

Institution: Birmingham City University

Unit of Assessment: 36

a. Context

When the Birmingham Centre for Media & Cultural Research (BCMCR) was established in 2009 we made applied research, knowledge exchange and a contribution to social, economic and cultural gain core objectives of our work. This commitment emerges from our place within the Birmingham School of Media and our origins in the Birmingham Institute of Art and Design (BIAD), and subsequent position in the Faculty of Performance, Media and English (PME). The School of Media has a long tradition of high quality vocationally-orientated programmes, its staff come from substantial professional backgrounds in media production or media scholarship, and we work within an institution with a record of applied research. The centre Director and Associate Director were formerly members of BIAD's Centre for Design and Creative Industries Research, which itself has a strong reputation in applied research characterised by external impact. With the creation of PME, media academics joined staff from English and music in a faculty with recognised achievements in applied and artistic practice built on strong research. This includes major projects using digital technology for automated linguistics and music composition.

Work within BCMCR integrates approaches from the arts, humanities and social sciences and we have been particularly assiduous in building research projects with partners from outside academia that complement our own expertise. These partnerships ensure our research is informed by a wide range of issues of debate within our field and its associated institutions and cultures of consumption, that the knowledge and ideas we develop can be embedded in existing external activity, and that we deliver wider societal benefits. This has involved partnerships with 177 organisations, which include major institutions like the BBC and the British Library, and a raft of SMEs operating in the music, broadcasting, publishing and new media sectors, as well as third sector organisations, community groups, political activists and social entrepreneurs. We have also developed strategic alliances with non-academic partners, such as international activist organisations like Un-Convention in the independent music sector, governmental bodies like the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency (Styrelsen för Internationellt Utvecklingssamarbete) and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office, cultural organisations like Birmingham Museum and Galleries and technology companies like Meedan.

As a new research centre we have emphasised knowledge exchange activities as an effective way of utilising the diverse expertise of staff and engaging centre members at different points of research development in collaborative teams. The majority of the researchers within the centre started to operate as independent researchers after 2009, and so the overwhelming majority of our work has been published since 2012, with further outputs awaiting publication. We have built upon the key expertise of the research-intensive members of the centre, developing projects with strong applied and knowledge exchange functions, and used the professional networks, knowledge and skills of emerging researchers with media and creative industries backgrounds to ensure our work has impact beyond academia. This has allowed us to rapidly expand the scale and enhance the quality of our research, develop the collective research knowledge and skills of the research centre and contribute to and learn from both the real-world situations we work in and the collaborative partners with whom we work. This emphasis on impact as a key objective, on building and developing research teams with complementary skills, and on collaborating widely has enabled us to generate a substantial body of research in specialist areas at the same time as we have assisted and effected beneficial changes in our partner organisations. We can already point to substantial evidence of existing impact of reach and significance and a trajectory and strategic plan that indicates this will intensify in the future.

b. Approach to impact

The researchers within the centre have a shared conviction that universities have a privileged position for enhancing knowledge, developing expertise and employing this in meaningful ways that result in broad and deep public benefits. We make notable interventions in cultural activities – like music production, distribution and consumption, history and archives, citizen journalism and hyperlocal media – all of which utilise new digital technologies; we operate in media and creative sectors which are experiencing significant change because of these

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technological innovations and shifting cultural practices; and we engage with professionals and community and political activists who aim at social transformations in the UK, the Arab region, South America, Africa and Asia.

Our impact is the result of our activities in three of our research and knowledge exchange teams, which represent key ideas of enquiry and external engagement. The longest running and largest team, **Interactive Cultures**, has achieved the most substantial impact. The focus here is on the application of new knowledge about the culture of communities which have been built around new forms of digital and online technology. Through this work we have achieved impact in the music industries and radio, in other media, arts and public organisations, and in the social movements associated with citizen journalism and hyperlocal media. This team, led by Prof Tim Wall, includes seven fully research-active academic staff, four staff working on PhDs and one PhD student nearing completion. Our work in music and radio, involving Barber, Coley, Collins, Dubber, Long and Wall is detailed in one of the case studies. The principles we developed here have been applied subsequently to partnerships with a wide range of organisations, including the Nottingham-based gallery New Art Exchange, academic publishing houses Sage, Intellect, and Pearson, and a variety of cultural industry SMEs. Most often this involves new approaches to audience-engagement or user-generated content, which sometimes lead to new business models. At a minimum we raise awareness or understanding of new ways to think about audience engagement through digital and online technologies, but in some cases we support the introduction of new platforms resulting in new organisational practices and processes, which sometimes lead to substantial economic gains for these companies. Many of the same staff, and some of the core ideas and approaches, are also involved in the work of the eight-person **History, Heritage and Archives** team, led by Dr Paul Long. The cultural and policy impact of their work is detailed in the second case study.

The **Media for Social Change** team, established in 2010 by Wall, and now made up of five research-active academic staff led by Dr Dima Saber, also includes four staff working on PhDs and six further doctoral students, most of whom work. Early in the survey period, Coley, Collins, Dubber, Long and Wall collaborated with a number of voluntary sector and activist communities, including the BBC World Service Trust, Care International and the Prison Radio Association on projects with significant social impact. Insights into online communities have been integrated with expertise in community media and online journalism, including that of emerging researchers with expert practitioner backgrounds like Paul Bradshaw, Dave Harte and Jon Hickman. This has also led to further research and knowledge exchange activities around UK-based hyperlocal media, including a work package in a £1.13M AHRC-funded cross-institutional project. These insights were also used in projects on radio for development by Coley in Africa, music for social change by Collins and Dubber in India and South America, development charity fund-raising, and community media. They are continued by new work from Saber and from Forkert on activist media. Wall established a strategic partnership with Meedan, a US-based not-for-profit technology company, to work in the Arab region on citizen journalism knowledge exchange projects through seven regional media or activist partnerships. These knowledge exchange projects, funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (£335K) and the British Foreign and Commonwealth Office (£455K), and now led by Saber, have enabled us to provide training to over 180 citizen journalists and helped to incorporate new translation and news verification technology in the practices of professional and citizen journalism in the MENA region. We expect our research, and its impact, to expand and deepen significantly in this area over the post-REF period.

c. Strategy and plans

Applied research and knowledge exchange are central to the research culture we have built, all centre members are involved in these activities, and we ensure individual work is part of larger sustained projects with explicit impact objectives. These objectives are formed through strategic relationships with our partners. The core strategy of the centre has been to build teams of suitably qualified staff, secure funding for research and knowledge transfer projects, and deliver these projects in a way that maximises the impact of our existing research and expertise. In doing so we simultaneously develop the research skills of staff in the team and use our knowledge exchange activities for further research and publication. This iterative process has been central to our success in achieving growth in the quantity and quality of research, and its suitability for knowledge transfer. We have systematically used the professional backgrounds of centre staff in

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media and cultural practice as a central component of our impact strategy. Their external contacts, professional affinity and skill base complement the expertise of research-active staff from scholarly backgrounds.

We see the impact of research as integral to the design and implementation of all our work, and all of the externally-funded projects we have participated in, with a total value of over £1m, have featured major commitments to knowledge exchange through the application of research-based expertise. This includes KE work with the BBC, digital R&D in the arts initiatives by Nesta, the Arts Council and the AHRC, and two AHRC Connected Communities projects. Wall, Coley, Dubber and Long were also awarded a Knowledge Transfer Fellowship on the strength of their work in music and radio organisation innovation. We have used such funding to expand our research-active staffing through new appointments and the development of post-doctoral researchers, and by converting the media and cultural industries expertise of centre members into scholarly activity. Through this process we have consolidated our research activity and expanded and deepened its impact.

Research and knowledge exchange activity is led and mentored by a seven-strong strategic team, which includes Jon Hickman in a dedicated knowledge exchange and external engagement role, and the Director, Wall, and Associate Directors Long and Webber. This team embed impact through the research cycle: in identifying opportunities for research, in mentoring others to produce clear objectives, and in developing funded projects with effective pathway to impact strategies. All centre members produce personal research plans to ensure that outputs will be valuable to academics internationally, connect to other work in the centre and, as part of this collective effort, have benefits outside the university sector. These plans are evaluated in annual performance reviews which also include objectives to establish or develop external partnerships as a basis for research or knowledge exchange projects. We have set out a new strategic plan which aims to consolidate our work in music and other creative industries, and with history and archives, and significantly expand and deepen our work in media for social change. This includes new funding applications to the FCO and to Google.

d. Relationship to case studies

We have chosen impact case studies that represent two of our key areas of research and knowledge exchange. They include detailed information about the reach and significance of our work, and provide examples of our external engagement with the creative industries and the public and voluntary sectors, along with the wider culture which consumes the professional products they produce. They reveal the significance of the music and radio industries, activist communities and public bodies in our work. As such, they demonstrate how our Interactive Cultures and Histories, Heritage and Archives teams operate and what they have achieved since 2009. We believe that the growth in impact achieved here indicates something about our ability to achieve similar scale and depth in our emerging work in Media for Social Change.

The case studies set out to detail how our rapid growth and development was achieved through strong leadership, internal collaborations between established research-engaged staff and emergent researchers with strong professional backgrounds, and the way we have cultivated substantial external relationships with a variety of organisations. They also clearly explain how we have used iterative processes of research and application to build an effective research culture.