Cultural Research Network Virtual Study Group notes
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Topic:
Cultural Data: Landscape and Directions

Panelists:
Beth Tuttle, Cultural Data Project
Margaret Wyszomirski, Ohio State University
Sarah Lee, Slover-Linett

Moderator:
Anne Gadwa Nicodemus, Metris Arts Consulting

PRESENTATIONS

Beth Tuttle, President and CEO, Cultural Data Project
CDP became an independent organization one year ago, after ten years incubation within the Pew Charitable Trusts. We've taken the past year to look at where we come from, what we've accomplished, state of the field as a result of our work, and other work in field around us. We conducted extensive discovery work, doing all of the following:

- Issued online survey of users with 1800+ responses, mostly from arts and culture organizations that complete CDP
- One-on-one interviews and focus groups with grantmakers, advocates, researchers and practitioners, to learn about their attitudes toward CDP, challenges, opportunities
- Field scan and literature review

The discovery work uncovered some gaps and opportunities and we wanted to go deeper into that, so we brought researchers together for a forum to explore the landscape: how far we've come, where we can go in future. We wanted to identify the potential value of CDP and what it will take to get there. Also wanted to forge more open and active dialogue between CDP and research community. We hope this is the first of many actions together.

Margaret Wyszomirski, Ohio State University
When I did this overview of cultural landscape, I was concerned with figuring out what we have, but also what don't we have and how would we know it. For each dataset we need to know the purpose for original creation of any dataset because that controls how the data is structured and whether it can be repurposed and restructured for other purposes. We also need to know the scope.

To help figure out what don't we have, I looked at these frameworks:
- Supply and demand
- Phases of the arts system
- Creative and cultural industry mapping
- Influence of exogenous factors, e.g., what happens to any of these indicators when demographics shift or there's an economic crisis?

I reviewed 52 databases. Many come from an inventory CDP keeps. Of those 52, we are relatively rich with data about
- Field practice
- Market research
- Arts in national economic performance
- Grantmaking and management
- Cultural products, services, programming (highly specific and has limited use)

We are relatively poor in data exploring
- Social and public value of the arts
- Public opinion /attitudes on the arts
- Nonfinancial resource fields
- Cultural products, services, programming (highly specific and has limited use)

We have a large number of one-time studies – lots of factoids, but little data

What are the components required for a strong data infrastructure?
- Data archives/portals
- Long term funding
- Information templates and/or crosswalks
- Data manipulation technology and capacity
- Training to enhance maintenance and use
- Aggregate reporting as well as disaggregate access
- Visualization capacity
- Framework models – how do we know what we don't have?
- Multivariate concepts

What we have is a lot better than what we used to have, but there's room for improvement.

Sarah Lee, Vice President for Arts & Culture, Slover-Linett
We convened and summarized a conversation among a small group of eleven academic and applied researchers, people who collect and analyze data. Started conversation with a small group, then think about expanding it outward. This is more like an opinion piece than a research study. We want to hear your critiques in order to deepen the ongoing conversation.

Consensus emerged early on that the problem isn't that we don't have enough data. The problem is that the data we do have often is not used effectively or strategically. Six broad, loose factors emerged in this conversation that are contributors to the fact that we're not always using the data most effectively:

Six systemic factors
- *Concerns about accessibility, quality and comparability.* A lot of data out there is proprietary. Quality varies quite a bit.
- *Undervalued data.* In part because a lot of data collection is funder driven, not organization driven. There's also a sense that data is in opposition to what we're doing in the arts. We need to take those concerns seriously.
- *Lack of coordination and standardization.* Of these factors, this is the issue least developed and may require most conversation. What is the ideal here? We don't want to over-aggregate. Even

vocabulary varies: "audience" means one thing to small theatre group while something very different to a large natural history museum.

Organizational factors
- *Underdeveloped capacity.* Organizations are fighting for survival these days, so investment in new data collection isn't a high priority. Also, this isn't standard training in most arts management programs.
- *Organizational culture dynamics.* Organizations that are more oriented to change, more focused on long term are more likely to use data for decision-making.
- *Lack of a strong vision.* We need models for how this works. Data often used for marketing and development, less so for program planning.

Six solutions:
- Establish coordinated leadership and vision
- Include and engage artistic and programmatic staff in data conversation
- Shift use of data from an accountability task to a decision-making tool
- Define objectives and plan for future research and data collection
- Train and develop data-related skills
- Improve the cultural data infrastructure

Thoughts about what's missing in this work:
- After the paper was produced, we realized we didn't have an ethnically diverse group participating in the first conversation. This was a real oversight and we need to introduce it into the dialogue as we move forward.
- How do we take what's emerging in Big Data and think about how it applies to our sector.
- How do we make room to ensure data is used for case-making purposes, demonstrating to others the value of cultural production and participation, making room for reflection on what works in our section. Not just showing our successes but reflecting about failures.

Q&A

Sarah: This wasn't a research project. This was more akin to a piece coming out of a conference, a dialogue among a group of knowledgeable people. This is a starting point not an endpoint. Both inside and outside the field there's been a shift in direction. Inflection point in our trajectory toward using more data more effectively.

Beth: We're clearly pushing in a more data-informed direction, aggregating and producing more information. It's either going to pile up or it's going to be productively used. In other sectors we've seen productive use partly because of their existing capacity and skill sets. Will this sector step forward in this same way and can we help develop that? Right now we're hampered by knowledge, skills and capacity gaps.

Bronwyn Mauldin, LA County Arts Commission: I've seen a real hunger for learning how to read and use research data more effectively among arts administrators. I was recently asked to do a workshop for Emerging Arts Leaders LA on how to read and use research reports, sort of a "Research 101." Nearly 30 people showed up and were very engaged. They've followed this up with informal conversations about individual research reports. I think this may be a promising model for other communities.

Sarah: I see this in our work too, a growing demand for information that helps organizations move their mission forward. Talking about information as "data" can do a disservice. People think of data as numeric, when there are other kinds of data they can use.

Beth: In our own training in the past it was always about *how do you put your data into CDP*. About a year ago began to shift conversation to talk about the value of the data. We began to shift training to talk about "data + stories = impact" workshop. We use their CDP data and put it into real life scenarios where people are making the kinds of cases they need to make, that's eye-opening for them. People are hungry for it, but they're scared.

Margaret: There's a real desire not just to have the fact or information, but to answer the question of why does it work, why does it happen that way, etc. We have so little data on public opinion on the arts and attitudes toward the arts. That's one area where we need to expand, so we can understand why behavior and trends look the way they do. Right now all we can do is see the trends. To know why people act the way they do, we need to know their attitudes.

We also need more data about infrastructure for the arts. We know about producing and consuming the arts, but what policy frame helps or hinders? What kinds of coverage in communications and other support systems.

David Pankratz, Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council: In Pittsburgh we've been looking at different kinds of data and low local groups are using it. I didn't see much discussion of tools in these papers and would like to hear more about that. We need good tools to help people who are overwhelmed or intimidated by data, in order to use it.

Margaret: We really need more tools that can make good visualizations so organizations can see the meaning in their data. Tables don't speak for themselves. But if you can show people the connections via good visualizations, suddenly the numbers will make much more sense. Have to show not just the numbers but the logic.

Beth: One of our biggest complaints is that it's a lot of time to enter the data, but organizations don't look for the reports. Once a year they put data in and walk away. CDP is trying to move toward shifting value proposition so that data coming out is useful. Right now, data is more useful to others than the people who actually enter it. Training and support is needed, but also changes to the software platform itself. Can we feed data in real time, and spit it back out in real time so you can use the data you've entered? That's where we start for our particular data. Organizational, financial and business management is where we start. Where does this data intersect with programming and artists decisions – that's where we'll head in the future.

Anne: Where is CDP moving going forward? What shifts are you making, specifically for research users?

Beth: We got lots of feedback on accessibility issues and comparability, quality and validity of CDP data. We know this is part and parcel of creating a richer, more robust and more reliable dataset. We need to reevaluate the actual profile itself. There's lot of info being collected that is never tapped. Part it's reflection of issues of the day when it was created.

Anne: What's being ignored?

Beth: One example is granular details on what kinds of government grants are coming. They add heft without adding weight. We have to go through a process of reviewing the elements.

We also need to look at reliability. There are things we can do mechanically, but there's broader sector training. We know attendance data is badly reported, mostly because it's not collected in a real-time fashion. Or it's collected in silos. Attendance in a theatre is hard to compare to attendance at a museum. But it's better than anything else we have in some respects. We're trying to make it better, and we will need help from many people outside of CDP to make this happen.

The most fundamental strategic shift that will inform where CDP is going, will be putting the needs of arts and culture organizations at the center of our practice. Funders and accountability were at the center when we started. We need to change that. We need to listen, talk with them, work with them to create a tool that will help them.

Secondarily, we will focus on deepening impact. We are going to have to do significant tech work on platform, but that will take time. In the interim we need to focus on training for people in the field. In last five years it's been all about expansion. Instead, we need to go deeper.

Third, has to be a national partnership for cultural data. CDP isn't that. We're one part of a much larger system. We need to help create a space for that system to move more effectively.

Anne: What feedback are you getting from these two reports?

Beth: We are just rolling this out. You are one of the first groups I've said this much to. We have 400 people registered for our webinar to talk about this report. That suggests high interest. There will also be in-person, live town hall meetings around the country as well.

Margaret: This is part of first discussion. You're starting to hear similar things at different forums. That's a good step forward. If you look at why other places have had big data pushes – cultural policy in the EU for example – it was being pushed by their integration effort, the need to dialogue between countries and cultures. Countries like England and Australia who've had massive creative industries push, it's always been pushed by something outside the cultural sector forcing the conversation. I wonder exactly how we can identify that characteristic here. There's a growing interest and need, but unless there's an incentive push it will be hard to get a national conversation going.

Beth: We cannot push this rock across the country by ourselves. We've been trying to build this one funder at a time. That's how CDP has done it up to now, and it's not scalable or sustainable. I look at CDP as backbone info, fundamental descriptive data, the longest and most detailed to date. As Margaret says, it's often been something outside that pushes the data conversation. When I met with IMLS, they told me libraries got pulled into educational data collection, that's why they're in such good shape with data. Funding for this is very difficult to come by, but it's critical. That's why most broad-scale data collection efforts have some kind of government underpinning for them.

Margaret: How do you cultivate a virtuous circle? If people use the data, then people will value it. Then you can build massive subscriber base. That's how a lot of big social science databases have been built.

Sarah: The drive toward greater data collection and analysis that's coming from inside the sector is in that many organizations are trying to think very differently about how they define their relevance to

society and the people they serve. They don't take that for granted any longer. This is fostering a new sense of the value of data collection that's about the audience and communities around them, not broad organizational performance metrics. That's one doorway into that conversation.

What kind of training and resources and structures do we need to have so that orgs can use data for decision-making? Making sense of data is a really human endeavor. It has to do with communication, the ability and time to reflect on what they're learning, think together about how to respond and react to what they're learning. We forget when we get into the nerdy, wonky conversations, that the ability of humans to take stock of what they're learning and change what they're doing is hard.

Beth: We're very interested in the notion of creating a new cohort of arts and culture practitioners who are interested in using data. Want to help people think about how organizations can learn, improve and reinvent. It's a different way of thinking about data if you're thinking about reinvention rather than about performance improvement.

Anne: Issue of representativeness for the CDP is a big one. In my earlier work in California, we wanted it to speak to all arts and culture nonprofits in state, but it really couldn't. We went through a lot of efforts to benchmark CDP data to NCCS, IRS data. I'd love to see a random sampling procedure to be able to have some assurance that CDP is accurate for X geography for Y margin of error.

Beth: I appreciate that. We've had that ongoing conversation. We don't even have an accepted definition of what "arts and culture organizations" means. We're working with Jennifer Novak Leonard and NORC to look at 1) developing that definition and 2) looking at scale and diversity within that. Use that to develop a national sample. Without knowing the universe, we can't know if we're representative.

David Pankratz: We've discovered an interesting split after surveying 100 orgs. Active data users tend to be mid-level staff, sometimes younger. Part of educational challenge is the leadership level. Higher ups a little slower to adopt.

Sarah: We as researchers need to reflect on our responsibility to make this work. Individuals in organizations who are resistant, often they've never seen data or research that they found useful. That gets back to one of underlying threads in the paper about how in our field we've often had the data-first questions-second attitude. We need to start with questions we need answered, then find data to address those questions.

Margaret: We need data where a wide range of people and orgs see themselves reflected in that data. I was astounded when I found out 80% of arts organizations in Ohio are microenterprises. So our data only captures 20% of the orgs out there.

Beth: Organizations with budgets $250,000 & below orgs predominate in CDP. How we get data on organizations that aren't in any of the systems we're using, that's very difficult. High on priority list for us and our partners is to get very small, diverse organizations into our database. Grantmakers are unhappy because very small organizations aren't applying for grants. Largest reach grantmakers out there are state arts agencies. There's a real have/have-nots situation for ability of SAAs to use CDP. This is a systems challenge we're facing, so we need a systems solution. CDP or any other individual technology or organization can do it.

From CDP's perspective, we're going to continue this conversation around the country. As we begin to try to forge this national coalition, we hope many of you will participate. What are the objectives we could work toward? How could we really come together to sense whether there are some fundamental, leading issues we can take on while each of us works on our own work. If this is a systems moment, it will require multiple hands pushing toward a limited number of solutions.

Anne: Tension between data driven research and question driven research. Sometimes these data collection efforts are cart before the horse. Very first CRN Virtual Study Group was on NEA's system map for how art works. They tried to do a concept map of all the ways art can benefit society. That could be a useful frame. What holes are there, and what data do we need to plug those holes?

Sarah: Questions first vs data first: This intersects with problem that a lot of data collection has been funder-driven. Funders have questions but are outsourcing data collection to grantees, so grantees are collecting data that doesn't answer their own questions. A dialogue between grantmakers and grantees about data is needed.

Beth: It's a both-and. We throw around this term "data." CDP is not big data by itself. It's really the organization unit that's the data collector. If you look at what NCAR is doing at SMU, they're the first ones to deeply and richly mine multiple data sources to see what insights come out, through a framework that is actionable for organizations. I'm not going to back down or step down from role CDP can play in helping arts organizations do better with financial and organization management. Your strong financial balance sheet is your artistic freedom. At the end of the day that's a contribution we can make to the field. But we will help with the larger issue of national data as well, because the data is not going to stop coming.