

## Soho's 'other' film industry: Researching Hidden Screen Economies

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This article examines the concept of 'hidden screen economies' – economic activities related to screen media that occur outside formal structures, often involving concealment to evade legal and regulatory frameworks. Drawing on the author's ethnohistorical research into Britain's trade in hardcore pornographic films from 1960 to 1972, the article applies Actor-Network Theory to demonstrate how we might research hidden screen economies.

The study reveals how a system of human and non-human actors, including corrupt police, pornographers, distributors, criminal networks, semi-professional film production technologies and the law, collectively intertwined to preserve this hidden economy for over a decade. By tracing the production, distribution and regulation of pornographic 'rollers' (short 8mm films), the article illustrates the intricate network of relationships and processes that allowed this hidden economy to function and prosper, despite the sale of hardcore films being criminalised under the Obscene Publications Act 1959.

By examining this historical case study, the article draws parallels to contemporary hidden screen economies, like illicit IPTV services, demonstrating the persistent drive to evade legal frameworks for economic gain. The author suggests that insights gained from such analyses can inform our understanding of emerging hidden screen economies and their relationship to the formal screen industry.

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## Introduction

On Tuesday, 12 December 2023, following raids on houses in Essex, Waltham Cross and Lanarkshire, police arrested two men who provided access to illicit Internet Protocol Television (IPTV) services. According to *Essex Live*'s report on the raid, the arrests related to a 'Telegram channel selling unauthorised access to Sky TV packages' (Lee 2023). It is said that this enterprise had generated 'more than £800,000' from thousands of subscribers. Police also seized equipment that enabled access to their IPTV service, such as Amazon Fire TV streaming devices. The police described the operation as 'large-scale' and 'sophisticated', commenting that such practices 'often [...] fund wider organised criminality'. Police also collected the details of those who subscribed to the service, noting that they too 'could ultimately be subject to criminal proceedings'. This was by no means an isolated incident. In November 2023, Spanish police arrested a British national living in Benidorm for running an IPTV service that generated £185,000 (Goren 2023), while, in October 2023, another British male was found guilty of selling hacked Amazon streaming devices via a closed Facebook group that offered access to copyrighted streams (Ashton 2024). Police claimed that he had earned £1 million in five years from 30,000 subscribers. The offender received a two-and-a-half-year prison sentence for committing fraud offences.

This crackdown on illicit streaming services is not exclusive to the United Kingdom, with countries across Europe and North America taking similar action. Many press reports detail the intricate investigations required to uncover these operations, often involving digital forensics and detection tools to circumvent some of the techniques those running the enterprises employ to lessen their chances of prosecution. For instance, the encrypted messaging application Telegram – a service associated with the sharing of copyrighted content (Bal 2023) – was used to evade detection. IPTV services are just one example of enterprise that takes place in what I term the 'hidden screen economy' – economic activities related to screen media that occur outside of formal economic structures, often involving concealment to evade legal and regulatory frameworks. Alongside IPTV, there is also the economic exchange of screen content through messaging applications or websites, file-sharing websites, black market sales of physical media and guerilla filmmaking, amongst many other practices. The purpose of this article is to not add yet another unnecessary neologism to describe such informal screen media practices. Instead, I want to build on ideas in this area, specifically those presented by Ramon Lobato (2012), but also draw from other fields to help highlight the need to investigate the practices, processes and networks that actors within hidden screen economies use to limit the risk of exposure and sustain their enterprise. This might involve the use of encrypted messaging platforms, taking cryptocurrency

payments, finding loopholes in the law and employing the use of new technologies to facilitate economic activity outside of the formal economy.

To illustrate this, I use a case study of a specific hidden screen economy – Britain’s pornographic film business between the years 1960 to 1972. While I have published extensively in this area (Carter 2018b, 2022, 2023a, 2023b, 2023c), here I draw on my previous ethnohistorical research and apply elements of Bruno Latour’s (2005) Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to demonstrate how one might conduct an interrogation of a hidden screen economy. I show how a system of key economic actors, both human and non-human, preserved Britain’s illicit pornography trade for a number of years, despite the sale of hardcore material being criminalised under the Obscene Publications Act 1959. I argue that using ethnographic methods and applying ANT can be productive in furthering our understanding of what Colin Williams (2006) terms ‘hidden enterprise cultures’. They can offer insights into their functioning, motivations and broader ties to the formal screen industry, bringing attention to screen activities often overlooked in media industry. Before moving to this case study, I begin the article by giving context to my use of ‘hidden screen economies’ as a concept, emphasising a need to look beyond Media and Cultural Studies to Economics, Criminology and Law, synthesising ideas from these fields. I then consider how we might approach researching these economic spaces, reflecting on my experiences of using ethnography and ethnohistory and reflecting on the challenges one might face when investigating hidden screen economies.

### **Hidden, shadow, underground, alternative?**

According to Stuart Henry (1988), the hidden economy exists outside the formal structures of the regular economy. Jason Ditton (1975: 275) defines it as the ‘sub-commercial movement of materials and finance, together with systematic concealment of that process, for illegal gain’, adding that ‘it is characterized by unregistered work primarily engaged in by individuals active in the regular or criminal economies’. The term is often used interchangeably with other synonyms, such as shadow, underground, irregular and, as I have done in my own work, alternative economies (Carter 2018, 2023a). A possible explanation for this variability is offered by Gunnar Viby Mogensen et al (1995), who note that such definitions are affected by ever-evolving socio-cultural and economic conditions, like changes in regulation or tax. Yet, while all of these ideas are closely related, they have subtle differences that are dependent upon the researcher’s position. For instance, Friedrich Schneider and Dominik Entse (2000) describe the shadow economy as the market-based legal production of goods and services that are deliberately concealed from public authorities to avoid taxes,

social security contributions, labour market standards and other regulatory burdens. In essence, the shadow economy is viewed ‘as any remunerated activities not declared to the authorities for tax, social security and/or labour law purposes when they should be declared’ (Williams and Schneider 2016: 6). Roberto Dell’Anno (2022), however, identifies the shadow economy as part of the informal economy, situating it alongside terms that are associated with illicit markets.

The goal of this article is not to add further confusion to this area of economic research, particularly given Edgar L. Feige’s (1990) observation that the use of such nomenclature is driven by ‘more connotative than denotative’ factors. However, Feige does stress the need for ‘a unified conceptual framework’ to highlight the nuances between these economies and how they connect or overlap. From looking at the work I have discussed so far, it is fair to accept that the act of concealment is consistently recognised as a key feature of economic activity outside of the formal economy. It is this idea of the hidden that I want to focus on. My reason for doing so emerges out of my interest in alternative economies. In previous work, I have used this idea to indicate a blurring between informal and formal media economies or, as Dennis McCarthy (2011: 26) suggests, ‘the area where the legal and underground economies intersect or overlap’. Here, ‘alternative’ is not intended to refer to radical or counter-cultural practices. Instead, I have used it to indicate a different, or separate, economic space. I have argued that alternative economies are liminal, enabling experimentation and innovation until regulators find a way to control the activities of economic actors, often resulting in an ongoing battle between the entrepreneurs and regulators. However, in the context of the ‘Hidden Screen Industries in Britain’ AHRC networking project, which this journal special issue is part of, I now question whether ‘hidden’ might be a more appropriate word to capture the types of screen-related practices that I have been interested in. My reasoning for this comes back to this idea of concealment. The economic actors I have engaged with over the years, whether it be fan entrepreneurs or pornographers, frequently recounted attempts to conceal their enterprise, either for legal reasons or to economically benefit from operating outside of a formal economic space. For instance, the pseudonymous Roman Nowicki, who made the giallo influenced *Fantom Kiler* series of films, went as far as hiding their London origin, creating a myth that they were produced in Poland in order to distance themselves from potential recrimination for selling uncertified films in the United Kingdom (see Carter 2018a: 118–124).

My reference to hidden economies draws on Maria Lackó’s (2000) definition. Like Ditton (1975) and Henry (1988), Lackó (2000) understands the hidden economy as unregistered economic activity, but suggests that it has three distinct parts, or sub-economies. First is the informal economy, activity that is not included in GDP calculations, such as household production, do-it-yourself activities and reciprocal

transactions between individuals. Second is the underground economy, activities that should be measured but escape official registration or measurement, including unreported income by registered economic agents and operations by non-registered economic agents. This includes activities aiming to evade taxes or bypass licensing obligations. Third is the criminal economy, which includes the breaking of fundamental laws beyond mere tax evasion, making them less amenable to economic analysis. Lackó's explanation is helpful, as it incorporates both criminal and non-criminal activities, while also emphasising concealment as central feature. Building on Lackó's definition, what I want to suggest is the need for greater attention to methods and processes economic actors in hidden screen economies use to hide their practices and benefit from them.

Increasing attention is being paid to entrepreneurs who evade formal structures and, through their enterprise, effect economic change. This process has been described as evasive entrepreneurship, which Niklas Elert and Magnus Henrekson (2016: 1) define as 'profit-driven business activity in the market aimed at circumventing the existing institutional framework by using innovations to exploit contradictions in that framework'. Evasive entrepreneurship builds on Joseph Schumpeter's (2017) perception of entrepreneurs as rule breakers and innovators. Elert and Henrekson (2016) highlight how evasive entrepreneurs disrupt the legal system, often resulting in the review of current laws that either enable enterprise or criminalise it. Therefore, evasive entrepreneurs use legal loopholes to create new markets. Scholars tend to not equate evasive entrepreneurs with criminals, highlighting the blurring of the lines between what William Baumol (1990) describes as productive entrepreneurship and unproductive or destructive entrepreneurship: entrepreneurial activity that does not make a productive or positive contribution to the economy. In this sense, the entrepreneur engages in what might be considered criminal acts but finds ways to circumvent regulatory frameworks for two primary reasons: to generate profit and to reduce their risk of arrest. Niklas Elert et al (2016: 177) believe that evasive entrepreneurship can become a means for 'regulatory and legislative change' that results in either 'a celebrated innovation or a criminal offense'. I suggest that evasiveness is one of the defining features of hidden screen economies and a technique actors employ to conceal their practices. This will become evident in the forthcoming case study.

In the context of the screen industry, 'hidden' has been directly used in reference to understudied areas of the screen industry, such as British music video (Caston 2019). Indirectly, it can be seen in work that explores informal screen distribution, particularly Ramon Lobato's (2012: 4) *Shadow Economies of Cinema*. Admittedly using 'shadow economy' as a 'heuristic device [...] to evoke the collective power of informal

networks, with a view to clearing some space for them in film studies research', Lobato explores the relationship between the formal and the informal through case studies of, amongst others, Nigeria's Nollywood, an industry built on informal distribution, and America's straight-to-video market. Lobato took inspiration from earlier scholarship in this area, specifically Ravi Sundaram's (2010) study on the impact of unauthorised media technologies on urban life in Delhi, which used the concept of 'pirate modernity' to describe a form of urban modernity driven by informal screen media practices, such as pirated cable networks and unlicensed DVD vendors. Sundaram examines how these practices shape the urban landscape and contribute to the creation of alternative media environments that operate outside formal regulations. Since Lobato (2012), there has been greater academic interest in informal screen economies. Much of this work tends to solely focus on distribution, including studies on file-sharing and piracy (Crisp 2015; Ferrante 2020; Meili 2022). In contrast, production and consumption perspectives have received less scholarly attention, although Fan Studies has explored the blurring of these areas, particularly in work on fansubbing (Hu 2016; Hills 2017) and fan archiving (De Kosnik 2021), even if not explicitly within the context of informality.

Therefore, many hidden economic spaces are yet to receive academic attention, both historical and contemporary; the IPTV services discussed in the opening of this article are just one example. Others might include histories of pre-digital screen piracy, such as bootlegged home media, film-trading networks, direct-to-customer pornography production and distribution, and cultures of guerilla film production, amongst many others. Kate Sivak's (2023) fascinating study of Ukraine's informal screen economy reminds us of how Western contexts are often privileged over non-Western ones, and that geographical context is vital for understanding the complex conditions in which many screen economies operate. Through engagement with those who run informal screen enterprises in Ukraine, including pirate cinemas, file-sharing websites and voiceover studios, Sivak tells of how these services fill a gap that the formal screen economy is unable to, for various cultural and economic reasons. She also explains their political motivations, mainly offering Ukrainian-spoken content as a form of 'language activism' to 'ensure its survival, and resist the presence of the more commercially dominant language that is Russian' (190). Although the economy that Sivak speaks of is not necessarily hidden, she discusses the techniques platforms use to protect certain content, usually Hollywood productions, from being removed. This article seeks to contribute to such ongoing debates about informal media by calling for greater attention to hidden economic spaces and to consider how those within these economies attempt to conceal their activities through different mechanisms as a way to evade the law.

## Researching the hidden

But how can hidden screen economies be researched, especially when they are usually clandestine and therefore difficult for scholars to engage with. I now reflect on my approach to researching such spaces, specifically the economy surrounding European cult cinema (Carter 2018) and Britain's pornography trade (Carter 2023a). I am not suggesting that ethnographic approaches are the only way to research hidden screen economies. Instead, I reflect on my experiences to stimulate a conversation around how we might do such work, acknowledging Sivak's (2023) point that studies on informal/hidden media rarely detail methodological issues. Typically, economists have relied on official statistics to determine hidden or informal economic activity. Colin Williams (2023) calls this approach 'indirect measurement', where economists use a range of indicator methods, both monetary and non-monetary, or a combination of the two, to measure the scale of informal economies. Williams notes that indirect measurement methods are assumptive, presuming that traces of informal economic activity can be detected in this data. He also points out that there has been a move towards using 'direct measurement methods', including surveys of those who work in informal economic spaces, analysis of tax returns and other forms of participant fieldwork. While Williams sees indirect methods as having been valuable in the past for highlighting the existence of the informal economy, he argues that direct methods have now become increasingly important for analysing not only the pervasiveness of the informal economy but also what informal work consists of, who engages in it and why they choose to do so.

My own work in this space falls in the latter category and specifically draws on ethnographic methods. This is by no means unique, with many studies of informal screen media (Sundaram 2010; Li 2022; Sivak 2023) taking this direction, benefiting from ethnography's 'broad church' (Hobbs 2006: 102) of sub-methods, which can include participant observation, interviews, textual analysis and life histories, amongst many others (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 3). My first study of hidden enterprise surrounding European cult cinema fandom (Carter 2018a) combined offline and online ethnography alongside autoethnographic reflection of my own participation as a fan producer. This, I suggested, allowed for a more holistic interrogation of cultural and economic practices that existed across physical and virtual spaces, with autoethnography being used to fill in any gaps or add further context to accounts offered by other participants. For my more recent research into Britain's illicit pornography trade (Carter 2023a), which I draw on for this article's forthcoming case study, I used ethnohistory, which Annette Kuhn (2002: 6) defines as 'ethnographic description and interpretation alongside oral historical inquiry and the historian's traditional source materials'. Given that the project broadly focused on the years

1960 to 2000, I required a suitable method for engaging with elderly participants and a range of archival materials. I undertook 42 interviews with producers, distributors, performers, legal professionals, film collectors, and casual workers. Following Kuhn, I interviewed most participants more than once, finding that this built trust and allowed time for memories to be rediscovered. The nature of hidden economic activity makes it challenging to engage participants, especially those involved in activities that occurred fifty years ago. People change names through marriage or deed poll, some are unlocatable or have passed away. As Paul Hammersley and Martyn Atkinson (2007: 75) highlight, the building of trust is very important, as well as ensuring that the ethical process is closely followed, ensuring that participants consent to being involved and are able to withdraw. Those whom I managed to interview willingly acted as ‘sponsors’ (Walsh 1998: 231), putting me in contact with others from the business.

The second part of my ethnohistorical approach involved archival research, locating various documents and artefacts that aided the historicisation of Britain’s illicit hardcore pornography business. This proved challenging as the ephemeral nature of pornography and the business’ difficult legal history has resulted in there being few specialist institutional archives to draw on (Dean et al. 2014), particularly in Britain. I began my archival research by attempting to collect a sample of the goods produced and distributed by pornographers during this period, initially digitised copies of 8mm and Super 8 films, before realising that their material properties – their packaging and the film stock – were equally, if not more, revealing than the actual films. I conducted a material object analysis of these artefacts (Carter 2023b), producing a database of titles that could be cross-referenced, providing potential dates of production and likely makers. To place these artefacts in context, I consulted a range of media reportage, collecting magazines, articles from newspapers and relevant television broadcasts. Newspapers played a vital part in documenting the development of pornography in Britain and Western Europe, particularly with it being an ongoing subject of public interest. I sourced over 1100 newspaper articles, while a range of magazines and periodicals from the period gave further context, containing interviews with some of the entrepreneurs involved in the trade, advertisements from enterprises and details of small-gauge filmmaking practices.

Newspapers and magazines often made mention of legal cases, leading me to undertake doctrinal research, a legal method that is ‘used to identify, analyse and synthesize the content of the law’ (Hutchinson 2013: 9). It involves ‘locating cases and statutes, the use of indexes and citators, and the use of computer information retrieval systems such as Westlaw and LexisNexis’ (McConville and Chui 2017: 3). This helped me to understand the complex legal context for the hidden economy and source legal records held at the National Archives in London that document Britain’s pornography



trade and attempts to regulate it. I scanned over 26,000 pages of archival documents that related to pornographic film, including obscenity trials and police corruption investigations. Collectively, these sources revealed the inner workings of the hidden economy, allowing me to understand how it functioned and learn how films were produced, distributed and regulated. Such a wide range of sources helped to corroborate some of the claims made by interviewees. Therefore, I used multiple methods to help verify 'one set of data sources by collecting data from others' (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 183) and corroborate my findings.

It is also worth noting some of the challenges faced when conducting ethnographic research into hidden economies, based on my previous experience. As already acknowledged, finding people willing to participate in the research, especially when they may be involved in legally problematic activities, can be difficult. For instance, I felt uncomfortable when trying to track down performers who appeared in pornographic films from the 1960s and 1970s, and I was very conscious of not intruding on their privacy. For this reason, I relied heavily on police interviews with performers or interviews in newspapers and magazines. Gaining access to the economy may require insider knowledge, or a personal involvement. Because of this, the researcher can find themselves becoming engaged in morally and legally dubious activities. I have found myself in this situation on several occasions, whether it be as a producer of fan-made DVDs or a member of a file-sharing website (Carter 2018a). This is not an uncommon position in ethnography, a methodology that 'carries a heavy ethical burden' (Anderson 2012: 352). Participants may openly reveal illicit activities, or as Dick Hobbs (1988: 7) found when researching traders in London's East End, the ethnographer can become involved in them: 'I was willing to skirt the boundaries of criminality on several occasions, and I considered it crucial to be willingly involved in "normal" business transactions, legal or otherwise'. For Hobbs, this approach was integral to enhancing his understanding of the trade and gaining the trust of his participants. Taking such a position presents an ethical dilemma for the researcher and, as Dekeyser and Garrett (2021) note, is regularly negotiated by criminologists and anthropologists. For them, finding ways to navigate legal boundaries in ethnographic research is crucial for maintaining academic freedom and producing valuable new knowledge. Dekeyser and Garrett stress the need for 'situated ethics', where ethics committee decisions are based on specific context rather than pre-determined rules that can limit the quality of the research. Naturally, ethical review is of the utmost importance for researching hidden economies, especially those which skirt the boundaries of legality, yet some flexibility may be necessary. For Williams (2006), one of the reasons for the lack of research into hidden enterprise cultures is their morally questionable nature, but this is what also makes them worthy of investigation.

## Carnaby kinks

In what follows, I draw on the ethnohistorical method discussed in the previous section to illustrate how Britain's hidden screen economy of hardcore pornographic films functioned between the years 1960 and 1972. To do this, I apply Bruno Latour's (2005) ANT to illustrate how elements within the economy collectively worked together to prevent it from being uncovered. While not exclusively focused on economics, Latour's model provides a way to understand how a network of human and non-human actors interact to create economic phenomena. Actors can include people, institutions, technologies, material objects, infrastructure and many other diverse entities. Latour notes that ANT is ideally suited for studying moments of controversy or uncertainty, believing these are when the networks and associations become most visible and explicit. Considering that pornography is regularly reputed to be a 'controversial economy' due to its long and complex legal history, as well as it being 'considered socially unacceptable by many large groups of society' (Cannatelli et al. 2019: 840–841), ANT is a useful lens. **Table 1** outlines my approach to conducting an ANT analysis of a hidden screen economy, drawing on Latour (2005) but also serving as a potential model for future work in this space. In what follows, I briefly present the findings from this analysis.

Steps	Description
Identify entry points	Start by finding accessible points of contact with the hidden screen economy. This could be through: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Interviews with former participants, intermediaries or peripheral actors</li> <li>• Legal documents/court records</li> <li>• Media reportage</li> <li>• Online forums or marketplaces</li> </ul>
Trace associations	Map out the network of actors involved, including: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Human actors (participants, facilitators, enforcers)</li> <li>• Non-human actors (laws, policies, technologies, goods)</li> </ul>
Map material infrastructure	Examine the physical and technological infrastructure, such as communication tools, transportation methods and storage facilities.
Analyse economic practices	Describe how goods and services are valued, exchanged, and distributed.
Investigate calculative devices	Identify and examine the tools and methods used for economic calculation within the hidden screen economy. These might include alternative currencies, informal credit systems or unique pricing mechanisms.

(Contd.)

Steps	Description
Examine boundaries	Analyse how the boundaries between the hidden and formal screen economies are maintained or blurred. What actors or processes are involved in this boundary work?
Study controversies	Identify points of conflict within the hidden screen economy or at its interfaces with the formal economy to reveal important dynamics and power relations.
Consider regulatory evasion	Examine how actors evade or interact with regulatory frameworks, focusing on techniques and networks that enable this evasion.
Analyse risk management	Investigate how risks are assessed, managed and distributed among actors in the economy.
Explore knowledge circulation	Examine how knowledge and skills specific to the hidden screen economy are transmitted and maintained.
Consider ethical frameworks	Analyse the moral and ethical frameworks that govern behaviour within the economy.

**Table 1:** A potential model for using ANT to analyse hidden screen economies.

Between the years 1960 and 1972, Britain had a thriving pornography business, despite the sale of hardcore material being criminalised under the Obscene Publications Act 1959 (OPA). For 12 years, the economy managed to avoid scrutiny, with British-made rollers – the trade’s name for short, 15-minute, 8mm hardcore films – and photographs being exported to parts of Europe, Scandinavia and North America, prior to Denmark’s landmark decision to decriminalise all forms of hardcore pornography in 1969. It is difficult to ascertain when Britain’s hidden screen economy of hardcore pornographic films first emerged. The earliest legal record I found was from 1962, which detailed a police investigation into a man named Ivor Cook, a professional photographer who was suspected of being ‘actively engaged in the processing and selling of obscene films and photographs’.<sup>1</sup> Prior to the emergence of hardcore films in the 8mm format, goods in Britain’s pornography economy consisted of erotic books, usually imported from countries like France via transnational networks, illustrations and photographs in packs of five, which were known as ‘Soho Postcards’, and typescripts or ‘Soho Bibles’, crudely produced books containing a short story and typically illustrated with Soho postcards.<sup>2</sup> The naming of Soho is important here, as this London district was the epicentre of Britain’s ‘sexual economy’ (Mort 2010: 356), with pornography sold under the counter in the backrooms of bookshops and,

<sup>1</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5786, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

<sup>2</sup> See Jamie Stoops (2018) for a discussion of Britain’s trade in obscene material prior to the post-war period.

occasionally, via mail-order. But why did hardcore films emerge at this time and come to dominate the market? Those who I interviewed believed that there were a range of cultural and economic factors that created the conditions for filmmaking. Under ANT, these can be understood as key non-human actors. The regulatory framework of the time is the first key non-human actor. For Douglas North (1990: 3–4), institutional frameworks provide the ‘rules of the game’. Human actors either choose to follow these rules or break them to gain a competitive advantage. As discussed earlier, Elert and Henrekson (2016) call these actors evasive entrepreneurs because of the ways in which they can disrupt the legal system. Their actions often result in institutions reviewing current laws that either enable economic activity or criminalise it, with evasive entrepreneurs finding loopholes in the law to establish new markets.

The primary legal instrument for controlling pornography in Britain is the OPA. Although repressive, Colin Manchester (1986: 33) notes that it was intended to be a ‘liberalizing measure’ and was part of a series of significant legal reformations directly related to sexual culture introduced in late 1950s and 1960s Britain (see Weeks 2012: 321–356). The Customs Consolidation Act 1876 and The Post Office Act 1953 also regulated pornography at this time, alongside the OPA. Collectively, these laws criminalise the publication and distribution of pornography, with the latter two focusing on ‘indecent’ material, a term perceived to be of a lesser offence than ‘obscenity’, but ultimately conveying ‘the same idea’ (Robertson 1979: 178). The OPA has many limitations, being based on outdated, moralistic principles, and using vague and subjective terminology. The OPA also afforded the police power to control the sale of obscene articles, giving them the power to search and seize offending materials that they perceived contravened the law. These would be collected as evidence and submitted to the Director of Public Prosecutions, who decided whether to prosecute the case in court. Successful prosecutions could result in confiscation and destruction of the obscene materials and/or fines or imprisonment. Rather than controlling the trade in illicit pornographic films, the OPA’s appointment of power to the police created the conditions for corruption. For Williams (2023: 40–41), ‘formal institutional failings’, as evident in the OPA, can result in public officials misusing ‘public office for private gain’. The Obscene Publications Squad, more colloquially known as ‘The Dirty Squad’ (Tomkinson 1982), entrepreneurially used the OPA to their advantage by operating a corrupt licensing system to permit the sale of hardcore pornography in Soho and economically benefit from it. Unbeknownst to these corrupt police officers, their interpretation of the OPA created an institutional framework for the clandestine production and distribution of hardcore material, including rollers. Producers and distributors became licensed and regularly paid fees to permit them to trade and, most

importantly, limit the risk of their arrest. I suggest that this institutional framework played a crucial role in hiding the economy for twelve years, aided by other human actors who contributed to sustaining its existence.

Licensed pornographers produced the goods that circulated in the economy. Interviews, legal records and newspaper reportage suggest the early producers of hardcore gravitated from photography to filmmaking, with Ivor Cook and Leonard Thorpe (*The People* 1960) being examples of these early entrepreneurs. The professional production of film relied on formal institutions to process negatives and duplicate prints for circulation. According to Joseph Slade (2006: 105), early pornographic films first appeared on 'single reels of 12 minutes' on 35mm film until the 1930s, when 'amateurs switched to 16mm formats'. Eric Schaefer (2002) sees 16mm as being crucial to the development of pornographic film, it being a semi-professional format that was also accessible to amateurs. Jamie Stoops (2018) claims that prior to the 1960s the production of hardcore pornography in Britain was disorganised, secretive and a small-scale activity. The use of 16mm made it accessible to a limited audience who had the means to view such content. The introduction of the lower-cost 8mm format was significant for the emergence of rollers. There existed an already established commercial small-gauge film market for roller makers to exploit, and more importantly, the technology made film production more accessible. According to self-taught roller maker Mike Freeman (2016), the most popular camera was the Swiss-made Paillard Bolex H16. David Cleveland and Brian Pritchard (2015: 293) remark on how the Bolex H16 appealed to the 'serious amateur' or 'semi-professionals making 16mm films'. According to an issue of *Amateur Cine World* from 29 September 1966, a second-hand Bolex could be purchased for £60, less than a month's take-home salary for the average male worker in the mid-1960s, while 500ft of 16mm film cost around £15, roughly a week's wage. Crucial to the making of pornographic films were performers, another key human actor in the economy. Roller producers sourced performers through their networks. Freeman used his relationship with editors of a magazine named *Personal Advertiser* to find performers, while others relied on modelling agencies or their contacts in Soho. Typically, female performers earned £20 to £30; men were paid less, usually £10 (*The People* 1970a). The clandestine nature of the business meant that producers favoured private houses and bedsits as production locations, rather than studios. My calculations suggest that it cost at least £100 to make one 15-minute roller, not considering the required equipment.

Once a film had been shot, it needed to be processed and developed. Professionals like Cook and Thorpe had the technical know-how to process their own rollers outside of film laboratories. Handbooks and cine magazines, such as *8mm Magazine*

and *Amateur Cine World*, assisted amateurs like Mike Freeman who were interested in learning how to use the technology. These publications enabled them to purchase kits via mail-order and gave them access to a like-minded community of enthusiasts who shared do-it-yourself guides for shooting, processing and duplicating film. Following their advice, Mike Freeman recalled how he set up his own film laboratory, but initially struggled to develop films, as he was unable to achieve the necessary combination of chemicals. Another interviewee, a film laboratory worker named Brian Pritchard (2019), believed that early rollers were also processed in 'garage labs'. Often found in the backrooms of shops or residential properties, these semi-professional spaces mainly specialised in 8mm film, using commercially available, semi-professional equipment to process and develop film. One early roller maker named 'Derek' (2020) used a garage lab in the back of a London shoe shop to process and print his films. Richard Henry Bombback (1956) observes that printing films was a manual, labour-intensive activity with limitations. Because of this, imperfect prints were common. Rollers were mainly black and white, as it was difficult to develop colour film outside of laboratories. To address this, more commercially minded roller producers like Evan Phillips quickly shifted to using commercial film labs, paying willing employees to process his titles out of hours (Manifold 1972a). Preferring to keep production in-house and limit the risk of arrest, Freeman imported two Uhler-branded optical printers from the USA, costing \$950 each – a considerable expense in the late 1960s. The Uhler enabled a contact print to be made from the camera negative, positive or inter-negative. The two films would be sandwiched together and run through the device, the master printing onto the film. With most rollers being shot on 16mm and printed on 8mm for wider distribution, optical reduction was necessary. An Uhler-type device was beneficial as it could perform this function, reducing 16mm film to 8mm for printing or, as was more common, reducing 16mm to dual 8mm. The double 8mm negative could then be contact printed and separated into single 8mm film using a splitter device. Freeman preferred the latter process as it made duplication faster, allowing for two 8mm copies to be made at a time.

In his police interview, Ivor Cook claimed to have manually produced 50 copies of each title, and it appears that print runs were limited because of the time it took to make them.<sup>3</sup> Early rollers were packed in generic boxes, usually with a postcard of a provocative image taken during the making of the film and a title Letraset onto it. Producers initially chose to not brand their films, possibly out of concern that it could bring their illicit activities to light. Licensed pornographer Evan 'Big Jeff' Phillips is

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<sup>3</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5786, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

regarded as the first person to brand rollers, introducing the label Climax Films in 1966. In a police interview, fellow roller maker Martin Granby explained the impact Phillips' decision to brand had on the economy, changing the way pornographers chose to market their films:

At first, it was sufficient for me to just have the spool with the film on it, but very shortly after [Evan] Phillips came on the scene, he was a very big-time operator, and he marketed his films in boxes with proper titles. I, of necessity, had to compete with him and box and title my films.<sup>4</sup>

Phillips opted for a more distinctive alternative. Rather than a generic cardboard box, either blank or with a photograph of a scene from the film glued to its front, Climax boxes had an orange and off-white colour scheme, with the branding at the top. Underneath would be a photograph, with the title of film *Letraset* onto the print. The film's length and format were printed below, with the text 'black and white' on the left-hand side and the format and length of the film on the right. When Phillips eventually issued films in colour, he introduced a green-coloured box. Brightly coloured packaging was probably utilised to differentiate Climax's rollers from others in the backrooms of Soho's bookshops, enhancing their visibility. Israel Kirzner (1973: 14) believes entrepreneurs 'notice profit opportunities that exist because of the initial ignorance of the original market participants'. Phillips' decision to brand shifted how rollers were packaged, with other competitors following his lead and expanding the market. By the end of the 1960s, there were at least 14 competing roller labels, although Phillips' Climax brand remained the most dominant until the early 1970s. Licensed pornographers operated within the institutional framework set by the Obscene Publications Squad. Mike Freeman repeatedly broke the rules of his licence and claimed in an interview that corrupt police attempted to have him assassinated, while Granby eventually became licensed after he similarly alleged being threatened by them.<sup>5</sup> Pornographers who did not pay off the police found themselves prosecuted under the OPA. Those who played within the boundaries of the framework profited from their enterprise and used the techniques described above to preserve the hidden economy.

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<sup>4</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5809, *Virgo*, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

<sup>5</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5809, *Virgo*, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

Roller distributors also paid the licence and occupied a central role in the exchange of goods. The pornographers wholesaled their goods to these distributors, who sold them via bookshops, initially in Soho, before spreading out across the UK in the late 1960s, and also by mail-order. The bookshops used a model of economic exchange that is known as sale or return, where the pornographers would only receive a share of the sale if the goods had sold. If not, they were returned. According to Derek Cox, a Soho bookshop employee, a 200ft black and white roller cost £2.50 wholesale, retailing around £15, while a colour roller cost £5 and sold for around £25, making them a profitable commodity for producers, but particularly retailers.<sup>6</sup> *The Longford Report* (1972: 34), an inquiry into Britain's hidden pornography economy, claimed that retailers stood to make the most profit from the pornography business, making up to '80 per cent profit on cost'. The sale or return model also helped to reduce their economic risk. Vice has always been synonymous with Soho; its history of sexual enterprise dates back to the early eighteenth century (Collins 2004). Bookshops emerged in Soho during the 1940s (Tomkinson 1982: 16). The innocuous term 'bookshop' served as a convenient facade for establishments that specialised in the sale of pornography. From the 1940s onwards, these shops usually had a front room, where inoffensive material would be openly sold, and a back room containing harder content. To access the back room, the customer had to get permission from the shop's 'Chair', or 'front man'. The Chair was the leaseholder, appointed by the true owner of the shop. As the licensing system offered limited protection from potential arrest, the Chair served as a patsy, distancing the owner from prosecution. In the event of an arrest, the Chair could quickly be replaced, allowing the business to continue with little disruption. Eric Ronald Mason, known as John Mason to others in the trade, or 'God' due to the power he exerted in the economy, was one of the biggest distributors of hardcore pornography, and gave an account of his enterprise in a police interview.<sup>7</sup> His company SJD Properties owned at least six bookshops, paying the corrupt police a licence of £1000 per month to do business. Mason maintained close, personal relationships with corrupt police, which brought many benefits. Martin Tomkinson (1982) tells of how the Obscene Publications Squad regularly invited Mason to Holborn Police Station to buy back stock seized from unlicensed traders. Due to the high demand for hardcore pornography, bookshop sellers used different methods of economic exchange. Journalist Duncan Webb commented on

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<sup>6</sup> Cox was interviewed for the Channel 4 documentary *The Porn King, the Stripper and the Bent Coppers* (Simon Berthon and Daniel Korn 1998).

<sup>7</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5786, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.



bookshop owner John Hawksford's use of a library-style hiring system, where goods could be rented out for £10, with £5 being paid to the customer on return (Webb 1956). Former Soho bookshop worker 'Dave' (2018) told me that bookshops offered to buy back pornography from customers and sell it at second-hand prices, providing them with a stream of regular stock.

Under the terms of the licensing system, the police forbade mail-order sales. The Obscene Publications Squad aimed to keep the pornography trade confined to Soho, making it easier to control, police and evade attention outside of their network. The sending of unsolicited mail-order catalogues to members of the public was determined to be a risk that could expose the trade. It seems that the expansion of the pornography economy in the late 1960s – particularly in the wake of Denmark's decision to legalise pornography in 1969 – and the opportunity for the corrupt police to make more money led to them permitting licensed distributors to sell through mail-order, providing that it was tightly controlled.<sup>8</sup> A mail-order operator named John Darby spoke of paying police £200 a month for a licence to trade at the beginning of the 1970s.<sup>9</sup> Acting as the distributor for the roller makers John Lindsay and Anthony Collingbourne, Darby sold black and white rollers for £7 and colour rollers for £14 or £17, undercutting standard Soho prices. Competing mail-order operators offered pornography imported from Denmark, where it was being legally produced with a higher material quality than rollers, which were still manufactured in clandestine circumstances, and therefore carried higher means of production as they could not easily be mass produced. In 1969, Evan Phillips moved Climax Films to Denmark, where he could legally operate and industrialise production. He arranged for the films to be smuggled back into the UK via lorries, planes and boats (Manifold 1972a).

Another key human actor in the economy was London's criminal underworld, who worked in alliance with the Obscene Publications Squad to offer their own form of regulation and control. Soho's unique geography made it difficult to police. Therefore, the police regularly worked with gangsters like the 'Godfather of Soho' Bernie Silver to help them control vice in Soho. According to Fergus Linnane (2016: 250), Silver and his enforcer, former Maltese police officer 'Big' Frank Mifsud, 'imposed a kind of peace in [Soho] for two decades', managing Soho on behalf of the police, while also being able to carry on their illicit practices; Silver was also paying the police for a licence to operate his bookshops. They regularly used violence and intimidation

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<sup>8</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5778, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

<sup>9</sup> The National Archives, UK, Director of Public Prosecutions, DPP2/5789, Virgo, Wallace Harold and others: corruption offences between 1 January 1964 and 24 October 1972.

to control Soho, playing their part in maintaining the hidden economy of hardcore pornographic films. The network of corrupt police, pornographers, distributors and the underworld collectively worked together to preserve the business and to continue profiting from it. Evidence of this alliance can be found in the 1970s, when *The People* newspaper took an interest in the economy following a report of a crashed plane in Belgium that held stock of Phillips' Climax Films label and was originally bound for Britain (*The People* 1970a). This incident spurred reporters at *The People* to investigate Britain's hidden pornography economy, resulting in a four-week Sunday edition series in November 1970. Guided by Assistant Editor Laurie Manifold, reporters orchestrated a sting involving a fake Middle Eastern businessman seeking to smuggle 3000 film rollers into Beirut (Cox et al. 1977: 143). While visiting Soho bookshops, they received contact details for Ivor Cook, who directed them to Stuart Crispie, Evan Phillips' agent. Crispie proposed shipping the films via Bahrain for a fee, but the reporters declined. The investigation extended to James Humphreys, a major Soho bookshop owner. Humphreys, protecting his interests, involved the Obscene Publications Squad, who uncovered the reporters' identities and coordinated a counter-sting. The reporters were exposed when they arrived at a hotel for a supposed deal and were photographed. These images were then circulated among Soho bookshops to identify the reporters. Despite the 6 December 1970 issue of *The People* claiming to have disrupted the economic operations, the trade continued to thrive (*The People* 1970b).

By the early 1970s, there were at least a further 30 competing labels issuing rollers, with brands like Universal Films looking to challenge Climax Films' dominance. Police documents indicate that by the end of the 1960s, 52 bookshops could be found in London's West End (Carter 2023a: 47–49), a ten-fold increase from five shops in 1955 (Manchester 1986: 31), signifying the growth of the economy in a fifteen-year period. A further 35 shops stretched across wider London, usually near train stations where there was heavy footfall. With an increasingly competitive market and the high costs associated with smuggling materials into Britain, Phillips' Climax Films quickly encountered financial troubles. On 6 February 1972, the *Sunday People* reported that the firm was in liquidation due to unpaid debt (Manifold 1972a). This financial mismanagement, coupled with Phillips' preoccupation with his wealth, led to the company's downfall. Further compounding the scandal, on 27 February 1972, the *Sunday People* finally managed to expose the corrupt practices within the Obscene Publications Squad (Manifold 1972b). The newspaper detailed how these officers, were systematically bribed by pornography dealers, allowing these businesses to thrive without significant legal repercussions. The exposé prompted a major investigation into police corruption led by Robert Mark, the new Commissioner of the Metropolitan

Police, which dismantled the institutional framework that had enabled the expansion of Britain's hidden economy of hardcore pornographic films. As a result, licensed pornographers became more susceptible to arrest and prosecution. Now, police repeatedly raided Soho's bookshops, and there were a series of high-profile obscenity trials (Carter 2022) that combined the OPA with common laws in an attempt to secure prosecutions and address the shortcomings of the problematic legislation that enabled the hidden economy to trade for twelve years.

## Conclusion

Although this is very much an abridged account, the hidden economy of hardcore pornographic films in Britain from 1960 to 1972 shows how a network of human and non-human actors, including entrepreneurial pornographers, performers, lab workers, distributors, retailers, the underworld, corrupt police officers, bookshops, evolving film technologies and regulatory frameworks, interacted to sustain an illicit enterprise for over a decade. During this period, pornographers produced around 1000 rollers, giving a sense of the economy's scale. Using Latour's (2015) ANT to frame the findings from ethnohistorical research illustrates the intricate web of relationships and processes that allowed this hidden economy to flourish and adapt to a repressive legal framework and investigations from the popular press. After 1972, hardcore pornography increasingly became a subject publicly discussed in popular media, drawing attention to the practices of entrepreneurs such as John Lindsay and David Waterfield, who both openly sold and screened hardcore films, using loopholes in the OPA and the Cinematograph Act 1952 to do business. In response to these legal ambiguities, regulators introduced a patchwork of laws in the early 1980s, inadvertently creating a thriving black market in hardcore video tapes, and later DVDs, until the sale of pornography was permitted in 2000, albeit under strict conditions.

There are parallels between this historical case study and contemporary hidden screen economies, such as the illicit IPTV services I discussed in the opening of this article. Both demonstrate a persistent drive from human actors to evade legal and regulatory frameworks for economic gain, adapting to technological advancements and exploiting gaps in the law. As new hidden screen economies emerge, the insights gained from such historical analyses can inform our understanding of their operations, motivations, and their wider relationship with the formal screen industry. Through combining ethnographic methods with ANT, I have proposed a model that might allow us to investigate both historical and contemporary hidden screen economies. Referring to my own experiences, I have considered some of the challenges researchers can encounter when attempting to do work in this area. Whether it be gaining access

to hidden economic spaces, locating participants who are willing to disclose their activities or navigating complex ethical situations, negotiating these methodological difficulties is crucial for uncovering commonly neglected aspects of screen industry practice and for developing a comprehensive understanding of screen industries in their totality, including the informal and illicit practices that often drive innovation and shape formal markets. It is also worth noting that the case study I used here focused on the contexts of production and distribution and neglected to consider how hidden screen economies are consumed. There is much to learn about how and why people consume goods or services offered by these economies, especially when it is their participation that helps to sustain them. Furthermore, as Sivak (2023:206) recognises, we need to pay greater attention to the economies found in other geographical regions 'to gain more comprehensive knowledge about the diversity of practice comprising these economies and the variety of complex, context-specific factors that may be central to their existence'. As screen technologies continue to evolve, so too will the hidden economies that exploit them. By understanding their historical manifestations, we are better equipped to anticipate, analyse and respond to the hidden screen economies of the future.

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## Biography

Oliver Carter is Professor of Creative Economies at the Birmingham Centre for Media and Cultural Research, Birmingham City University. His research into Britain's pornography business has informed the award-winning documentary series *Sexposed* as well as the second episode of the 2021 BBC series *Bent Coppers: Crossing the Line of Duty*. His latest monograph *Under the Counter: Britain's Trade in Hardcore Pornographic 8mm Films* was published in 2023, and he is currently working on a second volume. His blog can be found at [www.under-the-counter.com](http://www.under-the-counter.com).

## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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