographic follow-up to a larger, mixed methods project exploring the contemporary field of British comedy. The

original study examined comedy taste and consisted of a survey (n=901) and 24 follow up interviews with comedy audiences at the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe (Identifying Reference Removed). The follow-up study was conducted at the 2012 Edinburgh Fringe and involved participant observation, followed by interviews, with 9 cultural intermediaries (comedy agents, venue bookers, producers and TV and radio commissioners) who work as temporary 'talent scouts' at the Fringe. I chose to employ the 'go-along' approach to ethnographic research (Kusenbach, 2003), which allowed me to observe the occupational practices of comedy scouts *in situ*. Through asking questions, listening and observing, I was able to explore scout's experiences and actions as they moved through the festival environment.

I shadowed each scout for approximately 4-6 hours and in this period they scouted between 2-4 comedy shows, depending on their schedule. In total I went to 22 comedy shows with scouts. During the shadowing process, I observed a range of processes involved in scouting; show selection, scouting at live comedy, approaching comedians, negotiating deals, and the multitude of informal 'networking' interactions that occur as scouts traverse the festival landscape. Immediately after shadowing I conducted an interview with each scout, lasting approximately 1-1.5 hours. It is important to note that my aim here is not to claim robustly generalisable insights about British comedy scouts, but instead to provide a rich ethnographic insight into the 'authentic' experiences and practices of scouts as they unfolded in real time. Indeed, while there are a few ethnographic studies of cultural gatekeepers (Mears, 2011; Powell, 1986; Wynn, 2011), these are comparatively rare.

Moreover, I believe the go-along method has a number of advantages that may be beneficial to other researchers wishing to understand the decision-making processes of gatekeepers. For example, as cultural gatekeepers do not usually comment on 'what is going on' while acting in natural environments, it is difficult to access their concurrent interpretations through observation alone. Similarly, stand-alone interviews take gatekeepers out of their professional environment, making it hard to assess how their reflections about decision-making relate to

their 'real' practices. Using Go-along, in contrast, which represents a hybrid between participant observation and interviewing, arguably bridges these problems. Both by observing scouts' practices and, most importantly, by being able to ask about these practices in real time, I was able to capture the 'stream of perceptions, emotions and interpretations' that scouts may usually keep to themselves (Kusenbach, 2003: 464).

One of the main problems confronting ethnographers interested in cultural gatekeepers is securing access (Ortner, 2010). In this regard, I was able to recruit scouts by drawing on my own contacts in the field. As a magazine publisher at the Edinburgh Fringe since 2004 I have strong links with many key actors in the comedy industry. Although I had never actually met any of the respondents prior to the study, I was able to use my social capital to secure their involvement. This insider position both helped and hindered the fieldwork. Respondents were aware of my journalistic identity and some were apprehensive about disclosing controversial information ('don't even think about putting that in your magazine!'). On the other hand, my field position facilitated privileged access to exclusive festival spaces, such as private-members bars, where scouts spent much of their time socialising and networking in-between shows. These environments provided important insight into the 'social architecture' of the Fringe, rendering visible a complex web of informal yet professionally salient relationships, and allowing me to see how scouts negotiated this often perilous social landscape (Kusenbach, 2003: 466).

### **5. Positioning Scouts in the Contemporary Field of British Comedy**

As noted, there is no clear separation between mass and restricted production in contemporary British comedy. While the field retains a strong 'alternative' arm devoted to more autonomous production, there is no public funding for comedy and even those operating in the restricted domain must generate enough money to earn a living. Thus, in comedy, all actors straddle the divide between culture and economy in some way. It was difficult to know the 'true' population of Fringe comedy scouts because only some were officially registered. In 2012, for example, there were 295 registered comedy industry professionals eligible for



'scouting' tickets through the Fringe Society (The Fringe Society, 2012). However, my respondents – none of whom were registered - all agreed that the real number was much higher. Most speculated a figure around 1,000.

Again, without extensive employment histories, it was also hard to know how this entire field of scouts was distributed in terms of their relation to mass and restricted production. Yet considering the historical roots and development of British comedy, it is reasonable to assume that more scouts were allied to mass production, and that an increasing amount may now be straddling the sub-fields. My scouting respondents were therefore sampled theoretically to broadly reflect these contours in the wider field.

Three of the scouts were thus clearly positioned in the sub-field of mass production. These were Hugh, 47, a comedy agent with a large comedy talent agency, who represents a number of high-profile TV comedians; June, 51, Comedy Commissioner for a national commercial TV broadcaster; and Kerry, 31, a comedy producer for a medium-sized commercial production company specializing in TV comic magicians and variety artists. In contrast, two scouts were easily identified as belonging to the sub-field of restricted production - Tim, 57, owner of five comedy clubs which specialize in 'alternative' comedy, and Sam, 30, owner of a small but successful production company focusing on live comedy.

The four other scouts were more difficult to position. Most traversed the two sub-fields, maintaining connections and affinities to both. For example, Cathy, 56, Comedy Commissioner for a public radio broadcaster, arguably had more autonomy than market-orientated scouts, but at the same time was aiming output at large audiences of a million plus. Similarly, Linda, 27, worked as a comedy agent with a medium-sized management company specializing in 'emerging talent'. This stress on 'emerging' meant that Linda's company often recruited experimental artists, but then ultimately sought to find them mass-market work. Richard, 36, perhaps straddled the sub-fields most acutely. He was both a TV producer for a public broadcaster but also ran a monthly 'alternative'

comedy night in London. Finally, Stan, 34, was the comedy booker for a London theatre with an extensive and diverse comedy programme. The positions of all my respondents in the field are sketched in Figure 1.

**Figure 1 HERE - Comedy Scouts within the contemporary field of British comic production (Adapted from Bourdieu, 1996)**

These scouts not only occupied different field positions, but they also spanned a number of discrete occupational groups. This meant some wielded more professional authority than others. Agents generally had the least influence. Although they scouted to recruit 'clients', they were dependent on venue bookers and TV and radio producers to secure work for these clients. TV and radio commissioners generally had the most influence. They presided over a team of scouting producers, but always had the final say over which comedians were commissioned. A scout's influence also depended on their standing within their own occupational group. For example, experienced agents such as Hugh arguably carried more power than younger entrepreneurs like Sam. Indeed, it is worth noting that 4 of the scouts – Hugh, Tim, Cathy and June - were recently included in a list of the 100 most influential people in British comedy (Clarke, 2012).

Another striking aspect of the sample was the shared 'conditions of existence' – or habitus - of the scouts sampled. In line with cultural intermediaries in other fields (Negus, 2004; Kuipers, 2012), eight of my nine respondents were from privileged backgrounds, with at least one parent who was, or had been, in professional or managerial employment. All nine scouts were also graduates, with six holding humanities degrees in aesthetic subjects such as English literature, theatre studies, history of art and film studies. Eight of the nine lived in London. This shared habitus also manifested in the way scouts presented themselves. They assessed comedians with a striking level of self-assurance and their bodily *hexis* – posture, voice, use of eye contact - exuded a disarmingly 'natural' confidence. Moreover, as I will outline shortly, all scouts shared very similar personal tastes for comedy - although this didn't necessarily inform their professional practice.

## **6. Selection and Recruitment: Common Logics of Discovery**

The Fringe brings together almost every professional British comedian in one bounded setting, with only the most commercially successful opting out. It also showcases a comedian's most recent work, with the vast majority writing a brand new show for each festival which is then packaged into a standardized 50-minute set. This concentration of artists and new work meant that the Fringe was considered the apex of the industry calendar by my comedy scouts. While four noted that they did sometimes scout in an informal, ad-hoc manner during the rest of the year, the vast majority of scouting decisions were made at the Fringe. Indeed, the importance of the Fringe was so embedded in the field that Stan noted that comedy workers 'don't even call the month 'August' anymore. They just call it 'Edinburgh'. As Cathy noted:

For people like me this is a gift. I can't go out [and see comedians] every night back in London. For me it's like being a squirrel, filling the cupboard for the year ahead.

However, while the Fringe may be the dominant arena for scouting, one of the major challenges facing all scouts arriving in Edinburgh is the daunting abundance of comedy shows. Of the 970 shows offered in 2012, my respondents scouted on average approximately 60 comedy shows. This varied according to what each scout was looking for. For example, venue programmer Stan said he sees about 70-80 shows and usually recruits about 25. In contrast, public radio commissioner Cathy will see over a 100 comedians but only offers 8-10 pilots and only 4-5 will be commissioned.

In order to navigate this oversupply of scouting possibilities and the inevitable competition with other scouts, my respondents all drew upon three common strategies aimed at reduce uncertainty. First, each relied heavy on tips from non-competitive 'informal networks' within the industry to help decide which shows to scout (Coser et al, 1982). Such contacts were located within the industry – critics, PR agents, even comedians – but, significantly, were not in direct scouting competition. Sometimes these 'friends' were contacted in advance of arriving in

Edinburgh, but invariably scouting decisions were made last-minute and based on word-of-mouth recommendations from industry colleagues. These interactions invariably took place in private-members bars between shows, where scouts 'did the rounds', as Kerry described, chatting to colleagues and picking up on 'gossip'. Here, I observed, scouts were highly selective about the recommendations they acted on, talking to countless contacts but afterwards acknowledging to me that they only 'trusted' the judgments of a few. As Stan noted after noting the recommendation of one PR, 'I've been working with Dan for ages, he's not like most PRs, he doesn't bullshit you. He knows what I'm looking for'. For scouts, then, a key way to reduce uncertainty was to surround themselves with a network of trusted colleagues, who knew and shared their taste.

Secondly, and related to this, scouts relied heavily on the Fringe's extensive and established critical infrastructure. The Fringe brings together over 250 registered comedy critics from over 60 publications and hundreds of reviews (using a widely accepted 1-5 star rating system) are published every day (The Fringe Society, 2012). In addition, the Fringe also has 7 comedy awards. By far the most influential of these prizes is The Edinburgh Comedy Award (formerly the 'Perrier' Award), which has acted as a springboard for many of Britain's most successful comedians<sup>4</sup>. Together this critical apparatus acts as a key arbiter of cultural value, constructing certain comedians as objects of rarity and imbuing them with legitimacy (Bourdieu, 1993; English, 2005). In turn, scouts drew heavily on this architecture of incipient prestige, using reviews, awards and corresponding 'industry gossip' to inform scouting selections (Cosser et al, 1982).

Thirdly, scouts drew on scouting requests from comedians or their agents. This was a more problematic strategy, and less used, because each scout was inundated with requests and sorting through this ever-expanding pool was highly sensitive. Indeed, one reason my scouts did not register with the Fringe Society was that they preferred to maintain a low profile. Schedules were therefore kept strictly confidential and scouts deliberately bought their own

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<sup>4</sup> Past winners include Steve Coogan, Stephen Fry, Lee Evans, Daniel Kitson and Russell Kane.

tickets so comedians and agents could not determine who they had seen. Significantly, though, scouts were much more conspicuous than they hoped. In the process of our fieldwork, they were constantly approached by comedians and agents keen to grab their attention, initiate conversation and subtly extract information about their judgments and plans. These were often visibly awkward exchanges for the scout, as they struggled to maintain a neutral response amid what was normally a barrage of superficial charm. On one notable occasion, Stan and I made our way into a venue to see an aspiring Australian comedian. As we entered, Stan was spotted by a woman sitting at the entrance who rushed forward to greet him. We had only two minutes before the show started and after exchanging initial pleasantries, the woman hurriedly began outlining the comedian's credentials. 'You're going to love her', she said finally as the lights began to dim. Stan seemed annoyed that the woman, the artist's agent, had found out that he was scouting and at the end we made a very quick exit to avoid talking to her.

I witnessed many similar exchanges. Most had a casual, informal artifice, but this belied what were often desperate attempts to affect scouts' decision-making. One technique mentioned by several scouts, for example, was for an agent to invite a scout to a gig and then casually but deliberately sit next to them, proceeding to laugh manically at their client's entire set. Such practices illustrated the assumed power wielded by scouts at the Fringe. It also demonstrated that amid the freewheeling, hedonistic atmosphere of the festival, others were willing to put considerable time and resources into courting scouts. While it's difficult to ascertain quite how successful these courting strategies were, I was struck by the willingness of scouts to engage in such interactions, even under the potentially compromising influence of alcohol. In this way, ethnographic observation helped to illustrate the potential gap between the conscious decision-making strategies of scouts and the way in which they were unwittingly affected by agents and others within the industry that sought to influence their decision-making. All scouts maintained, of course, that any attempts at 'grooming' were futile. As June noted: 'I suppose in the end you become a little two-faced, which is terrible. But I mean, ultimately, the people I want to meet, I'll meet.'

## 7. Selection and Recruitment: Talent in the 'eye' of the beholder

While the scouting selections of scouts were underlined by a common logic aimed at reducing uncertainty, this didn't mean scouts chose similar shows to scout. Indeed, there was a striking diversity in the comedian's different scouts selected and even more variety in whom they chose to recruit. Initially, insight into the question of selection seemed to elude scouts themselves, even when I asked about their judgments immediately after we'd seen a comedian they liked. Most struggled to express exactly how they came to their aesthetic assessments. In the end, nearly all settled on the idea that scouting demanded 'an eye for talent', an ineffable professional expertise that largely manifested as an instinctive, intuitive or 'gut' reaction. Indeed, the notion of 'talent' was repeated time and again as scouts explained their judgments. As June exclaimed in exasperation after dismissing a third comedian in a row: 'we're looking for talent, it's as simple as that'.

However, delving deeper into scouts' preferences, it became clear that the notion of 'talent' wasn't simple at all. In particular, the meaning of talent was fiercely contested between those working at either pole of the restricted and mass sub-fields. Indeed, to understand this disparity in *why* certain scouts chose certain performers, it is necessary to move beyond a sole emphasis on institutional logics and examine interactions between habitus and field. For those working in the restricted sector, talent was very much defined in terms of their *own* judgments of aesthetic quality. Tim, for instance, explained that he was looking for 'experimental' comedians:

We still see ourselves as very much having a brief to put on challenging, controversial, or provocative comedy. Jokes that have a point to them are more attractive to me than ones that don't. Essentially, I suppose I'm trying to provide comedy for people like me (laughs). And if I can make that work then I'm happy doing it. If I couldn't...well I think I'd probably stop.

Similarly, Sam constantly used the somewhat ambiguous term 'ambition' to describe the comedians he recruited. Only when I pressed him on what this meant did he explain that he saw ambition in terms of playing with the form of comedy:

I guess it's about trying to push things in some respect, that's a particularly attractive quality. Someone who's using all the tools available, who's got a technique you haven't seen before.

'Talent' for scouts like Tim and Sam, then, was based largely upon a comedian's aesthetic approach. Moreover, these scouts were particularly sensitive to a comedian's critical reception and self-consciously sought out critically acclaimed performers. Significantly, Tim and Sam also talked frequently about finding comedians that 'suited' their small live venues. While this was couched in terms of the 'demands' of 'intimate' performance spaces, it also reflected their more general search for culturally legitimate comedy. According to Bourdieu (1993: 114), cultural tastes are categorized hierarchically in terms of their rarity. Thus legitimate comedians 'tend to lose their distinctive value as the number of consumers both inclined and able to appropriate them grows.' In other words, by scouting already-acclaimed comedians and directing them toward restricted channels for live performance, these scouts were both able to profit from this legitimacy and further contribute to the comedian's assumed scarcity.

In this way, these scouts were similar to the television buyers Kuipers (2012) identifies as 'aesthetes', or the music industry scouts identified by Negus (2002). While they were worked under similar economic constraints to other scouts, financial success was always constructed as secondary to a comedian's artistic integrity, to indulging the myth of their 'creative genius' (Becker, 1982). They were thus concerned with using their own personal taste (rooted in habitus) to 'frame' a distinct form of

*cultural value*, with the generation of symbolic rather than economic profit.

Significantly, though, notions of talent among mass sector scouts involved the construction of a very different form of value. While they shared similar personal comedy tastes to restricted scouts and often spoke glowingly about comedians I had scouted with restricted scouts, such consecrated comedy did not represent strong scouting potential. Indeed, these scouts unapologetically put aside their own taste when scouting. For example, Cathy noted that over the years she's 'bought' lots of shows for radio that didn't make her laugh. Hugh elucidated the point:

I often think 'this isn't great but hang on, the whole room is loving this - I need to be aware of that'. It's like saying 'I wouldn't buy that house but I know a fuck of a lot of people who would.'

Unlike Bourdieu's (1984) cultural intermediaries, then, these scouts did not necessarily personally 'believe' in what they scouted – their decisions were not guided so instinctively by habitus. Instead, they acted more as instrumental 'mercenaries' (Kuipers, 2012), interested largely in gauging a comedian's 'market potential' or 'commercial viability'. In this way, neo-institutional theory can be usefully re-inserted here to help unpack the recruitment decisions of mass sector scouts. These respondents were led not by their own aesthetic preferences but by a deeply embedded occupational imperative to find comedians for whom there was an already existing market or that they were confident 'other' consumers will like. As June admitted, 'At the end of the day they [comedians] *are* commodities'.

This institutional logic also provided mass sector scouts with a distinct 'vocabulary' and set of 'organising principles' for defining comic talent. Steering away from the more personal realm of aesthetics, they used talent to describe a comedian's *character* – their 'stage presence', 'charisma', 'star quality', or level of professional 'polish'. Kerry, for example, mostly



scouted at a raucous late-night showcase that she co-organised each night. Here she invited young comedians to perform short ten-minute sets. On the night I shadowed she had invited six budding acts, all of which were unsigned. After the show she was most excited about a young African-Caribbean stand-up who, curiously, was the least successful in terms of laughs. However, she explained, 'there is currently a huge gap in the market for a young and charismatic black male voice', particularly on the many British TV comedy panel shows. For Kerry, talent was not about aesthetic difference. Instead, it revolved around finding a range of charismatic 'voices' that will appeal to different 'markets' but which will, ultimately, fit into existing, formulaic, and profitable aesthetic frameworks.

Moreover, in most instances, mass sector scouts seemed to be looking for precisely the opposite of aesthetic 'difference'. Rather, recruitment was often orientated towards copying what Hirsch (1971) calls cultural 'fads'. For example, a number of scouts mentioned the recent success of a clutch of what they called 't-shirt comics' - young, white, attractive, male comics such as Jack Whitehall and Russell Howard, who were described as 'safe' and 'inoffensive'. While explicitly trying to recruit an imitation 't-shirt comic' was never directly endorsed, a number of scouts admitted being influenced by the fad:

You have to be aware of what's commercially viable; so you can definitely say, well, *Russell Howards Good News* is going to run for another 3,000 shows so if I take on a relatively attractive 't-shirt comic' in his early twenties, will they book him? Yes, they probably will. And you can play that game (Hugh).

It is possible to see here how these respondents embraced 'mimetic isomorphism' (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983) in their decision-making, allowing themselves to be led by the logic of following tried-and-tested

successes. Such isomorphism was not necessarily successful<sup>5</sup> in reducing uncertainty, but it did provide a key 'rhetorical strategy' for mass sector scouts seeking to legitimise their scouting decisions via a particular and 'widely accepted' frame (Bielby and Bielby, 1994; Negus, 1999).

While these 'ways of seeing' at either end of the comedy field were contested yet relatively coherent, scouts occupying the middle ground had more difficulty articulating what they were looking for. For these respondents, there was a strong disconnect between their personal taste judgments and more commercially strategic concerns that were clearly structured by dominant institutional logics. These scouts thus employed what Childress (2012) calls a 'garbage can' model of decision-making in which personal taste intermingles with other concerns, such as performer reputation, commercial viability and – especially for those working in public broadcasting – policy imperatives around diversity and variety. Linda was a case in point. For the last three years Linda had worked for one of Britain's largest comedy agencies that specialize in promoting big-name commercial artists. However, she recently moved to a smaller agency noted for 'bringing through new talent'. After we had seen a brash, young stand-up from Newcastle, who Linda had disliked from start to finish, she explained how her perception of a stand-up like this would have varied under her previous employer:

Mark [previous employer] used to go and find all sorts of shit like that on the Free Fringe. So if I'd been in last year, I would be thinking that's not really my thing, there's no theme, nothing new, but [pauses]...but I could see that it could be financially worthwhile. Those were the decisions I least liked making, though, the ones purely motivated for money.

What's notable here is the tension between Linda's own notion of (aesthetically informed) talent and her professional imperative to reduce

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<sup>5</sup> Indeed, like Bourdieusian theory, a key principle of Neo-institutional theory is that the institutional logics that are reproduced over time are actually somewhat 'arbitrary' and not at all based on transcendent principles or an unproblematised rationality (Dobbin and Dowd, 2000)

commercial uncertainty and recruit 'financially worthwhile' comedians. Profit vs. prestige – this was the constant conflict that Linda and other similarly liminal scouts had to resolve in their work. In this way, they revealed the complex dynamic between the different forms of value produced in the comedy industry. While all scouts espoused a relatively joined up notion of aesthetic quality – rooted in a common and relatively privileged class habitus - this personal comedy taste didn't necessarily inform one's professional practice. Instead the scout's notion of talent was fundamentally shaped by their position in the field and the logic of value that flowed from it, be this economic, cultural or a complex combination of both. As Mears (2011) notes, the 'eye for talent' was revealed as a 'social illusion', a learned and fundamentally *relational* skill.

## **8. Brokering Between Artists and Management**

Contestations around notions of 'talent' were also strongly connected to the forms of brokerage enacted by different scouts. As noted, mass scouts were more interested in the individual comedian than their comic material. But this stress on persona also reflected the fact that these scouts were scouting on behalf of large television and radio companies, where the production of comic products involved large production teams and where Fringe-style live standup was rarely directly transposed into broadcastable material. In this way, mass sector scouts were members of more 'centralised brokerage systems' (DiMaggio, 1977) whereby they must mediate between the creative aspirations of comedians and the more powerful interests of their employers at broadcasters or comedy management companies. In this relationship it was clear that scouts saw their function more as representing the interests of management. Thus when we spoke about prospective comedians, or when they recruited comedian's themselves, the performer's Fringe show was never discussed as a direct avenue for future projects. Instead it was viewed as raw material, a creative stimulus from which the scout, the management and the comedian could then collaborate to generate new ideas - many of which weren't even comedic. For example, after seeing a young intellectual

standup, Cathy seemed excited about working with him on public radio. Yet the ideas she excitedly brainstormed all involved fitting the standup into existing programme formats. She explained that he would be an ideal guest on panel shows and could 'perhaps even make a documentary about contemporary philosophy'. Moreover, when mass scouts actually decided to approach and recruit comedians, I was struck by the way they controlled and directed exchanges. After one show, Hugh made a point of waiting in the auditorium until the comedian appeared. He outlined who he was, explained that he had really enjoyed the show, and then handed the comedian his card. He didn't promise anything, but said pointedly that *he* had 'lots of ideas' of how they might work together. Thus, while mass scouts were always complimentary about comedian's they wanted to recruit, they led with an assumption that future work would be dictated by themselves or management rather than the artist.

Notably, scouts operating in the restricted sub-field had a strikingly different focus. As small-scale entrepreneurs, Tim and Sam represented both the scouts and the management in their organizations and therefore did not need to broker between artists and any other outside agencies. This gave them more autonomy over decision-making and more control over how much creative freedom they granted to the comedians they scouted. Indeed, both Sam and Tim were very keen to distance themselves from any implication that they might 'interfere' or 'meddle' with the creative autonomy of comedians. Instead, they simply provided a live performance 'space' for performers to 'do what they want'. Significantly, both strongly resisted even being categorised as 'talent scouts'. Sam, for example, initially refused to let me shadow him because he said he 'didn't scout'. Instead, he continually reiterated that he 'just wandered around', seeing anything he thought 'sounded interesting' and talking to people he admired. In reality, as he admitted in his interview, Sam had actually recruited most of his acts at the Fringe. But, as his reflections in the following passage illustrate, there was obviously something about the

assumed function of a scout – as someone calculatedly commercial – that violated Sam’s disinterested aesthetic principles:

So when I say I don’t go out and stalk – sorry I mean scout (laughs) – it’s because the relationships I’ve forged with my acts feels more organic. And I suppose scouting kind of debunks those myths that it’s all happened in a haphazard way.

In this way, restricted scouts were closer to the ‘entrepreneurial brokers’ described by DiMaggio (1977: 443) – ‘abdicating control over production decisions to creative workers themselves’. Yet this organizational analysis, premised simply on the notion that these restricted scouts were small-scale entrepreneurs, doesn’t adequately explain why they played such a passive role in mediating the creative work of comedians. To explain this, it is again important to return to field positioning and what is specifically at-stake in the different sub-fields of comedy. For restricted scouts reputation was not built on the basis of discovering commercially marketable comedians but instead by demonstrating one’s aesthetic capacity to identify and propel culturally legitimate comedy. In this way, these scouts functioned less as brokers and more as *tastemakers*. Much like critics (Shrum, 1996), they saw themselves as expert comedy connoisseurs, able to sift through a huge field of new comedians and reliably guide audiences towards the most exciting and cutting-edge tastes. In short, they made their ‘personal taste into a professional asset’ (Kuipers, 2012: 595). Sam, for example, had an explicit tastemaking ethos that underpinned his production company. While most companies promote comedians rather than their own brand, Sam explained:

I wanted to be slightly more present in people’s minds so that we could make the link between acts. So we’re working with Tim [Key - a comedy poet], and Tim’s doing really well now. If we could take some of that audience and go ‘yeah yeah yeah, so you like Tim...well maybe you’ll like this guy as well’. So I was keen on people being a fan of the brand because it

had a consistent tonality, which I guess is borne out of the fact that it's got consistent taste driving it. Which I guess is the fact that it's not really driven by what the audience wants, which would make it quite refracted.

Scouts straddling the sub-fields were harder to categorise through this binary between centralized and entrepreneurial brokerage. Instead, they most closely resembled 'pure brokers' (DiMaggio, 1977), serving and advocating the interests of both comedians and management. Yet while DiMaggio (1977) sees pure brokers as a healthy indication of a 'pluralistic' cultural system, these scouts appeared more conflicted by their dual allegiance. Most agreed, for example, that in an ideal world they would not 'tamper' with the creative autonomy of the comedians they scouted. However, this ideal was tempered by a reluctant awareness that their ultimate loyalty lay with the commercial interests of their employer. For example, Richard noted that he is constantly frustrated by the way his 'bosses' treat new comedians that he scouts:

**Richard:** [comedians] come in and they soon realize these people are talking out their arse. It's just a lot of dick waving and jumping on bandwagons. And I get it, it's business, that's the name of the game. But I just find it insincere. Like there's a few people who will listen to someone and go 'yeah, yeah I really like that idea – but how about you put a monkey in it (laughs)'.

**Interviewer:** What's your own approach to the comedians you scout?

**Richard:** I just try and leave people to it. I might say, that could be funnier, or that didn't work. But it's not my job to be funny.

It was clear to see here how Richard was exasperated with the way comedy 'talent' was interfered with by 'dick-waving' broadcasting management, and how this conflicted with his own aesthetic conviction – embedded within his habitus – that creativity should be 'left to' the artist.

Indeed, Richard's expression of this anger had even led to threats from his line manager that he may lose his job. Linda expressed a similar conflict, although her concern was more about the growing influence of corporate sponsors, and how they were influencing the aesthetic agenda of her employers:

We went to this Fosters [beer company] Comedy thing. And there was a quiz where they gave cash prizes. And I looked around at one point, at this free corporate lunch, and all this branded stuff, with everyone walking around with wads of cash and I thought, 'this is Stewart Lee's nightmare'. This is literally promoters slapping each other on the back and eating money.

For Linda the 'brave' way to avoid such corporate interference would be to go freelance. But, as a relatively inexperienced agent in her late 20s, she seemed reticent about how this might affect her career:

I'd be too scared. I like working in this wider network because I feel like I'm learning. Yeah it's braver to go freelance but you've got to have such vision, you've got to fight so hard.

The testimonies of Richard and Linda illustrated the 'multiple regimes of mediation' (Cronin, 2004) enacted by comedy scouts at the Fringe and how these regimes were intimately connected to the constraints and opportunities afforded by particular occupational contexts and brokerage relationships. Again, the major tension revolved around the opposition between restricted and mass production, individual aesthetic disposition and institutional logic. Although all scouts had to traverse this divide in some way, the conflict was most acute for scouts straddling the sub-fields. These respondents constantly oscillated between contradictory mindsets, often making initial scouting judgments based on their own highbrow aesthetic principles but then having to compromise these aesthetic

interests in order to build their reputations as successful commercial brokers.

### **9. Brokering Between Production and Consumption**

One aspect of scouting practice so far ignored but central to decision-making was the influence of audiences. As noted, comedy scouts did not just broker between comedians and management but they also mediated between artists and audiences, *matchmaking* comedy producers with comedy consumers. Indeed, when talking about recruitment, the intended consumer was always in the background. This was generally expressed in terms of 'fit' - how well an artist may align with the tastes and expectations of a particular audience. The source of knowledge about these audiences varied greatly, but all scouts seemed to have some formal instrument for collating information, ranging from broadcast ratings to customer addresses to large-scale pieces of audience research. Scouts also used the Fringe as an audience laboratory, studying in real time how audiences reacted to live comedy, and then referencing these reactions in their judgments. Indeed, respondents often spent more time examining the live audience, and their reactions, than the actual comedian they were scouting. Live Fringe audiences thus provided scouts with a virtual 'interface' through which they could understand what they imagined to be their intended audience (Entwistle, 2006).

Drawing on this formal and informal audience research, most scouts were remarkably confident when describing the socio-demographics of their intended consumers. For example, when asked to describe the audiences at his comedy clubs, Tim noted:

The core of what we do is 30 plus couples and groups of friends who want to listen to what's on stage. So yes I'm aiming at a middle class, middle aged, educated audience who want to listen to something that will make them laugh but make them think at the same time.



What was striking here was not just how precisely Tim was able to describe his ideal-type audience - in terms of age, education and social class - but also how he connected them to a particular aesthetic disposition for comedy. The reality was that Tim – like all my respondents – did not actually have any *empirical* understanding of his audiences' comedy tastes. Yet, in a similar way to the publishing cultural intermediaries described by Napoli (2010) and Childress (2012), he and other comedy scouts were very comfortable making speculative assumptions about their audiences. Here again scouts described working on 'gut' instinct, implying the importance of habitus in shaping such judgments. In particular, comedy tastes were often described in terms of social class. For example, Sam noted that the connection between the middle classes and the comedy he produces is so strong he admits he just takes it as a 'given'. In contrast, Cathy deliberately avoided using class labels, but still arguably smuggled in subtly snobbish assumptions when talking about public radio listeners:

They expect good language, and cleverness. So with our comedians it's not about people talking like me – god forbid – but I find there's a sing-song element to regional accents that doesn't translate well on radio, the microphone is kind of relentless in seeking it out.

Notably, however, scouts were much more tentative when talking about audiences at the lower end of the social hierarchy. They seemed to have a strong awareness of which tastes were associated with these audiences, but seemed to lack an appropriate vocabulary to describe them and often ended up looking awkward and uncomfortable. This was perhaps because there was a hierarchical undertone to such descriptions. Thus when these audiences were associated with comedy, it was invariably in terms of less legitimate tastes and styles. This was particularly noticeable among mass sector scouts like Hugh, June and Kerry, who all acknowledged a connection between certain audiences and the comedians they

commissioned who were more 'mainstream', 'safe', 'straightforward', and 'formulaic'. The discussion of class here was subtle and indirect, and often hidden behind hierarchically loaded linguistic euphemisms (Skeggs, 2004). For example, after giving me a list of sitcoms she might pitch one comedian we had just scouted, Linda summed up the intended audience demographic - 'I suppose, essentially, it's white van man comedy'. A conversation with Kerry about one of her clients illustrated the point even more directly:

He's Northern, he's from Middleborough, and people like that. It's the kind of cheeky chappy thing. So he has that same straightforward Northern thing that Jason Manford has. So I think he appeals to (pause) - I hate to say working class but you know what I mean.

This conflation of what Kerry terms 'cheeky' or 'straightforward' comedy with audiences from lower social positions was also a common practice among scouts in the restricted sector. Indeed, for these scouts, such judgments tended to represent more naked attempts at symbolic boundary drawing (Lamont, 2000). In particular, Tim, Sam and Richard positioned the comedy they produce, and the middle class audiences that consume it, against the comedy presented at Jongleurs, a national chain of comedy clubs. Jongleurs was repeatedly denigrated as 'not a real comedy venue', 'full of Chavs' and 'lary stag do's. As Stan summed up, 'It's catering for a different kind of person, isn't it? Tim made a similarly opaque reference to class and taste in terms of a new club he had recently opened in Newcastle. Unlike his middle class audience in Edinburgh, he noted that he expected a more 'local' audience in Newcastle. He explained that he has certain strategies to accommodate the 'inevitable' differences in taste. For example, he always programs a Geordie (Newcastle-native) comic to MC gigs:

It's important to have, it puts the audience at ease. There's someone who speaks like them and it relaxes them. And then into that mix you can drop different, more challenging voices.

This awareness of class and taste was even stronger among scouts who straddled the industry. Working across different sectors had made these respondents acutely aware of different comedy audiences. For example, Richard explained that he was recently asked to put on a large-scale stand-up show at the Fringe for a public broadcaster. He explained that he instinctively booked acts he normally works with at live gigs, and therefore 'the bill was full of exciting, experimental stuff'. But the show was a disaster:

**Richard:** I had all these people fucking complaining! I was presented with this one guy, and he said (whiney voice) 'I've stuck with it and it's the [public broadcaster] and I want my money back.' And I've noticed that a lot with the [public broadcaster], y'know, if it's not mass appeal.

**Interviewer:** What do you mean mass appeal?

**Richard:** Y'know, John Bishop, working men's club, I've had six pints, I'm here to laugh my fucking face off. Bosh. And that's fine. But I'm not looking for that.

What was striking about this passage, and the way *all* scouts connected comedy tastes to class-based audiences, was that such assumptions were invariably based on 'gut' instinct, or informal and anecdotal observations, rather than empirical audience research or a well-worn rhetorical logic. Despite the scouts professed certitude, then, these judgments were largely based on their own very personal *imagined audiences*. This is a significant point. While a number of studies (Blaszczyk, R. 2008; Havens, 2006; Kuipers, 2012; Hitters and van de Kamp, 2010) have noted how

gatekeepers make decisions based on imagined audiences, they have failed to address the full sociological implications of such taste-matchmaking.

Arguably the most valuable function of a comedy scout was to matchmake demand with supply and provide audiences with comedians that represent their taste. However, as I've outlined, the process of selection was often based on speculative assumptions, and class judgments, about the tastes of particular audiences. These audiences were frequently categorized in relation to age, gender and location, but it was arguably in terms of social stratification where such assumptions contained most power. Scouts connected class audiences to comedy in a largely hierarchical manner, with more highbrow comedy appealing to middle and upper-middle class audiences and more lowbrow comedy associated with lower-middle and working class audiences. While these assumptions were often based on years of experience – and indeed chime strongly with the class-based divisions uncovered in my own research on comedy taste (Identifying Reference Removed) – they nonetheless illustrate how scouts were responsible for *constructing, reproducing* and *intensifying* these comedy taste divisions. Rather than just passively reflecting taste already 'out there' in the social world, scouts were much more active brokers, directing certain comedy to distribution channels that they believed to have certain (strongly classed) audiences.

## **10. Conclusion: Comedy Scouts and New Forms of Distinction**

There is strong evidence that fields of popular culture are becoming increasingly complex, with certain popular sub-fields or sub-genres experiencing upward mobility within the cultural hierarchy (Regev, 1994; Bauman, 2001; Savage et al, 2013). Charting the historical development of British comedy, and particularly its growth at the Edinburgh Fringe, reveals that comedy is one such field. To understand the work of cultural gatekeepers in this increasingly complex environment, and in particular to understand the cognitive roots of *why* they make particular gatekeeping decisions, I have argued here that it is useful to combine insights from both neo-institutional and Bourdieusian theory. In

particular, the article reveals that these theories provide differing analytical purchase depending on the kind of comedy scouts in question.

Neo-institutional theory was most useful in unraveling the decisions of comedy scouts operating in the mass sub-field of comedy. Here scouts were guided not by aesthetic preferences but by a distanced and instrumental institutional logic geared toward, although not necessarily successful in, reducing economic uncertainty. This logic compelled them toward the safe and inoffensive, the 't-shirt comic' who fits into existing markets or repeats a successful formula. Mass sector scouts were also accurately characterized by DiMaggio's (1977) portrait of 'centralised brokers'. They scouted Fringe comedy on the basis of 'personality' rather than artistic content and it was clear from their interactions with comedians that the genesis of future collaboration would be top-down rather than bottom-up.

In contrast, the practices of comedy scouts operating in the restricted sub-field were better understood through the prism of habitus. For these scouts, decision-making revolved almost completely around one's own personal taste, with scouting an exercise in 'instinctive' aesthetic judgment. The imperative guiding this form of scouting was the promise of cultural rather than economic capital, and the ability to build reputation by propelling the most legitimate comedians.

In revealing these important distinctions between comedy scouts, the article underlines the utility of Bourdieu's notion of field to future studies of popular gatekeepers. Unlike some studies which have implied that gatekeepers fulfill singular or invariant mediating functions, my analysis illustrates that the nature of popular cultural gatekeeping may be increasingly complex, and therefore the decision-making of actors like talent scouts must be analysed relationally and with a clear sense of each individual's position and capital stocks in the wider field. Yet, at the same time, while Bourdieu's conception of the cultural field aptly describes the contested terrain occupied by cultural gatekeepers, his separation of restricted and mass production seems increasingly outdated. Instead, in previously discredited fields such as comedy, where the restricted pole of

production has emerged relatively recently and is not buttressed by public funding, there is a constant and tense overlap between these sub-fields. This is aptly illustrated by the conflicted and contradictory testimonies of my comedy scouts that straddled the mass and restricted sub-fields of comedy. For these individuals, scouting involved a continual compromise between the personal and professional, negotiating on one hand instinctively highbrow scouting preferences and hands-off artist management, and on the other the occupational imperative to negotiate economic uncertainty.

Finally, the article has demonstrated how all Fringe scouts were *equally* implicated in brokering between artists and audiences. Indeed, underpinning scouting judgments I found very strong preconceptions about the tastes of comedy audiences. In particular, there seemed to be a shared belief that culturally legitimate comedy was 'naturally meant for' those at the top of the social hierarchy and less legitimate tastes for those toward the bottom. As these assumptions were often rooted in highly personal and informal social judgments and rarely based on empirical understanding of taste, it is plausible to assume that they were rooted in the largely homogenous class habitus of comedy scouts themselves. Here, deeply embedded dispositions not only orientated scouts *personally* toward more legitimate comedy tastes, but led them to *professionally* direct such tastes toward people similar to themselves and vice versa. Thus, while Tim summed up his promotion of restricted production as 'providing comedy for people like me', Stan distanced himself from mass sector Jongleurs, where they 'cater for a different kind of person'<sup>6</sup>.

Of course taste assumptions made by scouts *were* based on genuine attempts to matchmake supply and demand. However, by operationalizing such striking preconceptions in the act of matchmaking, these intermediaries indirectly acted to *heighten* existing taste divisions. They play a fundamental role in 'framing' how audiences consume comedy (Maguire and Matthews, 2012), filtering which

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<sup>6</sup> Had these scouts themselves come from more diverse social backgrounds, it is possible that they might have been more inclined to direct their own 'expert' taste toward more diverse imagined audiences.

comedians go where in the industry and, by implication, which audiences are exposed to them.

This process is particularly apparent at festivals like the Fringe, which increasingly function as central training grounds for new and raw creativity entering the performing arts. Here, the decisions scouts make about where to place new artists in their wider fields can have a powerful and long-lasting effect, classifying these performers (and their potential audiences) in a way that that potentially defines them for years to come.

In this way, it is possible to illustrate how Fringe scouts play a pivotal role in what Savage et al (2005) call the 'circuit of cultural capital'. In the case of Fringe comedy, this circuit often starts with critics who consecrate certain comedians as 'special' cultural objects - entities that communicate a form of cultural currency and infer a certain cultural aptitude on the part of the consumer. However, as this article has shown, scouts then build on and augment this consecration. They become pivotal generators of meaning in what Bourdieu (1996: 229) called the 'science of cultural works' - using their professional expertise to place newly legitimated comedy in restricted distribution channels such as small live venues or niche TV slots (and less legitimate comedy in mass channels), which further imbues the comedy, or the comedian, with rarity. They thus act as *hidden tastemakers*, intensifying the scarcity of certain comic tastes, helping to categorise them as 'objects' of cultural capital, and ultimately strengthening the ability of audiences to use comedy as a new instrument of cultural distinction.

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