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RESEARCH ARTICLE



## A possible teleology of cultural sector data in England

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### ABSTRACT

In March 2019, Arts Council England (ACE), an official statistics producer, started collecting a new set of data from its National Portfolio Organisations intended to reveal whether those organizations' intentions correlate with the perceptions of their peers and audiences. In a world dominated by quantitative data, the *Impact and Insight Toolkit* addresses a perceived lacuna and marks a substantial investment in qualitative metrics. ACE also expects it to address a number of other concerns – help organizations self-evaluate, measure their short-term outcomes and advocate more effectively. Indeed, it envisages that an aggregation of the data collected will support the case for sustained public support of the sector. The Toolkit's launch comes at a time when changes to the UK's official statistics are encouraged, and policymakers are looking elsewhere to inform their thinking. The campaigning aspect of ACE's aspirations suggests a model of data collection and analysis distinct from that of official statistics production, valued for its impartiality. This article considers what might happen if the Toolkit, which relates to ACE's role as a development agency, encourages data to be collected and analysed in order to deliver specific outcomes. It reflects on three visions of cultural sector data from the past 50 years: Toffler's *The Art of Measuring the Arts*, DCMS's *Taking Part* and ACE's *Impact and Insight Toolkit*. These suggest a trajectory of cultural sector data determined by increasing importance being attached to institutional interests, and implies that the future of cultural sector data in England may be determined by how ACE addresses its potentially conflicting interests as an official data provider and development agency. Greater investment in the former would more accurately reveal the arts' contribution to economic and social development; greater investment in the latter would encourage the teleological development of cultural sector data designed for sectorial advocacy.

### KEYWORDS

Quality metrics; evidence-based policy; teleology; toolkit; toolkit; Arts Council England; *Taking Part*

### Introduction

In March 2019, Arts Council England (ACE) began collecting a new set of data from its major National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) to show how the organisations' intentions for selected parts of their programmes “align” with the “experiences” of their peers and audiences.<sup>1</sup> The new *Impact and Insight Toolkit* is also significant for other reasons. It

constitutes a response to what was originally a sector-led initiative, and it marks a substantial investment by ACE, which has invested almost £3 m in the project to date (Hill, 2018). ACE expects it to improve the effectiveness of individual organisations' advocacy and to support its own case for sustaining public support to the sector overall (Hopkin, 2018; Platt & October, 2017).

These attributions suggest that the Toolkit is more closely associated with ACE's function as a development agency than an official statistics provider. Rather than complying with the model of impartial data collection associated with official statistics, it proffers an advocacy-based model determined by the prospect of particular outcomes. This article considers the implications such an approach might have for the future trajectory of English cultural sector data.

Teleology is rarely, if ever, applied to official statistics. But, considerations of their use, usefulness and "practical utility" are central to both the UN's *Fundamental Principles of National Official Statistics* (2013) and the UK Statistics Authority (UKSA's) *Code of Practice* (2019, p. V1): "Statistics producers ... should consider the ways in which the statistics might be used and the nature of the decisions that are or could be informed by them". In addressing the teleology of English cultural sector data, this article considers perceptions of the data currently available on publicly funded arts and museum sectors in England in particular, produced by, if not funded by, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and its agencies. It does so, bearing in mind that DCMS leads on the government's National Data Strategy and on debates about the use of data in the public sector.

Opinions explored in this article are mainly drawn from the current grey and academic literature, but – given the paucity of literature on the current state of English cultural sector data – many of the observations made are drawn from a series of elite interviews (see Harvey, 2011). Interviewees were selected on the basis of their experience and influence – albeit through executive positions, academic reputation or social networks. They represented different generations and different constituencies of interest including academics and practitioners. In order to elicit frank responses, their anonymity was assured. Their comments, which have been used throughout this article, are signified by quotation marks and are unattributed.

The article is written in three parts:

Part 1 explores current discussions about the nature of data associated with public policy development in general, different constituencies' expectations of it and various issues associated with it.

Part 2 considers characteristics attributed to cultural sector data in principle and in practice, and their applicability to ACE's new Toolkit.

Part 3 discusses a number of critical issues that may shape the future trajectory of cultural sector data.

## Definitions

- The terms "data" and "statistics" tend to be used interchangeably – one person's statistics can be another person's data. Where appropriate, this article seeks to distinguish

between them. In doing so, it understands data to constitute the raw values (chiefly, but not necessarily, numerical) from which statistics may be created. Statistics are understood as the basis of investigations and analyses of empirical facts (Romeijn, 2017).

- “Development agency” conventionally refers to an agency that helps support social and economic development within a specified country or region, especially one currently regarded as underdeveloped. ACE describes itself as the national development agency for arts, museums and libraries.
- “Evidence” is broadly defined here as “policy-relevant knowledge” (Blomkamp, 2014). “Research” refers to the effort of uncovering evidence.
- “Indicator” denotes a variable that provides information about the sector and suggests trends.
- “Insights” refer to an understanding (usually of a user base), which reveals actions that could be taken to improve business or marketing. Insights may be generated as a result of collecting and analysing data.

## Part 1: public policy data

The extent to which data is thought to play a useful role in the construction of public policy is open to question. The UK government’s interest in evidence-based policy, if not the systematic and rigorous use of statistics, is generally attributed to Blair’s first New Labour administration (Parkhurst, 2017; Solesbury, 2001). Its reforming and modernising agenda sought to shift ideologically driven politics to rational decision-making (Blair & Cunningham, 1999). The Party’s *Modernising Government White Paper* (Cabinet Office, 1999, p. 16) signalled that,

This Government expects more of policymakers. More new ideas, more willingness to question inherited ways of doing things, better use of evidence and research in policy making and better focus on policies that will deliver long-term goals.

### Official statistics

Since New Labour’s reform of the UK statistical system, official statistics have come under the jurisdiction of the UKSA, which operates at arm’s length from government as a non-ministerial department and reports directly to the UK Parliament and the devolved legislatures. Its statutory objectives are to promote and safeguard the production and publication of statistics (HMSO, 2007). It provides professional oversight of the Government Statistical Service (GSS), has exclusive responsibility for the Office for National Statistics (ONS) and independent regulation through the Office for Statistics Regulation (OSR).

Official statistics are produced by the GSS, which includes statisticians across the ONS, UK government departments, their agencies and the devolved administrations (UKSA, 2019). Most government departments have a Head of Profession whose job is to ensure that their statistics are relevant, of high quality and benefit from user engagement (UKSA, 2018). Heads report to their departmental Permanent Secretaries and Ministers, as well as to the National Statistician. Such divided loyalties may, occasionally, generate tension.

Over the past 20 years, the UN's *Fundamental Principles* (2013) UK statistics legislation and its *Code of Practice* (UKSA, 2019) have helped to transform the belief that official statistics are primarily intended for the government's needs. The *Code* expects statistics to be "of public value, high quality and produced by people and organisations worthy of trust". "Users of statistics and data should be at the centre of statistical production; their needs should be understood, their views sought and acted on, and their use of statistics supported" (UKSA, 2019, p. 28). The *Code* provides official statistics' producers with the principles and practices they should adhere to in the construction and dissemination of statistics. It encourages the production of accurate, reliable, coherent and timely statistics, provides guidance on data sources, urges producers to maintain their independence, ensure the adequate resourcing for their statistical production and support of its continuous improvement. Official statistics assessed to be fully compliant with the Code are designated as National Statistics. But, adherence to the Code is likely to benefit the production of other data, including management information (used for administrative and operational purposes), and those pertaining to third and private sector organisations.

The presumed default is for statistics produced by official statistics producers to be classified as "official". However, they may deliberately choose *not* to categorise their outputs as such – a decision that may reflect their perceived fitness for purpose, or conscious need for better quality data. Conflicts of interest, including commercial confidentiality, may affect publication. In practice, "the extent to which quality is questioned may depend on the culture of the department, the sector involved, and the media", but this can be controversial (DIFID, 2019).

### Critical issues

Specific observance of the Code may be an issue. As one interviewee observed, it "effectively represents a theory, if not a vision, for both data and statistics" and, "... in practice, it may be a matter of conscience".

Since New Labour's first administration, successive governments have committed, in principle, to improving the use of evidence and ensuring its impact. The latest Ministerial Code reminds all those who work in government of The Seven Principles of Public Life, including objectivity: "Holders of public office must act and take decisions impartially, fairly and on merit, using the best evidence and without discrimination or bias" (Cabinet Office, 2018, p. 27). This approach is reinforced by the *Data Ethics Framework* published in 2018 by DCMS, which champions data sharing, better use of data by government and open data.

But, while public confidence in official statistics remains high, trust in how official statistics are used is low – only 26% of respondents to the latest *Public confidence in official statistics* survey (NatCen, 2017) felt that government presented official figures honestly, and only 18% were confident about the media's use of the data. Distrust of evidence-informed debate and decision-making is commonplace, as evidenced by the notions of "post-factual" and "post-truth politics" (Andrews, 2017). Antipathy to specialist knowledge also abounds. As Michael Gove, then Secretary of State for Justice and Lord High Chancellor of Great Britain, famously put it, "People in this country have had enough of experts".<sup>2</sup> Lobbying is also regarded as dubious, but in 2018 when the Cabinet Office tried to prevent government funds being used to sway government opinion, its actions were interpreted as an

attack on data-driven policy-making and on researchers' desire to be involved in public policy development.<sup>3</sup> In the event, departments were left to decide whether their funding could be used to raise issues with ministers and civil servants, support responses to consultations or general policy debates (Birkwood, 2016; Cabinet Office, 2018).

Twenty years after New Labour sought to champion evidence-based policy, various commentators still maintain that evidence-based policy is conspicuously absent from much decision-making.<sup>4</sup> Calls are still being made for greater transparency: the public should be able to understand how decisions have been made, and what evidence was used.<sup>5</sup>

The so-called "evidence-policy gap" is major preoccupation of the academic literature. This conventionally refers to policymakers' insufficient respect for expertise and good quality evidence (Gavine et al., 2018; Nutley, Walter, & Davies, 2007). It also applies to researchers not fully appreciating the *realpolitik* of decision-making (Blomkamp, 2014; Burton, 2001; Parkhurst, 2017). It is often recommended that the *supply side* produces better evidence and communicates it more effectively, and that the *demand side* reforms how government processes evidence and improves policymakers' data literacy (Cairney, 2018). It is suggested that academics would benefit by considering the interests of others actors and networks, and understanding the frequently contested environment within which decisions are made – including the potentially conflicting aspirations for evidence-based policy and the politics of spin (Cairney, 2016). Policy-makers' behaviour is explained in relation to their "bounded rationality" – circumscribed approaches to gathering sufficient information with which to make decisions. Cairney (2018) suggests that decision-making is either rational – based on the best evidence – or irrational, and based on other indicators including emotions, beliefs, and habits.

While some users are seeking to improve and broaden the analyses of official statistics, others are looking for evidence elsewhere. In what may be a response to household surveys' falling response rates, *The Economist* (2018) reported that government ministers and officials increasingly turning to social media data and the outputs of data producers specialising in telecoms, computing, networking, storage and smart metres (Verhulst, 2017).

A recent article in *The Journal of the Royal Statistical Society*, argued that such words as "objective" and "subjective" that conventionally dominate statistics discourse, are "mostly unhelpful". Its authors propose substituting objectivity with "transparency, consensus impartiality and correspondence with observable reality", and subjectivity with "awareness of multiple perspectives and context dependence" (Gelman & Hennig, 2017, p. 1). Other actors have sought to redefine "evidence" to embrace

... anything from research and evaluation studies, to administrative data, expert knowledge and stakeholder consultations, and potentially even data from social media. ... We do not advocate any particular method or research discipline, as long as they are robust, unbiased and appropriate for the question(s) being asked by decision-makers. (AfUE, n.d.)

It is also suggested that what might be regarded as "good evidence" and the "good use" of evidence should be reconceptualised. For Parkhurst (2017, p. 167) this means promoting the "good governance of evidence" and the use of rigorous, systematic and valid evidence in decision-making processes that are representative of, and accountable to, the populations served.

In early 2019 the Royal Statistical Society and the Statistics User Forum (RSS/SUF, 2019) called on ONS to improve user engagement across the GSS – echoing a

concern raised some years ago (UKSA, 2010). They maintain that any initiative to enhance the value and societal benefit of official statistics must start with producers understanding current and potential users and unmet needs, across and beyond government. Communication is central to this, because of government data being released in “broadcast mode, giving little or no encouragement for users to respond” (RSS/SUF, 2019, p. 4).

The government’s use of data dashboards – interfaces that display complex data, typically drawn from multiple sources, and often in real time – is particularly criticised. Such tools are increasingly important in informing departments’ decision-making. Dashboards are relatively cheap, easy to use, provide insight into citizens’ concerns, and allow for “smarter” choices. But, according to Bartlett and Tkacz (2017, p. 5), the data

... is rarely as straightforward as it appears. Dashboards condense data for easy digestion, which can obscure a user’s knowledge of how trustworthy or accurate that data is. By presenting often very complex, messy and varied data in simplified forms ... sometimes subtle changes take place in how that data is understood. Most notably, by introducing a new emphasis on metrics, indicators and measures, it can create a greater focus on operational issues rather than longer-term strategic ones.

Given that cultural sector data is a sub-set of public sector data, the following section explores the extent to which it is affected by the same issues.

## Part 2: cultural sector data

### *In principle*

Despite (or, perhaps because of) the plethora of criticism applied to the burgeoning of cultural sector data since the late 1970s, the literature has revealed little about how “politics, institutional histories, processes and tensions” have determined its analysis. Exceptions include Selwood (2002) and Meyrick, Phiddian, and Barnett (2018). Nor has it investigated the shifting interests of the data itself, which – over the past 35 years – have fluctuated between quality of life (possibly starting with Nissel, 1983), performance management (The Arts Business, 1991), economic impact (Myerscough, 1988) and estimates of public expenditure (Feist & Dix, 1994).

Forward-looking accounts tell a very different story: they abound with recommendations as to how the burden of data collection might be reduced (IVAR & EFF, 2018) and the use of data improved (DCMS, 2017a, 2017b). Such advice usually relates to evaluations of specific policy initiatives or agencies. Yet reflections on cultural sector data were not always so myopic. Toffler, the Futurologist, whose work has been reassessed following his recent death, provides a useful overview of the possibilities of cultural sector data. As Colvile (2016) observed, be believed that that data and technology can change the world. He regarded the “explosion” of interest and investment in the arts in America and Europe after WW2 as an inevitable consequence of the evolution to post-industrialisation. “No system of social accounting could possibly be complete without indicators of the cultural life of the nation” (Toffler, 1967, p. 142. Toffler proposed a cultural data system that would encourage those making decisions in government, business, research and education to consider cultural consequences of their actions and support support rational policy-making in the cultural sector:

The arts play an important role in integrating individuals into subcultures within the larger society; they provide a running critique of social policy; they act on value systems that accelerate or retard change; and they educate individuals to new role possibilities and styles of life ... (Toffler, 1967, p. 142)

While he noted that there was a considerable historical and theoretical literature on the arts and social change, he had found “little in the way of objective contemporary data”. Indeed, “we have done everything but study them in an objective empirical fashion”. He, therefore, contended, “... that a cultural data system is needed, if only to shed light on those processes of change and adaptation that should, in our time, be the central concern of the social sciences” (All quotes Toffler, 1967, p. 143).

Cultural quality was central to Toffler’s thesis. Rather than understanding it as “a single irreducible entity”, he recognised it as represented by “a shifting combination of factors” (Toffler, 1967, p. 148) He identified 15 such factors that, taken together and measured objectively as quantitative proxies (or “substitutes”), could provide an index of the state of health of the nation’s culture, “social change and adaptation”. These were never conceived as definitive, but merely suggested that the system could provide a common language for a debate about cultural issues allowing proponents of different value systems to “at least agree on the facts”. Assuming a growth trajectory, his indicators highlighted the arts’ relationship to urban development plans, poverty and assistance to the aged. He envisaged a society whose cultural output was copious, varied, and marked by excellence; a large and sophisticated audience for the arts, which was growing and highly committed to cultural activities. He visualised training for artists and audiences, and increasing numbers of geographically decentralised cultural institutions, which disseminated the work of artists to the public with increasing efficiency.

Toffler’s proposals for social accounting arguably precipitated developments in UK statistics, including *Social Trends* (first published in 1970 and known as the “statistician’s bible”) and *Cultural Trends* itself, both co-founded by the civil servant and statistician, Muriel Nissel. Despite differences in the semantics, Toffler’s rhetoric resonates with DCMS and ACE’s current priorities, which could either be articulated in relation to ACE’s goals – excellence, access, sustainability and resilience, workforce and leadership, children and young people – or in relation to the priorities DCMS (2017a) attached to ACE – financial resilience, building skills capability, promoting digital, and strengthening the importance of cultural investment in place-making.

### **In practice**

Fifty years on from Toffler’s (1967) *The Art of Measuring the Arts*, what is the state of English cultural sector data?

### **Official cultural sector statistics**

Within the context of the UK’s statistical system, official statistics related to the cultural sector are produced by DCMS and its arm’s length bodies (DCMS, 2015). The Department’s *Statistics Workplan* identifies three priorities – trustworthiness, quality and value – effectively echoing those of *The Code of Practice for Statistics*. Those statistics are intended to meet policy teams and other users’ needs, and support key decisions (DCMS, 2018a).

DCMS currently produces 11 sets of official statistics (DCMS, 2016a). These include *Taking Part* (produced in partnership with its agencies, ACE, Historic England and Sport England), its sectors' *Economic Estimates*, its *Museums and galleries monthly visits* and *Sponsored museums annual performance indicators*. The museum statistics draw on data produced by its arms' length bodies, and are expected to be impartial and free of any political pressure (UKSA, 2012).

*Taking Part* is DCMS's flagship survey, based on an annual sample of around 10,000 adults and 2000 children in England. Launched in 2005, it is the sector's only National Statistic (UKSA, 2012). The latest easily accessible details on its cost refer to a total of £5.2 million in 2016–19 committed to IPSOS MORI for its production.<sup>6</sup> Their appointment followed changes to the survey resulting from extensive consultation with its users – policy makers, practitioners and academics.

*Taking Part's* key objective is "To provide evidence to enable policy makers and practitioners to develop, monitor and evaluate effective policy". It meets this by

- delivering robust, nationally representative data in various forms to support DCMS's priorities, those of its arms-length bodies and others;
- meeting their evolving evidence needs of measuring the effectiveness of existing policy and designing new policies based on the evidence provided;
- measuring changes over time and understanding what drives and prevents participation;
- modernising data collection and measurement, whilst maintaining comparable data from previous surveys to allow changes to be tracked and analysed over time, and
- enabling and encouraging users to undertake their own analyses of the data, and supporting DCMS and other users to exploit the data to its full potential. (DCMS, 2016b, p. 8).

As an official statistics provider, ACE is committed to transparency. Its principles are that it will only collect data that will be used and whose collection is justifiable; publish data by default wherever possible; use best practice statistical methods that are neutral, objective and unbiased; make data sets available for reuse; produce accompanying documentation to explain the data; ensure value for money, and handle official statistics in line with ONS guidelines (ACE, n.d.a). Its two official statistics are the *Museums Accreditation Statistics* and the *Annual Submission by National Portfolio Organisations* (DCMS, 2018b). At the time of this article going to press, UKSA had expressed some concern over a lack of clarity with regard to some aspects of the latter.<sup>7</sup>

In addition to its official statistics, ACE also collects numerous other datasets that contribute to the total sum of cultural sector data available.<sup>8</sup>

### Issues

Several interviewees regarded the growth of cultural sector data as indisputable: "It has increased exponentially. The sector is collecting more data now than it ever dreamed possible". Others reflected on the preponderance of accessible data, which they associated with the government's increased openness (DCMS, 2012).

What used to be collected was more likely to represent internal records and was much lower key. Take the DCMS museums annual performance measures. They were always there, but now they're seen as contributing to greater transparency.

Increases in the amount of data available were attributed to several drivers: the possibilities offered by new technologies; on-going, top-down demands for better utilised data; persistent expectations of audience growth; the continuing culture of advocacy and celebration of success. “Much more is being produced for advocacy purposes. It’s led to new work being undertaken, its wider dissemination and changes in how it’s used”. Government schedules are also a factor, as evidenced by DCMS’s regular preoccupations with “advocating for Treasury allocation in the ... Spending Review[s]” and ACE’s commissioning of reviews of existing evidence in anticipation of its next ten-year strategy (BritainThinks, 2018a, 2018b; NESTA, 2018).

Whether there is more data, or more accessible data, interviewees unanimously agreed that the nature of the data had, in general, “improved amazingly”.

Looking back, some of the [national] survey data tended to be rather *ad hoc* and there would, at best, be few questions about culture added to Gallup polls, or questions on participation would be appear in the annual British Household Panel Survey. These were sometimes quite idiosyncratic, unsystematised and didn’t provide comparable time series data.

Improvements in “collecting data, measuring performance, and generating more qualitative data” were also evident at organisational level where improved consistency had led to greater use. This marks, “a radical change from the time when there was just one person in the marketing department looking at the data”. Interviewees also maintained that it was the analysis of data that was changing things: “Even if the data remains the same, what people are doing with it is different – they’re getting much more out of it”. The work of the National Theatre’s data intelligence and the DCMS statistics teams were highlighted as exemplary.

DCMS’s Research Collection list (2014) reveals that many of the reports it commissioned were about the impacts, value and benefits of cultural provision and were written by academics using social science research methodologies. Those listed include reports for the Culture and Sport Evidence (CASE) programme (2008–12), based on *Taking Part* (DCMS, 2014). Its data was also subject to latent class, cross-domain and multivariate analyses undertaken on behalf of ACE by Chan and Goldthorpe (Bunting, Chan, Goldthorpe, Keaney, & Oskala, 2008). The same researchers had previously, independently reanalysed data from the 2001 ONS survey of *Arts in England* to reveal the relationship between social stratification and cultural consumption (Chan & Goldthorpe, 2005, 2007). Subsequent secondary analyses of *Taking Part* were also independent (Leguina & Miles, 2017; Miles & Sullivan, 2012; Taylor, 2016). Beyond academia, The Audience Agency also draws on *Taking Part* and other data sets to explore attitudes towards culture, and cultural habits amongst the UK population.<sup>9</sup>

Such research outputs imply a tacit degree of co-dependency between government officials and academics. Academics’ contributions are not necessarily “disinterested nor value neutral” (Donovan & O’Brien, 2016, p. 33) and can support, or corrode the bureaucratic ethic (O’Brien, 2016). At base, academic analyses may highlight the limitations of particular datasets and undermine familiar, if not, celebratory findings (Campbell, O’Brien, & Taylor, 2018).

Nonetheless, analyses based on a critical of mass of data drawn from different time series remain the exception rather than the rule. Such work has “resource implications ... which people are reluctant to take on board. We want to link datasets together but

don't know where it will lead. It's a massively unexplored area, and so it's currently somewhat of a struggle". Working across several data sets is not confined to academics. One combined authority was reported as planning to amalgamate local authority data with data from the subsidised and commercial sectors to inform future decision-making. Elsewhere researchers who have found official statistics insufficient for their needs are prompted to explore combinations of other data sets to address long-standing problems (Sleeman, 2018).

The creation of new knowledge does not, however, guarantee its use in policy development. Interviewees were convinced that the utilisation of data lagged well behind improvements in data quality. Even if data is being used "more to make decisions about policy and programme development", it is unclear to what extent it informs funding decisions. What organisations do with their data is, thus, a critical issue.

It seems that old habits die hard. Despite fears of "calculative reason" taking over (Prince, 2014), the sector is reputed to be slow to adopt data-driven practices, and operates at some distance from the statistical community: "The absence of a strong history of statistics and the relative lack of user demand may explain why it has no presence in the Statistics User Forum". "Data" was said to "not come up at all at DCMS" in that it was considered peripheral to policy development and decision-making. As yet, the Department still has to fill "gaps in the data necessary to produce a holistic understanding of whether museums are 'flourishing'" (DCMS, 2018c, p. 8). Its recent review of CIPFA's Public Library statistics, noted that the data conventionally used to describe the current state of English libraries lacks "important insights" (O'Bryan, 2018). It should, therefore, come as no surprise that "The majority of arts and cultural organisations still do not use data for important purposes" (MTM London, 2017, pp. 5–6). It is neither routinely used "to ask potentially uncomfortable questions" nor "to assess areas for improvement". Perhaps it still smacks of managerialism – "ammunition with which to challenge artistic programming that might only have been of minority interest". The rhetoric still garners greater appeal than the evidence when it comes to the limited capacity of culture to generate economic impact (What Works, 2016) and the persistent imbalance of socio-economic groups attending arts events (NESTA, 2018).

Agencies have conventionally attributed an underuse of data to the sectors' lack of skills. DCMS appears to be somewhat ambivalent about that. Its Tailored Review of ACE reported a clear steer from stakeholders which indicated that providing data on impact should not become a mandatory requirement for funded organisations in the immediate future (DCMS, 2017a, p. 45). Since then, both DCMS (2018d) and NESTA (2018) called for funded organisations to improve their collection, use and sharing of audience data. This would allow cultural institutions to develop a more informed and responsive relationship with existing audiences, engage new, and under-represented, audiences, optimise business processes and unlock the value of their cultural assets.

Interviewees described the sector as largely "fearful of numbers and statistics". "Most people take a fairly narrow view, related to their own experience", and often "place great reliance upon small surveys, which undermine the reliability of the evidence. They don't understand things like margins of error or confidence intervals, the impact of sample sizes, what random samples might represent". Incompleteness, partiality and selection bias persist. "The quote ... 'Lies, damn lies and statistics', probably sums up how they think about statistics", and their default is to

... Always talk about data, and very rarely about statistics. We regard data as broader than statistics, and as involving 'evidence'. This includes numeric information ... and qualitative material. It might refer to any research undertaken ... or for setting baselines for future strategies and initiatives.

Organisations still associate data with accounting to their funders, rather than regarding it as an asset. But, since even DCMS was said to find data "to support policy", it follows that other organisations could well "use it to prove what they want"

Data has come to be regarded as a sufficient evidence-base for decision-making. This could be raw data, and might refer to a range of different things ... It's used for simple advocacy: how many people were attracted; how much money they generate. ACE requires them to do that.

Interviewees speculated that the availability of certain technologies might even be contributing to the skills gap. Pictograms and data visualisations were criticised as detrimental because of their oversimplification and decontextualisation of statistics. Target readers "don't have the expertise to take it any further". While digital technology allows organisations to collect and process more box office data than ever before, their analysis of it was characterised, in the main, as myopic:

To date, organisations have been most enthusiastic about harnessing resources to make them financially viable, which might involve changing pricing. This, however, is often short term. They're less good at using data to support longer-term thinking. In a product-led landscape, they're less keen to confront the prospect of possibly changing their programming.

And, because organisations have become more effective at talking to return visitors, "their default has been to emphasise the importance of those ... rather than broadening their audience base".

It follows that encouraging the sector to embrace big data (Lilly & Moore, 2013) might be regarded as overambitious, if not misguided (Leetaru, 2019):

It's assumed that references to data, if not big data, are going to be a more effective way for organisations to present themselves, rather than by using statistics ... Big data has an aura of scientific objectivity about it, it appears stable, and is attributed with a sense of power that isn't necessarily appropriate. The whole idea of big data is associated with abstraction, but the bigger the data, the further away it becomes from the particularities of the objective. Using it to get some purchase on specific facts is more and more difficult (Interviewee).

Looking to the future, those invited to reflect on ACE's next ten-year strategy, recognised that using data could make a difference: "ACE has the ability to survey, gather data on and present a national view of arts, museums and libraries which would provide vital information for planning" (BritainThinks, 2018a, p. 76). Its consultees' default was to turn to ACE for help with their data management (BritainThinks, 2018a, p. 74).

### ***The impact and insight toolkit***

As a sector-led initiative, the project's appeal initially lay in foregrounding often-tacit understandings of artistic value. It offered ACE an opportunity to relate these to its policy objectives of broadening the audiences for the arts, and evidencing the impact and public value of its funding. The project was inspired by the Australian management consultancy, Pracsys Economics' work for the Department of Culture and the Arts, Western Australia, which had devised a Public Value Measurement Framework that

allowed it to “create a family of metrics that connected the defined outcome areas (people, communities, economies and environment) with its stated policy drivers – quality, reach, impact and value” (Pracsys, 2011, p. 1). The Framework, which appears to be indebted to Toffler’s vision, was designed to capture

... the social, civic, economic and environmental impact of cultural activities (or any publically funded activity). This includes public opinions and data facts. All metrics sit within a broad outcomes framework, contributing to a comprehensive value story (Chappell, 2017).

Fast forwarding to the present – ACE commissioned Culture Counts/Counting What Counts to deliver the Toolkit project, exploiting data generated through its online platform. Both entities are closely related to Pracsys.<sup>10</sup>

ACE requires those NPOs in receipt of at least £250,000 of its funding to use the Toolkit to report how their peers and publics rated at least four examples of their work per year. The 256 organisations, whose participation is mandatory, account for 33% of ACE’s NPOs and receive over 80% of its NPO support, if not the majority of its audience reach (ACE, 2018, 2019a, 2019b). In some respects, they might be perceived as representing *the* cultural sector. The Toolkit is also available to NPOs with less support, and presumably smaller audiences.

The activities selected for scrutiny may be very different, ranging from specific events, to exhibitions and performances. Each evaluation requires the NPOs to collect a minimum of three survey responses from self-assessors, three from peers and an unlimited number from the public (ACE, n.d.b) – the national Pilot encouraged a minimum of 30 (Nordcity, 2016). The NPOs are expected to code responses according to a set of standardised qualitative statements.

While the Toolkit’s basic premise is to allow organisations to compare their audiences’ responses against their intentions, a number of other functions have been loaded onto it. These include organisations benchmarking their findings against aggregated data from other ACE clients by art form and geographic area. International comparisons are also possible. “Examining data from diverse geographies and ethnicities means that patterns can be identified that help us learn more about the impact of culture on different parts of our community” (Chappell, 2016). Their collection of “big data” helps each organisation “learn more about our audiences and understand how and why different contexts shape experience”.

Like ACE’s other toolkits, the *Impact and Insight Toolkit* is intended to help organisations to self-evaluate, measure their short-term outcomes, and advocate more effectively.<sup>11</sup> It should provide them with “more persuasive evidence and insights” which might encourage potential funders. And, thanks to the Toolkit’s generation of “richer data and evaluation culture” (Hopkin, 2018), ACE will also be able to make “stronger case for continued public investment in arts and culture” (Hopkin, 2018), and deliver greater benefits to the public:

I believe, and I think we at the Arts Council believe, that this will make arts and culture more accessible to more people so it is better for the public and it is a better way of making sure we are investing public money in the best possible way (Henley in Platt & October, 2017).

### Part 3: a possible future trajectory

Given the scale of ACE’s investment in *The Impact and Insight Toolkit*, this section reflects on what kind of influence, if any, the project might have on the immediate trajectory of

English cultural sector data. It considers various issues that might be considered critical – namely, its clarity of purpose, expectations of the data, the interests of the data providers, benefits to the public and contribution to advocacy.

The Toolkit is the latest initiative intended to deliver the holy grail of measuring impact and quality of the arts kick-started by Matarasso's 1997 report on the social impacts of arts participation. During the course of its seven-year development, the project has had various working titles – the Participatory Metrics, the Manchester Metrics, the Quality Metrics (sometimes jointly referred to as “the Pilot”),<sup>12</sup> and the Consumer Insight Toolkit – which suggest modified emphases, if not changed priorities. A review of the Pilot found that users needed greater clarity and stronger messaging “about its ultimate purpose” (Nordcity, 2016). Its providers are expected to build “renewed support, confidence and understanding for the toolkit” (ACE, n.d.a). Indeed, organisations appear to be unclear about ACE's use of their data more generally (DCMS, 2017a, p. 44).

Shifting the semantics from “metrics” to “insight” conceivably addresses some of those issues (Nordcity, 2016). Nevertheless, the project was always predicated on the production of metrics managed via a “metric framework” (Culture Counts, 2018a, 2018b). While ACE's thinking may have changed, Culture Counts fundamental approach to capturing data has not. And, while metrics are conventionally understood to be neutral quantitative measures of standard units, Culture Counts uses the term more freely to describe the quality or impact of individuals' experience of an event, programme or place (Culture Counts, n.d.a). ACE's Chief Executive dismissed the term “quality metrics” as “somewhat deceptive” – “I think we can all agree that it is a little bit misleading” (Platt & October, 2017).

To all intents and purposes, the primary aim of the project is to help the NPOs' creative processes: it was initiated by the sector and conceived as being to their advantage. Registered NPOs are encouraged to develop, test and validate metrics for specific artforms and types of cultural experience (Culture Counts, 2018b). But although it was originally intended to reduce cultural organisations' reporting burden (Knell, 2013, p. 31), the Pilot found that interviewing and uploading the data to the digital platform considerably challenged NPOs' skills and administrative capacities (Nordcity, 2016).

ACE has specified that users should have on-going, real time access to the data, that monitoring information should be presented in a range of formats including datasets, visualisations and analytical dashboards, and that more sophisticated means of exploring and understanding the data should be provided (ACE, n.d.a). Given perceptions of the cultural sector's relationship with data, it has to be hoped that the project's training programme will be sufficient to ensure the NPOs' competence to collect, analyse and use the data. While Culture Counts is wary that possible bias and interviewer misinterpretation may affect organisations' data returns (Chappell, 2019), it also acknowledges that as an outside body, it is seen to provide external validation of those contributions.<sup>13</sup>

ACE acknowledges its “responsibility to be able to be accountable to the general public” (Mowlah in Platt & October, 2017). In practice, this means that audiences at funded activities should be treated “... more like customers. Ultimately, the arts and cultural world is in constant competition with other forms of entertainment and we have to win over people's leisure time” (Henley in Platt & October, 2017). Becki Haines, an NPO spokesperson involved in a promotional ACE podcast, recognised the emphasis on audiences as “... absolutely crucial because if we do not ask them then we do not know what they want and what it is that we are supposed to make” (Platt & October, 2017). It is possible that,

as a result of the project, some NPOs may come to hold audience assessments in higher regard in the future than they had in the past, and that they will welcome their contributions to the development of their creative processes and programming. However, this was never explored in assessments of the Pilot.

This apparent move towards cultural democracy, in the sense of greater access, participation, engagement and inclusion (Hadley & Belfiore, 2018) seems way beyond McMaster's, 2008 recommendations to the then Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport. His report, *Supporting Excellence in the Arts. From Measurement to Judgement* argued that the "excellence" of artistic work itself was the ultimate goal of cultural organisations, and should be the principal criterion for public funders. The question of what was good should be settled through "self-assessment and peer review" by "people with the confidence and authority to make tough decisions". While sidestepping the potential for peer review to be subject to political pressure, McMaster did not count the public amongst those exercising judgement.

By employing the Toolkit, ACE will be collecting audiences' perspectives via a number of metrics or "dimensions" – the quality of the concept of the work, its presentation, distinctiveness, challenge, captivation, enthusiasm, local impact, relevance and rigour. It has been suggested that cultural assessments tend to be characterised by the use of language and phrases with no universally agreed definitions (Meyrick et al., 2018). An evaluation of the Pilot noted some difficulties in the publics' understanding of the metrics (Nordcity, 2016). It is assumed that this too is being addressed.

In the event, ACE's confidence in the NPOs' audiences is limited. They are not being invited to comment on the works' originality, risk and excellence (ACE, n.d.b). These may be evaluated by three self-assessors and three peers. Audiences are not invited to participate in decision-making (Gilmore, Glow, & Johanson, 2017). Their involvement is evidently regarded as educational: it will encourage them "to really *think* about the work they have experienced" (Mowlah, 2016, p. 322 – his emphasis).

ACE's investment in the Toolkit is also predicated on its advocacy potential – both in respect of individual organisations and the sector as a whole. Despite its status as an official statistics producer, the agency has no compunction in conceiving of its new data as a lobbying tool (albeit Lottery, rather than government – funded). Indeed, in 2016 and 2017 it commissioned research on how it might most effectively communicate with MPs (ComRes, 2018) and it encourages its constituencies to make the case for arts and culture.<sup>14</sup> Culture Counts marketing reinforces that: "The arts needs an evidence-based value story. Without it, resources allocated to the arts will always be under threat" (Chappell, 2017), and anecdotal evidence is provided of the project positively contributing to organisations' funding applications (Culture Counts, n.d.b; Knell & Whitaker, 2016a). Endorsements of the Toolkit may well reflect the fact that almost all the positive reports and scholarly papers on it have been written by those involved or associated with it in some capacity (Arvanitis, Gilmore, Florack, & Zuanni, 2016; Bunting & Knell, 2015; Gilmore et al., 2017; Knell, 2013; Knell et al., 2015; Knell & Whitaker, 2016a, 2016b) suggesting something of a walled garden.

Although lobbying may be more acceptable than it once was, the Treasury and other public funding authorities still need to be assured of the validity of any arguments about increasing public funding – something that Myerscough's case for the economic impact of the arts in 1988 famously failed to achieve (Hughes, 1989). A "toolkit approach" may not

suffice – toolkits being associated with “excessive simplifications” and “perceived advocacy potential” (Belfiore & Bennett, 2010, p. 121). Culture Counts’ continuous analysis of the NPOs’ data may enable the aggregated data to reveal changes over time, but it is unclear how consistent the results are likely to be. Some of those participating in the national Pilot had difficulties in recruiting viable sample sizes, and the full complement of the Toolkit’s metrics has yet to be fully standardised.

**To close:** This article has reflected on three visions of cultural sector data: Toffler’s proposals on *The Art of Measuring the Arts*; DCMS’s *Taking Part* and ACE’s *Impact and Insight Toolkit*. Considered consecutively these suggest a trajectory shaped by increasingly myopic, institutional concerns. The first envisaged an independent cultural data system revealing how culture both contributes to, and reflects, social change. The second seeks to understand the population’s participation in cultural activities in order to understand the effectiveness of existing policy. The third was originally intended to allow organisations to compare their audiences’ responses against their intentions, although a number of other expectations have been added to that. The Toolkit’s providers, Culture Counts, conceived it in terms of a wider framework designed to connect people, communities, economies and environment in relation to particular policy drivers. ACE’s aspirations are more insular: it envisages the Toolkit as improving the effectiveness of organisations’ advocacy while also reinforcing its own case for public support.

Comparing the Toolkit with *Taking Part* reveals stark differences between England’s two costliest contracted data collections. These cover the relative clarity of their objectives; the nature of their data production; their user base; their accuracy, consistency, coherence, validation and impartiality. These are, by definition, conservative comparators associated with the values of official statistics production.

Such disparities raise questions about the impartiality of the Toolkit and those closest to it: the NPOs are potentially compromised by their dual role as data providers and grant recipients, as is ACE in its capacity as an official statistics provider and development agency. These functions have conflicting needs: the former requires ACE’s distance from its sectors to allow for the production of unbiased analytical perspectives; the latter necessitates ACE’s close proximity to its sectors to help strengthen them and evangelise on their behalf. Indeed, one interviewee understood the arts funding system as operating “as a kind feedback loop” in which advocating for one part of the system feeds advocacy in another. Culture Counts’ involvement in the Toolkit is a pragmatic function of its business concerns.

The Toolkit’s operation, which is largely determined by both vested and conflicting interests, contrasts starkly with the ways in which *Taking Part*, and ACE’s other official statistics are expected to operate under UKSA’s jurisdiction. However, it should be acknowledged that the level of resources committed to *Taking Part* is exceptional. “Official [if not, National] statistics require a huge amount of work to meet compliance. If all data were provided to that standard, there would be no capacity for anything else” (Interviewee).

Despite seeking clarification as to ACE’s role as a “development agency”, DCMS’s Tailored Review (2017a) makes no mention of its influence on the agency’s approach to data. Yet, at the same time that the review was being undertaken ACE was hinting at a teleology according to which its cultural sector data collection and analysis would be explicitly purposed to deliver a number of specific functions, including advocacy. This may have

considerable traction in a sector criticised for being so slow to address skills-gaps around data and for its resistance to the adoption of data-driven practices. More generally, it raises serious questions about the longer-term narratives of efficacy and advocacy that have led us to this moment, and the very serious ramifications that these might have for the future

## Notes

1. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance-library/impact-and-insight-toolkit>.
2. <https://www.ft.com/content/3be49734-29cb-11e6-83e4-abc22d5d108c>.
3. This was arguably exacerbated by the influence of the right wing, libertarian think tank, the Institute of Economic Affairs (Smith, Collin, Hawkins, Gilton, & Moore, 2016).
4. The UK Alliance for Useful Evidence (AfUE) campaigns for the importance of decision-makers, government and civil society to routinely use high-quality evidence to inform strategy, policy and practice, including the rigorous evaluation of the impact of initiatives. (<https://www.alliance4usefulevidence.org/>) The What Works Network aims to improve the ways in which government and other organisations use, create and share high quality evidence at both local and national levels (GOV. UK, 2019).
5. The charitable campaign group, Sense about Science's *Transparency of Evidence* reviews scored a selection of government department policies according to whether citizens can see clearly what the government proposes to do and why. The organisation advocates openness and honesty about research findings, challenges the misrepresentation of science and evidence in public life, and works to ensure the public interest in sound evidence is recognised in public debates and policymaking. (<http://senseaboutscience.org/activities/transparency-evidence-spot-check/>)
6. This sum comes from a Freedom of Information request by Helen McNally (reference FOI2018 08446). I am grateful to Adrian Babbidge for locating this.
7. See correspondence of 29.4.19 between Director General for Regulation, Office for Statistics Regulation and Andrew Mowlah, Director of Research, ACE <https://www.statisticsauthority.gov.uk/correspondence/attendance-at-national-portfolio-organisations-and-major-partner-museums/>.
8. See <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/research-and-data/our-data>.
9. See Technical Glossary in this issue.
10. Pracsys and Culture Counts share at least four key members of staff. Counting What Counts Ltd. is the latter's UK arm.
11. These include Measuring Outcomes, Inspiring Learning for All, Evidencing your Impact, Understanding Society (<https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/advice-and-guidance-library/toolkits>).
12. See <https://culturecounts.cc/uk/reports/>.
13. <https://culturecounts.cc/case-studies/access-arts/>.
14. <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/why-culture-matters/making-case>.

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