

How subsidies lead to a homogenous film supply

Thematic field: Media industry and society

Abstract

Besides pure location policy film subsidies are often justified with a supposed contribution to artistic film quality and diversity of the film supply. Anecdotal evidence cast doubt whether these objectives can actually be achieved. Jurys for film grants consist of industry veterans as well as TV representatives and representatives of the cultural administration. Each of them might have their own agenda and each of them has a tendency to prefer projects that seem familiar. We draw on concepts of isomorphism and professional socialization as well as on network theory to systematically study the impact of subsidies. We use the German film industry as an example and conduct two empirical studies. The first is an interview study with film producers (n=16). We ask novice and veteran producers for their experience while applying for a film grant and how this might have changed over time. Producers seem to lose their idealism to pursue their own artistic vision over time and the issue how to please the grant jury with what they expect becomes relatively more important compared with other objectives in the project development phase. The procedures in the submission and selection processes can thus be interpreted as professional socialization as they constitute an introduction to the “rules of the trade” for novice producers while at the same time these junior producers are brought into line about what is considered an eligible film idea. This seems to suggest an inter-organizational isomorphism resulting from a reproduction of norms and judgements. One mechanism at work here might be newcomer adjustment and self-affirmation of veteran producers. To test this, we conduct a second study where we focus on the network relations in the selection process. Again, our example is the German film industry and the subsidies granted by the federal film board. Veteran producers and authors make up more than a third of the selection jury. We identify prior connections between the crew of a film and the jury members deciding on a grant for 720 films produced during a 12-year period to test whether the degree of familiarity has an impact on the subsidy decision. Each jury has a tenure of four years and we compare the results over three jury terms. This second study is still in the field phase, but we will be able to report the findings in the full paper.

The contribution of this paper is twofold: First, we provide an assessment whether the film subsidies schemes in Germany actually achieve their proclaimed goals in terms of quality and diversity. Second, we apply organizational theory in the field of film production and provide an example how structures reproduce themselves and determine contents. Possible implications for film policy are discussed.

Keywords: film industry, subsidies, isomorphism, professional socialization, network analysis