

FOR SMALL, ARTIST-RUN, NICHE OR OBSCURE ARTS INITIATIVES.

dis- CONNECTED BODIES

ARTS MARKETING
PRACTITIONERS,
AUDIENCE ENGAGEMENT
CONSULTANTS.

RESEARCH ASSOCIATES - OUR ARTS AUDIENCE RESEARCH PROJECTS

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For small, artist-run, niche or obscure arts initiatives.

We exist to increase access to the contemporary arts and help support art initiatives and artist-run spaces to become more democratic and inclusive.

We partner with innovative contemporary arts and artist-led spaces that are, or want to be, **experimental, sustainable, collaborative, and accessible** to provide them a roadmap to develop their audience engagement, grow audience participation, increase reach and enrich experiences.

Our range of custom consultancy solutions have been designed with the small arts organisation in mind, seeking **Arts Council England funding, NPO status or who are required to submit ACE reporting documents.**

The arts don't need marketing,

We find audiences fascinating, and feel successful audience engagement as an emotional response. Yet search listings of 'arts marketing consultants' and you'll find a serious lack of understanding of this simple and important perspective. Still thinking in terms of marketing not engagement, many employ the same strategies and tactics for the arts as you would for Coca-Cola or an iPhone.

We're proud of our unique approach to arts engagement; a process that involves an extremely limited use of 'traditional marketing'; instead combining key elements of marketing with the unique requirements of arts engagement and audience development. We look forward to our continued research of arts audiences to develop this approach; and **optimistically move the arts industry away from being marketed.**

Our National Arts Audience Research.

Research into the arts audience is crucial to support the industry moving forward. We pride ourselves on our knowledge of contemporary arts audiences, their changing habits and the means of connecting with them.

The period 2018-19 saw Disconnected Bodies conduct three arts research projects. These are listed below, with the findings submitted to Arts Council England to contribute to their previous audience research. Key components and most important findings from these studies have been summarised in this document.

Our research projects have included,

- Arts Audiences: Establishing Opportunities for Engagement
- An Experimental Investigation of how Digital Engagement Can Deepen and Democratize Artistic Exchange with Audiences
- Audience Development: A Focus on Widening Participation

Launched in January 2020, our current research project, The Diverse and Changing Needs of Arts Audiences, requires participation from a range of small, artist-run spaces. We are actively seeking such organisations to contribute to the project in the form of audience data, experimental trials, surveys or conversation.

The finished report and findings are to be submitted to Arts Council England to support their current arts audience data and guide future strategic planning.

We welcome any enquires to participate.

Arts Audiences: Establishing Opportunities for Engagement.

The engagement of arts audiences is in a serious state of flux. Behaviors, motivations and the expectations when interacting with visual arts are changing.

This study provides new insights into the benefits and challenges of arts organisations engaging with audiences throughout their operations. Emphasising the impact of emerging audience behaviors, especially as younger audiences become the primary consumer, opportunities for digital strategies and methods of data collection, questions pertaining to arts audience engagement can be explored; with a critical review of the literature on audience engagement included to provide a robust framework.

Based on a mixed methodology comprising of desk based, interview and observation methods, this study was conducted with considerable emphasis being placed on deriving qualitative data directly from participating placement organisations to gain firsthand opinions on audience engagement and to provide insights into current methods of engagement as to provoke future discussion.

The Relationship Between Audience Engagement and Marketing.

The definition of audience engagement certainly leaves room for some overlap with marketing. (Mabbitt, 2016) agrees, stating, 'audience engagement falls under the umbrella of general marketing', yet the author argues, 'but it depends on the definition of marketing - something of a nebulous term'. This is especially the case, considering when Harris raises the point that, 'we've got lazy about using 'marketing' only to mean 'selling existing products to existing audiences''.

Multiple definitions exist and there is a plurality of meanings, but in many ways marketing feeds audience engagement as (Albee, 2015) explains, 'engagement is about what comes next'. Mabbitt further expands by writing, 'while audience engagement focuses on building a relationship with individuals who become your loyal audience, marketing is about finding people who are going to love your current show'. There is a recognition of the long-term value of keeping an audience as opposed to direct marketing, which focuses on getting new clients; moving an audience member from one-time interest to a loyal regular. (Fanizza, 2014) views audience engagement as something completely separate from marketing, describing the difference as 'marketing is getting the word out about your show yet audiences engagement, by contrast, is working with and creating with the audience to benefit both the organisation and the audience'.

To What Extent is the Arts Audience Changing?

Arts audiences are currently polarised. The DCMS's Taking Part survey shows that "while participation in the arts has remained relatively static over the previous years, it is significantly higher for people from the upper social economic group (84.4% in 2016-17) than the lower social economic group (67.4% in 2016-17)".

The Warwick Commission highlights the unequal engagement for arts with the wealthiest 8% supplying 28% of all attendees to theatre, despite "supply side interventions to increase audience diversity". Considering this, audiences are therefore not representative of population but skewed to the most privileged. This does not necessarily demonstrate a lack of engagement from those outside the high socio-economic groups, rather that "low engagement is more the effect of a mismatch between the public's take and the cultural offer", as Jackie Hay suggests, "they are much less inclined to worship at the altar of fine art".

Changing Audience Behaviours.

“The whole concept of audience may need to be reconsidered”.

Audiences increasingly expect their arts experiences to emphasise interaction and creation. For an audience to engage as deeply as possible, enabling them to engage on their own terms, at their own convince and in personal ways is going to increase this. According to Doug Borwick, “Individuals are far less willing to be bewildered than in the past... these are not stupid people, a tragic assumption sometimes made by arts professionals. They are willing to learn but not willing to acquiesce to assertions of greatness, especially when standards of greatness are limited to those of a specific culture”.

Today it is possible to tailor experiences in the arts, but also entertainment and commerce, to increasingly targeted groups of people. As a result, audiences now have expectations that they will be provided with options that closely match their requirements of an arts experience. But will audiences become more demanding of traditional forms of arts and culture as their modern experiences of other forms of entertainment increases?

Implications of Younger Audiences on Arts Organisations.

As they move into the position of primary consumer, millennials will become increasingly influential on changes in audience behaviours across the arts, with their first interaction with an organisation likely to be online. It is important to consider that this "millennial cohort" is the first generation that is fully digitally immersed, and with this comes implications for organisations trying to engage with them, as Ipsos MORI (market research specialists) suggest, "although not possible to prove, many other aspects of millennial life will partly flow from this [technology use] – openness, diversity of choice, but also their lack of trust in other."

From this diversity of choice, desire for novelty and personalisation, "millennials have a heightened expectation of immediacy, participating and transparency" James Murphy, Managing Director of Southbank Sinfonia agrees with this point, "people want a real experience when they go out for something cultural new-a days. We see this particularly with millennials, so it's really important to all arts to address that. We need to keep pace with that kind of appetite and imagination, whilst ensuring audiences can still connect at a fulfilling artistic level."

The arts industry is highly focused on putting young people first, however, often there are limitations in regard to access to these younger audiences. Fiona Ross, Director of Creative Learning at Sandler's Well says, "it's about finding the right strategies and structures to involve them at the planning stage". Josephine Reece of Ort Gallery says, "it still a struggle to get them metaphorically 'through-the-door' online" she argues, "there's something very special about the tangible live experience and the arts need to continue to champion that alongside exploring digital and other platforms, perhaps that combination will open up access further".

In the Digital Age, how are Audiences Currently Engaging with The Arts?

Arts Council England and Nesta's Digital Culture Survey 2018, shows the noticeable growth of the positive impact of digital on different aspects of audience experience, over the last five years; but "this has resulted in incremental rather than transformational changes".

Currently the use of digital media is primarily a complement to, rather than a substitute for the live experience. According to MLA 53% of the online population have used the internet to engage with arts and culture online in the period 2009-2010. The most common arts activity online was that of discovering information about an artist or exhibition (33%), with the viewing of works, through various means, totaling a combined 45%.

The Arts in Wales Survey 2015 highlighted substantial digital use of arts and cultural products; "three in ten had purchased music via a digital download with the last year, 29% had purchased a film or TV drama via a digital download, almost a quarter (24%) had purchased a book via digital download and 16% had visited a website to view or download an online arts collection or performance". It is inevitable that this will shape audience expectations of how they interact with arts organisations; with some arguing that offline visits will decrease because of online availability. This includes Sally Foster of RBSA who says, "we often have concerns that visitors will have their arts experience itch scratched by simply viewing our collection online; it's a lot less effort than making the journey to visit in person".

The concern that digital engagement is lessening the desire for live experiences is somewhat disproven in the MTM London's Digital Audiences document, where it is suggested those "who engage with the arts content online tend to participate in the arts through live events as well, suggesting that digital media is more valuable as a means of reaching out to audiences that are already culturally engaged".

While effective digital engagement has been repeatedly demonstrated to facilitate and support the co-creation of meaning and value, it has also been revealed as a potential cause of superficial 'dumbing-down' of content. However, Michelle Wilson argues that the most prevalent online activities are those that support access to live events, with users indicating that they are, "doing so in order to sample, filter and decide what events or shows to see live". To many in the industry, it is a relief that arts consumers still perceive the live experience as being superior to online. It is important to remember not all audiences are digital audiences; with many valuing culture and the arts as a means of escaping from the "digital chatter" of daily life.

Current Digital Strategies

“The most effective strategies for adoption seek to integrate digital internally across the organisation as a whole”; especially with the increasing significance of mobile technology.

High quality digital experiences are key to catching the eye of the target market, so it's worth investing time in building an online presence, however, digital technology has not yet transformed access to arts. Digital technologies, with their potential to enhance access to the arts across a range of channels has been championed as a means of changing the supply and demand for arts in similar fields such as music; digital distribution has led to changes in audience behaviours.

Digital can be a great medium for low-cost experimentation; enabling the ability to try out ideas quickly and gather data on which of these are effective. However, arts organisations can tend to jump on new digital platforms without properly considering the resource implications; opening social media accounts to be left inactive; indicating the difficulty for small teams to consistently create regular content that leads to a meaningful impact on engagement.

Digital strategies should not be viewed in isolation, instead must “weave across projects and operations as a whole[1]”. In order to select suitable content, it is important to define digital strategies in terms of the wider objectives of the organisation; knowing who is it for, what impact it is required to achieve and the desired audience response.

Measuring The Audience Experience.

To truly understand the audience experience research is absolutely necessary; providing the ability to integrate data on audience behaviour in consistent ways as to enable organisations to use data-driven insight to inform future plans. Many arts organisations understand the power of audience research in helping to identify new audiences and inform what creates an excellent experience however, some organisations continue to develop their artistic programme without considering audience research.

Data collection without action only give a false sense of security. Rather than exclusively measuring quantitative data, instead measuring methods should be used to record qualitative data also, which, according to NESTA, “promises a wealth of possibilities, assimilating the intrinsic and instrumental values of ‘culture’”.

The current approach to the use of data in the cultural sector is out-of-date and inadequate. Many organisations are still struggling to really take advantage of what the Counting What Counts report calls, Data 1.0; namely a stage of digital development in which they manage data about the core activities of the organisation using digital tools such as databases and box office systems. Competence in this stage is merely the entry requirement for the successful use of big data.

According to Viktor Schonberger and Kenneth Cukier, in their book, Big Data: A Revolution that will Transform How We Live, Work and Think, “the cultural sector has struggled to prove impact through causation”. To measure and learn from audience engagement, a clear strategy around data gathering, monitoring and evaluation is required. The sector currently largely addresses data from too limited a perspective, “‘Butts in seats’ can bring short term rewards like creating a façade that you are successfully filling the house, but in the long-term its taking the focus away from building an audience that will commit in the long term”. Brian Oberkirch, Marketing Strategist comments, “I have a bit of trepidation over the wish to quantify and verify engagement as the baseline by which all an organisations work should be evaluated”.

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Measuring The Audience Experience (cont.)

With the increasing use of digital as a method of data collection and with more research funding available for big data projects exploring audience experience; there has been a number of big datasets becoming available, namely Art Council England's Taking Part Survey, and their Let's Get Real report, in association with NESTA; highlighting many emerging trends and patterns from across the sector. Anne Torregiani, Chief Executive of Arts Professional says, "they pose big questions about what we do, where we do it and who we do it for".

Too often, however, the data is inadequately collected, left in an un-analysed form and not considered during strategic decision-making. Increasingly, organisations are at risk of information overload concerning the amount of data available, with this data enthusiastically reported, but rarely understood and acted upon.

Conclusions and Recommendations.

The relationship that audiences have with arts organisations will continue to evolve. Research has culminated in a series of insightful findings, some of which have significant implications for emerging practices of audience engagement. The research has generated insights into the changing definition of 'engagement' and how the audience themselves define engagement; with an increased emphasis on interaction. As has been explored, successful arts organisations embrace the opportunity to work with their audiences and offer varied points of engagement, with it being important that they not just develop their audiences, but listen, engage, and open up a variety of avenues to that audience; to maximize engagement opportunities.

As the industry turns to digital through more focused methods, although these digital developments have resulted in incremental rather than transformational change, it is important to put art programming in positions where young people can experience them. As younger audiences become increasingly influential, the arts have to maintain pace with the wider landscape, whilst not presuming low-tech methods are being shunned and sneered by the first fully digitally-focused audience.

Thorough analysis of data is starting to uncover new ways of measuring the impact of the arts. Increasingly-sophisticated approaches to data measurement are giving glimpses of a future in which it will be increasingly possible to track, measure and influence the spread of ideas, however, it remains the case that this data is ineffectively utilized and not considered during strategic engagement strategies.

An Experimental Investigation of how Digital Engagement Can Deepen and Democratize Artistic Exchange with Audiences.

Many arts organisations are re-assessing their missions in what has become an increasingly complex arts environment; with arts policies appearing to be shifting from the supply the arts, to increasing the public's access. This shift derives from a broader cultural policy in which 'public spending on the arts is justified in terms of an 'investment,' which will bring about positive social change and contribute to alleviate social exclusion in disadvantaged areas'.

This expectation of future democratisation represents a significant challenge for art organisations as they are, as Sandell (1998) argues, "innately socially exclusive". Traditionally supporters of high culture, they have often been 'effectively appropriated by social elites so that, rather than functioning as institutions of homogenization, they have continued to play a significant role in differentiating the elite from popular social classes'.

With this in mind, expecting substantial democratisation of artistic exchange is, potentially, unrealistic. The enormity of this task is exemplified by a fairly consistent arts visitor profile, with demographic research consistently concluding that arts attendance is not spread evenly, but rather that arts attenders 'tend to be better educated and more affluent than the general population, and be drawn largely from the 'white professional classes'. The recent research paper 'Arts Audiences: Establishing Opportunities for Audience Development and Engagement' Colella (2008) concluded that, in relation to visual arts; the better educated feel more at ease with their understanding and appreciation of art, whilst those with 'lower cultural capital' voiced their opinion that 'ordinary people are not seen as the main beneficiaries of arts funding' (Colella, 2018).

With the search of a democratized ideal being questioned, arts organisations face complicated issues that require a methodical understanding of artistic exchange strategies. It is with the consumption of the arts growing increasingly flexible through the development of digital technology, that there begins to be evidence of a move towards the democratized ideal. As Gerri Morrissuggests, digital technology has "liberated the public's voice; the means of production, communication and the access to and exchange of information and consumption". It is through emerging digital strategies, suggested as 'the liberator of arts democratisation', that the development and diversification of audience engagement will be investigated within this paper.

Exploring the Democratisation of Art.

Recently art organisations have been called upon to demonstrate their social value; with funding criteria demanding they be socially inclusive in regard to physical attendance and, more importantly, that they 'act as agents of social change'. Shifts in expectations regarding the value of art organisations is derived from a wider approach to cultural policy in which 'public spending on the arts is justified in terms of an 'investment,' which will bring about positive social change and contribute to alleviate social exclusion in disadvantaged areas'.

These expectations of social inclusion pose a significant challenge for art organisations which are, 'innately socially exclusive'. Traditionally exclusive; with a precise sets of standards and that presume a particular level of prior knowledge, arts organisations, as Spencer perceived, 'have functioned as institutions of homogenization, playing a significant role in differentiating the elite from popular social classes'.

The democratization of art is founded upon the idea of social inclusivity; particularly 'prized' if those engaging are from lower sociodemographic bands. As Bailey, Miles, and Stark (2004) explain, 'it is about enhancing the quality of life for a wider section of the community through the promotion of an appreciation and understanding of artworks'.

However, the democratisation ideal has been questioned, which, as Looseley (2004) observed, will only 'improve opportunities for existing art lovers rather than to engage new audiences and provide opportunities for artistic exchange'. This is further expanded on when Prior (2003) observed, 'efforts to increase access to the arts for those on low incomes have clearly failed, as arts attendance and participation increase dramatically for those in higher income groups and with higher educational status'. Elitism (including perceived) remains a barrier to participation issue for many organisations; being felt to be 'repellent, formidable, or unwelcoming places to visit by lower demographic groups'. This is exasperated by making the assumption that 'engagement in art will do lower demographic groups good—that is, improve quality of life'; an authoritarian and belittling approach that will further distance audiences.

It is clear art democratisation is not simple to achieve. There still remain concerns over the possible loss of quality and/or control that may confront an organisation's cultural norms and strategic direction; with many worrying that their brand image could be tarnished by a loss of artistic integrity.

Exploring the Democratisation of Art (cont.)

Furthermore, with the increase of digitalization, heralded by many as a catalyst for democratisation, anxieties over 'virtual accessibility' have surfaced; the loss of physical attendance striking fear into many arts organisations. However, as MTM London state, 'art attenders generally use virtual attendance not as substitutes for physical attendance, but rather as information tools about specific artists and/or art movements that can be consulted before or after visiting a real gallery or museum'. Exasperating a reluctance towards digital democratisation is a further skepticism that, as Moreno (2007) explains, 'the Internet is a resource still limited to an economic and cultural elite'.

Democratisation has a long way to go to reach the ideal suggested within academic theory. There remains a need to provide evidence to establish the accuracy of that theory, lessen fears and disprove skepticism. However, as Dean, Donnellan, & Pratt suggest 'becoming accessible and inclusive to all-comers, physically and intellectually, as well as culturally' would be a good place to start.

Contextualizing Arts Marketing and Audience Engagement.

The American Marketing Association defines marketing as the process of 'planning and implementing policies, pricing, promotion and distribution of ideas, goods and services; which will satisfy the needs of individuals and organizations'. As Colbert and Cuadrado (2003) state, 'the essential objective is the optimization of the relationship between the company and the customers, and the maximization of their mutual satisfaction'.

When considering arts marketing, opposite to for-profit marketing where the main goal is to maximize long-term profits. Arts organisations, besides increasing audience numbers, focus on the continuation of the organisation's social and artistic missions. This has been witnessed through arts marketing's maturity from a functional use of marketing to integrating the mission of arts organisations with marketing. Through a shift from 'push' to 'pull' marketing; that builds relevant offers and authentic communication, 'magnetizing of attention; drawing people to the arts because the specific artistic offer strikes a chord with something in them', has become possible. This explanation of pull marketing certainly leaves room for some overlap with the definition of audience engagement provided by Tajtáková, 2008; 'A proactive process of cultivation and growth of long-term relationships through engaging, educating, and motivating diverse communities to participate in a creative process[4]'. However, despite the increase of academic theorizing on the importance of arts engagement to develop artistic exchange, the creative process itself (sometimes intentionally) is often withheld.

It is clear that arts engagement can be loosely interpreted as to best meet the objectives of an organisation. 'They see engaging audiences as a way of achieving their objectives, whether these are artistic, financial, social or all three'. Yet by any definition, both audience engagement and arts marketing are critical to the success of every arts organisation. Mabbitt suggests, 'this means taking a collaborative approach in how you create and present art so your audience feels more engaged and emotionally invested in the final product' with Wadeson concluding that, 'when we look at audience engagement and arts marketing we're trying to meet the same aims'; action on the part of the audience.

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Contextualizing Arts Marketing and Audience Engagement (cont.)

By willingly taking time and energy to talk to arts organisations implies that an audience has a personal interest in the artistic exchange an organisation is proposing, which has been further indicated can promote offline engagement also.

Although digital engagement of arts audiences is still in its infancy and empirical academic research in this niche field is notably scarce, there have been a number of benefits demonstrated; most significantly evidence of digital democratizing arts dialogue. As Conner (2013) argues, 'a pleasurable audience experience is one that deeply connects with the hermeneutic opportunity to discuss and interpret meaning'. It is these 'deep connections' that must be evidenced in order to assess whether digital engagement has a valid future in artistic exchange strategies.