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CULTURAL POLICY UPDATE

Making better **use** of cultural policy research **findings**

‘There is a divide between cultural policy research on the one hand and cultural practice and public policy on the other’ is a common lament in the cultural field. They seem to coexist in an everlasting split. This issue of Cultural Policy Update looks into the barriers which prevent an easy flow of research findings to the cultural field and public cultural policy and the implementation of those findings. Even more important are possible solutions to bridge this gap. Co-creation and knowledge-sharing are in the foreground in 2012. They express new ways of gathering and disseminating new forms of information, needed in the knowledge society.

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Cristina Ortega and Melba Claudio

Cultural observatories and the transfer of scientific knowledge

Cultural observatories face new challenges to advance towards a changing society of knowledge. They are mainly information brokers and focus on facilitating the transfer of knowledge between researchers/academics, cultural workers and cultural policymakers. It is often suggested, though, that this goal is hampered by a lack of understanding between researchers/academics and the users of research results. To gather opinions on this question, a quick poll was carried out for this issue of Cultural Policy Update among professionals in the cultural sector in Europe. Barriers are mentioned, proposals and suggestions are made, both by researchers and the users of research findings like cultural managers and public policymakers, to improve the most relevant function of cultural observatories: the transference of knowledge.

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While both information and knowledge have always been strategic parts of decision-making, the big difference between today's society and previous ones lies in the dramatic transformations made possible by the third revolution featuring ICT. Never before have both information and knowledge been enshrined as the great motors of political, social, cultural and economic development. It should be noted, however, that there are grave doubts about the global response to whether the exponential leap forward has been made from the information society to the knowledge society. As indicated in the UNESCO world report *Towards knowledge societies*, the information society revolves around constant technological advances, while the knowledge society is based on the cornerstone of effective management and use of that information to facilitate its corresponding conversion and transmission in the form of knowledge.¹ Any society that intends to rise to the challenges that we are facing today and advance in political, economic and social development cannot remain apart from the qualitative distance which separates these two models of the emerging society.

Information into knowledge

Undoubtedly, the challenge is to invest in a knowledge society in

¹ UNESCO (2005).

the Information Age. The collection, processing and intelligent use of information, supported by the pillar of ICT, is only the first step for the generation of knowledge. Information is indeed an instrument of knowledge, but not knowledge itself. Information and technology development go hand in hand in a process that is not an end in itself, but acquires meaning through a rational, strategic and innovative use which converges on knowledge generation. Knowledge that in turn can only be of value when it is applied,

tion have been created. Observatories have become one of the types of organizations that have to encourage the conversion and transmission of information into knowledge through its effective management and use. To this end, observatories have comprehensive information systems which, via the capturing, processing and intelligent use of information, constitute the first step towards the generation of knowledge and, of course, higher goals of a strategic nature for decision-making policies.

By observatories in general we understand organisms in charge of facilitating the access to information and its transference to knowledge, in order to assist the decision-making by means of a systematic information system. Their main function in the emerging society is to facilitate the transfer of and access to information and knowledge with the following aims: to spark debate, to promote dialogue, to contribute to reflection and to stimulate the creation of thought; to facilitate research; to improve the decision-making process; and to serve as support for policies.

A specific kind of observatory is the cultural observatory. Its landscape is rich and varied. Institutional formats, organizational structures, resources, goals and actions are quite heterogeneous. There are observatories which centre their attention solely on reflection and

research in the cultural scope (The Bank of Sweden Tercentenary Foundation, the Institute for Cultural Analysis (ICAn) in the United Kingdom, Observatoire de la Culture et des Communications du Québec in Canada), whereas others develop action to support cultural policies generally and decision-making in particular (Osservatorio Culturale del Piemonte in Italy, Observatory of Cultural Policies in Africa (OPCA), the Southern African Cultural Information System (SACIS) and the Observatorio Cultural con Orientación Bibliotecológica y Promoción de la Lectura in Argentina). There are also organizations that carry out their activities at both levels of intervention (Asia-Europe Foundation in Singapore, European Audiovisual Observatory in France, Observatorio de Industrias Creativas (OIC) in Argentina, Creative Exchange in the United Kingdom or the Canadian Observatory). On the other hand, there are observatories that are not only in charge of the dissemination of data and objective information, like those just mentioned, but which also take an active role in the subjective configuration of the sector through the development of functions focused on action (European Observatory on Cultural Tourism, The Budapest Observatory, Cultural Observatory of Buenos Aires, ERICarts Institute, Observatory of Cultural Policies, Observatory of Cultural Activities, Oserva-

Observatories have to encourage the conversion and transmission of information into knowledge

shared and evaluated to generate new knowledge. A society that has knowledge as its motor of development enters into a virtuous circle, where advances in knowledge promote and accelerate the emergence of new knowledge. It is a cumulative logic to which scholars, including Castells, refer as *'the application of that knowledge and information to apparatus of knowledge generation and information / communication processing, in a cumulative feedback loop between innovation and its uses'*.²

In the context of the information revolution new forms of organiza-

² Castells (1997), p. 58.

torio Culturale, Latin American Initiative, EUCLID, Observatory of the Colombian Caribbean, Centre for Cultural Research and Interarts Foundation or the Observatory of Urban Culture).

New challenges of cultural observatories

Nowadays the debate about cultural observatories in Europe is mainly guided by the ENCATC Policy Grouping Monitors of Culture³ that has set up a framework for discussion (platform) and exchange of best practices to improve the design and evaluation of culture policies, mainly at regional level. In order to reflect on the future role of cultural observatories a Think Tank was organized in Bilbao by the Institute of Leisure Studies of the University of Deusto on 8 and 9 September 2010. One of the outcomes was a series of insights and recommendations:

1. The variety of cultural observatories must be considered as an element of vitality and democracy, responding to the wide range of needs and expectations on the part of local communities, cultural actors and public administrations.
2. Cultural observatories can effectively play their role of critical mediators between society and the cultural community on the one hand, and public decision-makers on the other. This requires inde-

pendence from political power and from the market, arm's length from cultural actors, a multidisciplinary approach, stable financial resources from a variety of sources, and a strategic vision.

3. Culture is quickly evolving and its contents are prevailing upon its material substratum. It is a long wide process, requiring a balanced combination of general analysis and specific focuses. Cultural observatories, therefore, should adopt a long-term perspective and track supply and demand in their complexity and multidimensionality. Economic and social benefits generated by culture must also be analysed. Cultural observatories can play a crucial role in this period of transition. This implies a common willingness to overcome the local dimension, activating a wider network able to share methodologies and to adopt a comparative approach. In such a way the complex evolution of culture can be properly interpreted and its dynamics optimized within a wider territorial scope and a long-term view.
4. Action undertaken by cultural observatories should go beyond data collection and focus on interpretation and elaborate guidelines. This requires cooperation with other organizations committed to data collection and evaluation and the ability to consider stakeholders' views, in order to incorporate qualitative analysis and elaborate

appropriate indicators and benchmarks to measure performance and impact on markets.

5. The present transition requires deeper involvement of cultural observatories. Its features are evident: public budgets for culture are subject to cuts, but creative industries are viewed as a driver of economic growth; cultural markets are converging and incorporating technology; cultural consumers migrate through forms and styles and often produce and share cultural contents.

Reviewing these recommendations, the conclusion is clear: cultural observatories have to face new challenges in order to advance towards a changing society of knowledge. They were established at the beginning of a society of knowledge where they had to cope with the challenges characteristic of a transition from industry to services. Nowadays, cultural observatories coexist in a society that is emerging in a new era where time is limited and other issues are abundant. We are entering a new era called the economy of experience⁴ and have to face other sorts of challenges where the subjective/qualitative side acquires great relevance. This becomes all the more obvious when taking into account that some of them are participating directly in the cultural process, with actions that include the presentation of

³ For more information on the monitors of culture, see www.monitorsofculture.deusto.es

⁴ The term experience economy was coined by Pine & Gilmore (1999).

proposals or recommendations, the development of consultancy studies, or the preparation of strategies and intervention programmes.⁵ But what should they do?

Should cultural observatories focus only on gathering data or also generate knowledge? Should they generate intelligence and new ideas on cultural and creative industries, heritage and the arts to support and improve cultural policies? We believe that observatories should broaden their scope and generate knowledge and intelligence, not just monitor the present situation. In fact there are other organisms in charge of this issue and there is no need for their activities to overlap. The present transition requires a deeper and different involvement of cultural observatories that draws special attention to the function of the transference of knowledge.

Genuine barrier perceptions in the transference of knowledge

As the SACo report on *The state of art of cultural observatories in Europe* revealed, the prior functions of cultural observatories resemble the main general functions of observatories in general: research and consultancy; facilitating research; supporting cultural policies; promoting debate and dialogue; contributing to reflection; and improving the process of decision-making.⁶ This

⁵ Ortega (2008).
⁶ Ortega, Claudio & Buntén (2011). See also the PowerPoint presentation based on the SACo-report.



PowerPoint presentation based on the SACo-report

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study also revealed that the majority of cultural observatories are working from objectives that mainly focus on facilitating the transfer of knowledge between researchers/academics, cultural workers and cultural policymakers. However, it is not uncommon to hear opinions that suggest that this goal is often hampered by the perceived lack of understanding between researchers/academics and the users of research results who are mainly responsible for making decisions about public policy.

Does the gap in understanding between researchers and policymakers really exist? Can we actually speak of barriers that make it difficult to take decisions based on information and knowledge generated by researchers? What can be done to improve the use made of the results of cultural research?

Without wishing to conduct a rigorous methodological survey, we carried out a quick poll (for example with the help of brainstorming) among professionals in the cultural sector in Europe for this issue of *Cultural Policy Update*.⁷ The main objective of this exercise was to gather opinions on these questions. The result has been interesting and could serve as a backdrop to a further study on this topic. We received responses from 27 people including researchers, cultural managers and professionals involved

in designing cultural policies, and people who fulfil both roles. While these quick-poll results are not conclusive, it should be noted that over 80% of respondents think that the gap exists and more than 65% feel optimistic and think that it can be solved. These are some of the barriers mentioned by people interviewed:

1. *Discrepancy between the objectives of stakeholders* – what the researchers consider to be important is not necessarily equally important to the decision-makers;
2. *Lack of understanding about working speeds* – the time constraint and the lack of specific knowledge of what is going on in the literature undoubtedly also affect the decision-making process. Governments need to react fast. They are client oriented and often do not take the time to seek and base their judgments on scientific production (evidence-based policies), or, failing that, they do not have time to wait for the valid reliable information that is required to make informed decisions. When the data do arrive, results may force the decision-makers to act on them immediately. On the other hand, sometimes the researcher cannot assume that decision-makers' needs are short termed. This could be due either to a lack of resources to act quickly without sacrificing methodological rigour or to how conservative they
- can be about taking risks when outlining their recommendations.
3. *Lack of expertise and informed arguments to defend the speech and proposals* – sometimes politicians are not fully aware of the important technical and organizational details of their areas of responsibility. Other times, even in the closest professional fields, information is lost along the way due to excessive bureaucracy.
4. *Lack of toolkits* – the research outcomes often do not provide tools to implement changes and recommendations on how to improve practice. To promote good practices effectively, it is necessary to present the research outcomes in a way that is understandable to non-academics.
5. *Obstacles to impartiality and reticence* – the potential political cost of basing decisions on scientific evidence does not only determine whether that cost can be taken into account. It can also provoke certain recommendations being systematically filtered, if they are not adapted to the thinking of the political group, even though the recommendations are valid. Researchers' ideology can also influence their work which is why they sometimes take a stand on certain evidence. It is sometimes easier for researchers to maintain contact with other researchers than deal with other professionals who are closer to the practical situation. This situation

⁷ Less than 1% of the respondents were from non-European countries.

deepens the gap between knowledge and practice.

6. *Access* → *translation* → *listening* – there is a perception that there is not enough research and the little that exists is not disseminated well. Universities play a relevant role as sources of knowledge which often do not cross academic boundaries, thereby failing to facilitate access and open knowledge up to society. It is difficult for the universities to cooperate with organizations outside their structure. That structure also becomes a barrier to research outcomes that have been tested and implemented.
7. *Academic language is not understandable* – some people identify academic language as another barrier. The challenge is how to make the outcomes accessible and understandable, whilst maintaining the prestige and quality of the research.

Proposals for better use of cultural research findings

We would like to comment on some proposals to improve the most relevant function of cultural observatories: the transference of knowledge. These proposals or suggestions were made by researchers, cultural managers and policymakers in the poll for this issue of *Cultural Policy Update*. They address the use of cultural research findings. The most outstanding ones are:

1. *Opening a training process in two*

paths – researchers must provide those responsible for implementing public policies with evidence-based discourse tools. On the other hand, those who make decisions should consult with researchers and anticipate their information needs during the planning process. Opportune communication with researchers and adequate explanation of the real context and its limitations would help to bring the needs and possibilities of both sides closer.

2. *Creating plural collaborative communities* – it would be useful to create opportunities (think tanks, working groups, innovation laboratories, etc.) for the public presentation and discussion of the research results, together with the policymakers. That is, spaces that facilitate the access to information, promoting collective knowledge creation and stimulating new synergies. There should be better interaction between researchers and policymakers.
3. *Setting up improved knowledge management* – knowledge managers could help to improve the integration of the variety of inputs on which cultural research is based. This would help break the bias that blurs research developed from a particular discipline (economics, tourism, etc.).
4. *Access* → *translation* → *listening* – observatories, public research departments, universities and research centres need to find a way

to provide systematic information about the important findings. But access to the research means more than just being able to pick up a research paper and read it; you must be able to understand how to use the research. As mentioned in point 3, promoting meetings between cultural stakeholders to discuss potentially relevant research results could be a way to reach policymakers bottom-up. In addition, researchers must understand the value of accessible user friendly language, as well as understanding the priorities and objectives of policymakers.

5. *Civil society fills the gap* – it is important to encourage civil society to be proactive towards authorities and to participate actively in the knowledge creation process, close to the researchers. To involve non-specialist and larger audiences is difficult but it is the only way to ensure a democratic impact of research studies. Networks should be more proactive on this issue.

Cultural observatories play a crucial role as information brokers nowadays in the transfer of knowledge from researchers/scholars to cultural policymakers. These are some highlights from the opinions and suggestions mentioned during the dialogue about how to improve the use of cultural research findings among researchers, cultural managers and cultural policymakers.

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