

Valuing Culture

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Valuing Culture - Measuring Culture

At the last Labour Party conference, the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport remarked that 'Investment in the arts is not only an end in itself, it is also a means of achieving our promises, our policies and our values'. What I want to talk about this morning is how the government is going to know if its funding of the arts has actually helped it to deliver on those promises, policies and values, and if so - how.

We tend to lose sight of the notion that government supports art for its own sake. We prefer to focus on the other, very considerable expectations that it attaches to culture - that it can help challenge social inclusion and make a difference to education, employment, crime and health, kids, communities, the economy. You name it. And, what we find really hard to come to terms with is the notion of evidence being necessary to prove that it does. As much out of desperation as anything else, someone recently suggested that trying to measure the impact of culture, and demonstrate that it can indeed 'cure the sick, raise the dead and eradicate world poverty' was tantamount to the search for the 'holy grail'. The requirement for evidence is, of course, about justifying public funding to the sector - the implication being that there's a relationship between the effectiveness of the sector and how much money it gets.

Over the past 20 years or so, the cultural bureaucracy hasn't had much of a problem about claiming what it could do, although it's been rather less good at substantiating those assertions. But, with DCMS calling the shots, and the fact that under New Labour the sector has become more highly administered, the situation has become altogether more serious. To put it crudely, the stakes are higher.

So, how are we doing in terms of measuring culture?

Let me go back over why it's even an issue ... Robert's already covered part of the narrative. I'll just add that one of DCMS's most striking characteristics is its explicit concern to contribute to government commitments. It always intended playing 'a full part in 'joined-up government''. And, it raised the sector's status by arguing for recognition of the part it could play in delivering government policies. The imperative for the department to be seen to be delivering is driven by the Treasury and the Cabinet Office.

They also inform its 'modernising' agenda, which accounts for its rational pursuit of an evidence base, which should – in turn - lead to it constructing evidence-based policy. Doing all those things - if not proving that it is doing them - is predicated on measuring culture. You could say, it was the price to be paid for increased funding and proximity to mainstream politics.

But, actually getting hold of the data, let alone collating it coherently and analysing it meaningfully, is a whole different story. About 95% of the department's money goes straight back out to its public bodies. That, plus the arms' length principle and a related policy vacuum, meant that when DCMS was first set up, there was little strategic direction from the centre, and only limited knowledge of how it was fulfilling government objectives. Attempts to impose performance measures on the sector had more or less consistently disappeared into a black hole for about 20 years. Perhaps not surprisingly, the sector was referred to as 'a evidence-free zone'.

DCMS tried resolving this in various ways – being more 'strategic, extending its influence, streamlining the infrastructure, raising standards of efficiency, and embarking on a 'new relationship' with the bodies that it funds.

Chris Smith described the reforms that he set in train as quite categorically signalling that 'the something-for-nothing days' were over. In terms you might have expected to hear from the Treasury, he said that he wanted to see 'measurable outcomes for the investment which is being made'. Carrots and sticks were involved: 'From now on there will be real partnerships with obligations and responsibilities'; the 'more money invested, [the] more results are required'; success would be rewarded; failure would not, and where appropriate - the department would take 'direct action'.

So, what kind of outcomes have been measured so far?

DCMS and its agencies have been pursuing two kinds of evidence. One is concerned with outputs. It focuses on efficiency and – depending how you define it – effectiveness. The other, is about outcomes and impact - what difference the policies, the earmarked funding, and - ultimately -the sector itself, actually make. This is high on the research agendas of DCMS's first-tier bodies.

Measuring efficiency is the stuff of regular monitoring. It's expressed in quantitative data: how many visits are made; how many seats sold; how many people participate in education and off-site programmes; how many hits the website gets – that kind of thing. It can track the relationship between inputs and outputs by allowing calculations to be made - as in the value of grant in aid per visit. And –whether you see it as being invidious or a useful management tool - it theoretically enables benchmarking– comparing the cost of a visit to the V&A with one to the NPG; or the relative amount of sponsorship attracted by the National Theatre compared to the RSC.

But, whatever its value, conventional wisdom suggests that this kind of data has its limitations. It's said that hard data, the so-called statistics, 'fail to generate any useful information on the outcomes of the services or on the impact they make'. It's certainly the case that mining extant quantitative data sets for evidence of impact is highly unproductive. But, because quantitative data is easier and cheaper to collect and analyse than qualitative data, its use is still prevalent - even if it's not necessarily up to the job. It tends to quantify what can be quantified, rather than providing the answers to difficult questions that need answering. For example, some of the measures in DCMS's funding agreements are considered to function as proxies for qualitative indicators. But, the assumptions involved are quite crude and too many caveats apply. For example, the number of repeat gallery visits is assumed to be indicative of the likelihood that visitors' quality of life is even more enhanced, or that the percentage of time that a museum is open for is 'a good measure of the availability of its collections for access'.

When it comes down to it, the sector still needs to sort out some of the data about its basic outputs. For example, we only have a vague idea of how many people visit museums and galleries, as opposed to how many visits are made. We certainly don't have precise enough information to enable us to see if things have changed. How many more people were prompted to go to museums or galleries as a result of lottery-funded capital developments, for instance? There are other issues with cultural statistics. To its credit, DCMS recognises the shortcomings of the national data sets and their inability to provide meaningful intelligence for policy makers at regional level in particular.

But, if measuring what can be measured is difficult, how is the government setting about measuring what's essentially unmeasurable - the value people derive from culture. How do you aggregate up evidence of learning from art exhibitions, when the constructivist approach embraced by gallery education departments is based on the belief that knowledge is relative rather than absolute, and that learners construct their own personal meanings?

To date, DCMS, hasn't set much of an example with regard to collecting evidence of impact, although it's currently grappling with the problem. It presumably, initially assumed that assessing the social impact of the arts would be relatively straightforward. But, on the basis of the research strategy it recently put out for consultation, it looks like the department is only too well aware of the difficulties involved.

Over the last year or so, DCMS and its quangos have critically reviewed the existing evidence. Their meta-analyses of large numbers of existing impact studies highlight the lack of robustness in the field.

- For example, they point to the shortcomings of the methodologies used, their conceptual basis, design, execution and - ultimately – their reliability. The reviews suggest that the quality of evidence can ultimately undermine evaluations' validity, and that analysis and interpretation don't always support the conclusions reached.
- They observe the absence of baseline data means that change can't be assessed.
- They note that despite wanting to know about the outcomes for 'users', user-based evaluation isn't the norm;
- They highlight the fact that anecdotal evidence about 'critical incidents' may have no bearing on long term or sustained impacts . Short-termism is big issue. Longitudinal research is fundamental to assessing impact. It takes longer than a three year funding cycle to find out what difference a major development is going to make, or to know what impact childhood participation in arts activities might have made to someone's life.
- They point to the difficulties about attributing causality, and to ...
- the real and reasonable limitations of artistic projects' potential influence
- They suggest that people who work in the arts lack experience of evaluation and have little interest in it.

The arts, and indeed, the cultural sector generally, come over as defensive. There's a real fear of what access policies might eventually lead to –visitor centredness and dumbing down. People are wary about the reductivism of performance measurement. And, though they say they want to be judged by the quality of their work, the arts funding system has historically evaded discussing quality publicly. It avoids committing itself to cuts in the light of what, in private, are perceived to be falling artistic standards. Its protectiveness extends to management issues – something the National Audit Office occasionally picks up on

- Then there's the fact that it's in everyone's interest to produce the best outcome – DCMS, the Arts Council, cultural organisations themselves. But the reviews pick up on the fact that such expectations encourage positive rather than balanced reporting. Counter examples, which might make salutary reading, rarely get published if ever.

So, the whole exercise ends up being shaped by a number of tensions within the sector– dealing with the requirements of spin alongside the fundamental research priority of impartiality; thinking about creativity at the same time as auditing; distinguishing advocacy from evidence; aspiration from actuality.

To close

Despite the mass of data out there – and despite the fact that the cultural sector obviously impacts on people, communities and the economy - it's still very difficult to account for precisely what difference subsidy makes to the national picture. To go back to where I

started - this is - of course – supposedly what measuring culture was about in the first place.

But, there's a wider issue about how much value we even want to attribute to either data or targets. This is endemic – and it isn't remotely confined to the cultural sector. At the time of the last spending round, for instance, the Secretary to the Treasury admitted that they weren't going to cut departments for underperforming. It seems that the Public Service Agreements are really there to motivate politicians, civil servants and the public sector.

As far as the cultural sector is concerned, there's little evidence to show that the data collected during the 90s by funding and policy bodies was ever put to much strategic use. Even at an organisational level, any marketing person will tell you about visitor and user studies which never get picked up on, but sit on shelves and gather dust. Recent increases in funding to the sector have been more closely tied to expectations than results. Moreover, the full implications of pursuing evidence-based policy are probably too radical to contemplate seriously. What are you going to do - take the money away from the Opera House and put it where the so-called 'need' is greatest – say, in the former coalfield areas?

At the end of the day, the strategic use – or, rather, the lack of use to which data is put – comes down to how government operates. There are any number of dilemmas implicit in, say, the relationship between investigation and political decision-making; between politicians' receptivity to new research and determined ideology; between rational, evidence-based policy and intuitive politics; between the timescale required to research impact and politicians' immediate requirements for information – and, by implication, the production of results for announcements.

The exercise of measuring culture has exposed the culture of making claims for it. Talking publicly about the problems of data collection in the sector is considered, by some, to put Treasury support at risk. But, until the data being collected is regarded as robust and until the evidence gathered can be seen to be being used constructively, it could be argued that the attempts to measure culture so far have been relatively spurious, and some aspects of cultural policy could do with rather firmer foundations.