

Arts and culture: another case of policy-based evidence making?

Understanding the relationships between “research”, “effective evaluation” and “responsible advocacy”.

1. The first thing I wanted to say was that I thought the briefing paper that Charlotte and Ruth had prepared was very helpful in setting the context for this seminar. As the paper shows, one of the key things that this fellowship scheme so far does seem to have achieved is to bring out very strongly the tensions between research, evaluation and advocacy. And it is the relationship between these three that we are being asked to investigate further in this seminar.
2. However, there does seem to be one very important element missing in this formulation of relationships – and that is the key relationship between research/evaluation/advocacy - **and the actual process of making policy decisions.**
3. Over the last twenty years or so, numerous studies have been commissioned and produced around the world to demonstrate the socio-economic impact of the arts. Most of these have been driven by an advocacy agenda - and also as a response to the growing trend for evidence-based policy. Many have been subjected to quite extensive scholarly critique - though this hasn't stemmed the flow, as we saw at last year's international conference on cultural policy research in Vienna – which quite a few people here today were at. Nevertheless, despite the popularity of these impact studies, we really have no idea whether they have had any effect on the formulation of policy or, if they have, what that effect might have been.

4. Let's take economic impact studies as an example. Although these have been around in a very basic form since the 19th century, it was in the 1980s that more systematic approaches to these studies were developed. In Britain, John Myerscough's 'the economic importance of the arts' was the prototype for the many more that followed. But it is not possible to say with any degree of confidence that these studies, individually or collectively, have actually affected policy at a national or local level.
5. In Britain, it is probably fair to say that the high-water mark of impact studies in the arts has now probably been reached. There also appears to be a growing acknowledgment of the limitations of evidence-based policy making and a greater honesty about the role that evidence actually plays in the decision-making process. The Arts Council's current public value enquiry is a good example of this. It acknowledges the conflicting values of its stakeholder groups and recognises that evidence is by no means the only factor that is going to be used in the negotiation of these conflicts.
6. To quote Davis and Howden-Chapman again, who Ruth & Charlotte cite in their paper, evidence is just one of the drivers of policy, alongside ideology, value judgements, financial stringency, economic theory, political expedience, intellectual fashion, competing demands and the power and influence of stake-holders.
7. Some academic analysts of the policy process go further, using metaphors such as the 'black box of decision-making', even the 'black hole of decision-making', the 'primaeval policy soup' or 'the policy garbage can'. All of these attribute a significant element of irrationality to the policy-making process. In

these models, policy decisions are not so much evidence based but the result of previously existing agendas, pet ideas, untested assumptions and rival strategies, and so on, which swirl around in the policy garbage can or the primaeval policy soup, to emerge at different times in unpredictable combinations.

8. So, my first suggestion is that we spend a little time exploring how policy decisions are reached in relation to the arts, at both national and local levels, in order that we can understand a bit better what the relation of research, evaluation and advocacy to these processes might be. In this respect, the policy decisions that are going to come out of the Arts Council's public value enquiry, and the manner in which these decisions are going to be reached, would make a very interesting case study.
9. The second point I would like to make concerns the way in which arts organisations, and those agencies charged with the support of the arts, use research and, in particular, empirical research. Here, there do seem to be characteristics that distinguish the arts sector from other sectors.
10. As we all know, evidence-based policy is supposed to deliver policy decisions based on evidence rather than ideological preferences. It is, of course, an ideological development itself, which tends to present itself as politically neutral, but is in fact linked to the highly politicised New Public Management agenda of the 1980s and 90s. A key feature of this was the application of private sector management systems to the organisation and management of public services. It was from this that we got the new focus on competitiveness, internal markets, contracting out, targets, performance indicators and so on. And we can relate this further if we like to neoliberalism

and associated global political trends. The claim was that this was the best way to ensure that resources were spent effectively and efficiently and that the tax paper got value for money.

11. Now, to go back to the differences in the way that 'evidence' is used by the arts sector: take the health sector, for example, where evidence-based policy-making is generally said to have been first applied. Evidence of the effectiveness of, say, different forms of treatment can indeed help to channel resources towards treatments that offer the best results for the least cost. But in the cultural sphere – and I'm grateful to my colleague Eleonora Belfiore for this observation - evidence-based policy has been articulated in a different manner. Here, evidence has not been collected to decide how best to spend available resources amongst competitive alternatives. It has been expected to provide justification for public spending on the arts *per se*.

12. This is really not a matter of evidence – it is a matter of politics and of values. If we continue with our health sector comparison, it would be rather like using evidence to justify the continued existence of the NHS. But, as everybody knows, whether or not we have a publicly-funded National Health Service is essentially a political question – a question of what sort of society we want.

13. I think I would go even further and say that key policy decisions **within** the arts sector are also based on values and power relations rather than on an ostensibly politics-free consideration of evidence. For example, what museum directors put in their museums, or whether the Arts Council prioritises opera over community projects, seem to me to have everything to do with values and very little to do with evidence.

14. If this is the case, then we might wish to reconsider what role evidence-based policy-making has in the arts. We may, in fact, come to the conclusion that it has an extremely limited role, confined mainly to the evaluation of whether or not specific programmes succeed in achieving their objectives.

15. But for the larger and more important questions, concerning the value of the arts to society, the rationales for government support and what the priorities should be, then it would perhaps be as well to recognise that this is less a matter of **evidence** and more a matter of **argument**. Argument alone is never going to drive policy, but if we return to the image of the 'primaeval policy soup', I think we can see how strong "argument" constitutes a very powerful element within it.

16. This brings us back to the question of the kind of research we need to best inform the value judgements that lie behind policy-making in the arts. And it does seem to me, as Eleonora and I have tried to show in our own contribution to the Fellowship scheme, that critical-historical studies have a very important part to play in illuminating the issues at stake. This is a role that is particularly well-suited to the Humanities. They also show that these debates about value have been around for a very long time – and that they are never actually likely to be settled.