

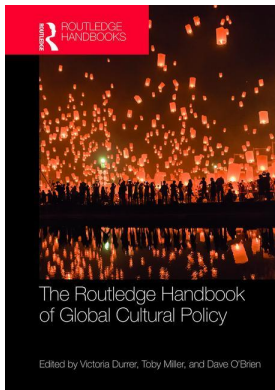
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### Inside out

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## Inside out

# The role of ‘audience research’ in cultural policies in the United States

*Jennifer L. Novak-Leonard*

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### Introduction

“Cultural policy” in the US is not what it is elsewhere in the world. Uniquely, the recognized arts-related policies in the US have largely evolved from opportunities created within US tax code and the influence and financial support of philanthropic entities. This chapter discusses the evolution of arts policy-making since the mid-twentieth century in the US and the role of audience research in policy-making over this time. While audience research stemmed from a policy paradigm focused on supporting the nonprofit cultural infrastructure in the US, this chapter argues that social and policy contexts in the US and advancements made to audience and arts participation research over the past 10 years are calling for policy-makers to focus on expanding the view of arts and culture and deepening the role of arts and culture in democratic life.

### “Cultural policy” in the United States<sup>1</sup>

While many countries have an identified policy-making body, such as a cultural ministry, for matters related to arts and culture and/or hold a membership in the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), the US has neither (Rubin 2013). The US does not have a formal cultural policy, at least not in the tradition of many other countries. An integral part of the nation’s fundamental beliefs is the freedom of expression, which is evoked as an aspect of policies related to culture in the US and is lawfully protected under the US Constitution (Kreidler 2013). Akin to other countries, the US has laws to protect intellectual property rights and to oversee exports. However, while the US does have regulations and allowances like many other countries, they are predominantly applied to market-driven commercial art and culture and are more commonly understood and handled as issues of trade as opposed to issues of “cultural policy” (Balassa 2008; Ivey 2008).

In the absence of a formal cultural policy or an official cultural policy-making body, prominent governmental and non-governmental institutions and vocal actors all shape policies about arts and culture in the US. A particularly powerful influence that has shaped cultural, or at least arts-related, policies in the US since the early twentieth century is the

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federal tax code. The tax code grants charitable organizations, which include arts and cultural organizations, tax exemption and qualifies these organizations as “nonprofit” and eligible for philanthropic support (Peters and Cherbo 1998; Mulcahy 2006; Woronkiewicz et al. 2012; Kreidler 2013). Mulcahy (2006) succinctly describes how policy-making is affected by the structure of the tax code:

To an extent unknown elsewhere, the American government through its tax code has delegated broad policy-making powers to private institutions in the pursuit of various eleemosynary goals.

(*Mulcahy 2006, p. 328*)

### **Evolution of the nonprofit arts infrastructure and its information needs**

Since the 1960s, providing direct funding to nonprofit arts organizations has been a primary policy intervention used by both non-government and government entities in an effort to fuel the arts in the US. Kreidler (1996, 2013) has chronicled the establishment of the nonprofit arts infrastructure in the US, which provides an important historical context for considering the current state of cultural policies in the US. In the late 1950s, major foundations whose endowments came from wealth accumulated during the Industrial Revolution worked together to examine the state of performing arts organizations. A product of these efforts was the landmark work of Baumol and Bowen (1966), which led to the principal conclusion that arts organizations faced structural financial challenges that the authors coined as “cost disease.” The implication of this phenomenon was that the arts required financial subsidies to survive. At this time, there was also a general “cultural inferiority complex” in the US that reinforced the conclusion that arts organizations would require substantial subsidies because there was a desire to not only have the arts survive, but to have them thrive (Kreidler 1996, 2013). Kreidler (2013) characterizes this strategy as “supply side pump priming,” the basic underlying theory being that subsidies would ultimately improve and expand the work of the organizations, reaching more audiences and attracting more sources of revenues for the organizations. Influenced by much of the same thinking, other philanthropic entities adopted this strategy, and in 1965 the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) was founded (Kreidler 2013; Wyszomirski 2013). Wyszomirski (2013) describes financial sustainability as one of the agency’s three fundamental, underlying policy aims, the other two being to support artistic vitality and, vitally important as a public agency, acknowledging the value of arts for the US public at large, originally referred to as “public access to the arts” in enabling legislation.

Given this supply-side focused environment, in the late 1960s and early 1970s the number of nonprofit arts organizations in the US exploded, establishing a notable and vocal constituency reliant on the direct and indirect benefits of philanthropic and public funding (Kreidler 1996). As Toepler (2013, p. 167–168) explains, this era placed the NEA “at the core of an implicit policy paradigm that kept most policy actors focused on the funding and support needs of the nonprofit cultural infrastructure.” The NEA and philanthropic organizations supporting this system served as key policy-makers in the US, even if not formally designated as such.

#### *Inside organizations: research on existing audiences*

Alongside the increased number of nonprofit arts organizations in the 1960s and 1970s came a penchant for research on the audiences of these organizations. This early research focused

almost exclusively on the relationships between the organizations and the audiences who came through their doors (DiMaggio et al. 1978; Pettit 2000). The surveys tended to include topics such as satisfaction with facilities and with the program attended. However, the primary stakeholders for this research, by and large, did not have a clear sense of its purpose. In their landmark review of 270 audience surveys, DiMaggio, Useem and Brown (1978, p. 4) concluded that two of the chief motives for nonprofit arts organizations undertaking audience research were (1) political leverage and (2) “a vague sense of concern for more information of some sort.” DiMaggio et al. also identified the variable and overall low technical quality of the surveys as a key concern. The state of audience research made it difficult to draw inferences from the disparate studies to inform systems-level policy conversations.

After establishing a research division in 1975, the NEA took active interest in coordinating conversations and research about the arts at the national level. The NEA’s Research Division worked to address concerns raised by the decentralized and inconsistent nature and quality of audience research and, importantly, the goal of having data to address the government’s own objective of equitable access to arts (Tepper and Gao 2008, p. 25). The most significant effort was establishing the *Survey of Public Participation in the Arts* (SPPA), which was first implemented in 1982 and remains the primary source of national data about arts participation in the US.

In December 1977, the NEA convened the Conference on the Policy Related Studies of the National Endowment for the Arts. The creation of a national survey on arts participation was discussed at this conference and the competing priorities for arts research were articulated—study either what the public does or rather what select, high arts organizations offer (Orend 1978). The establishment of the SPPA was the initial milestone that bridged *audience research* into *arts participation research*. However, despite the fact that the fundamental idea for a national survey was “a concern about democracy and equitable access” (Tepper and Gao 2008, p. 25), another original driving force for establishing a national survey was to help monitor the health of nonprofit arts organizations by capturing data on arts attendance (AMS Planning and Research Corp 1995; Tepper and Gao 2008).

The earliest analyses using SPPA data largely focused on the differential rates at which members of different racial and ethnic groups reported participation in the arts (Keegan 1987; Robinson et al. 1987; DiMaggio and Ostrower 1992). Examining the SPPA by race and ethnicity, as well as other key demographic variables, has continued as a key analysis to inform discourse about “access” (National Endowment for the Arts 1999; Nichols 2003; Welch and Kim 2010; Silber and Triplett 2015). Early on, however, it was apparent that the pump-priming hypothesis was not effective at attracting a wider and more diverse audience, or at least not at attracting an adequately larger and more diverse audience (Kreidler 2013). So, even though the focus on supply-side investments continued to shape arts policy in the US, the tactics designed to bring audiences “into” the organizations evolved.

While the 1960s and early 1970s were generally a flourishing time for nonprofit arts organizations, the subsequent decades stood in sharp contrast, and the nonprofit arts sector assumed a defensive posture. In the 1980s and 1990s, the NEA faced a great deal of controversy, which ultimately resulted in significant funding cuts and staff reductions at the agency (National Endowment for the Arts 2009b). However, for the particular matter of policy-making, a critical impact of these resource reductions is the re-disbursement of influence on arts policy-making. The NEA and philanthropic organizations supporting this system, even if not formally designated, serve as key cultural policy-makers in the US. Therefore, declining financial support for the NEA meant that the influence on discourse for arts policies began to disperse from the centralized, influential voice and created the opportunity for more perspectives on what policies related to the arts could be. Yet at the start of what Toepler (2013) refers

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to as the “post-NEA era,” there remained historical inertia favoring a centralized supply-side focused paradigm for arts policy. While most research had been focused on understanding differences between those attending and those not attending the arts, informing the policy structures in place, the 1980s and early 1990s brought about a need for research to justify and demonstrate the instrumental value of arts organizations and their work.

### **Efforts to bring audiences “in”: research on potential audiences**

In the late 1990s and 2000s, there was a shift in focus away from discussing access to arts organizations based on current audiences and toward audiences and participants seemingly willing to come “into” arts organizations. The general discourse within arts policy shifted from “access” to “outreach” and “audience development.” It was during this time that the NEA launched initiatives to bring arts into more rural and underserved communities across different states as a quantifiable means to conclusively demonstrate public value (Wyszomirski 2013).

Several seminal pieces of research were produced, not under the auspices of the NEA, but sponsored by major foundations during this time. Foundations were also helping to establish arts research centers in policy schools at major research universities during this time,<sup>2</sup> signaling their desire and aims to contribute policy relevant research (Schuster 2002). The Wallace Foundation (at the time known as the Wallace-Reader’s Digest Fund) sponsored seminal research conducted by McCarthy and Jinnett (2001), which gave rise to the now commonly used mantra amongst US-based nonprofit arts administrators—broaden, deepen and diversify arts audiences. One of the key recommendations stemming from McCarthy and Jinnett’s research was that arts organizations should seek to learn about existing and potential audiences, which the authors referred to as “inclined” individuals, on the basis of their behaviors and attitudes, as opposed to solely on the basis of their demographics (2001, p. 36). This research informed a decade of funding investments made by the Wallace Foundation and others to support arts. Much of the research focused on marketing, messaging, ticketing and how to make audiences feel welcomed in a theater or museum.

### *Research on the value of and for audiences*

The late 1990s and early 2000s also saw a greater focus on the economic impact of the arts as a means to demonstrate the instrumental value of arts organizations. Multiple researchers have raised important questions about the methodologies used for assessing economic impact. Some researchers fundamentally argued against the very premise of using economic impact as a metric for evaluating whether activities merit public subsidization on the basis that the less tangible, intrinsic values of art could not be enumerated by the approach (Cultural Policy Center 2004). This brought about a widespread debate within the nonprofit arts sector about instrumental and intrinsic arguments for evaluating and demonstrating the impact of arts on individuals and the role of both arguments in communications with legislators and other authoring stakeholders. *Gifts of the Muse: Reframing the Debate about the Benefits of the Arts* (McCarthy et al. 2004) proposed a language and conceptual framework for evaluating the arts, which integrated both instrumental and intrinsic perspectives. It took a good deal of time, debate and translation for the research first put forth in McCarthy et al. (2004) to be accepted by arts organizations (Brown 2006). Even after the concept of intrinsic impact achieved resonance, capturing and communicating intrinsic impact required the development of new analytical methods and systematic understanding, as done in Brown and Novak (2007), Radbourne et al. (2010), Brown and Novak-Leonard (2013) and Lord (2012).

Evaluating intrinsic impact represents a return to audience research in a more traditional sense of acquiring information about those who attend an arts event. The research emphasizes documenting how arts experiences can affect individuals, for example in how they can be emotionally moved or intellectually engaged. This measurement system currently remains in an early phase of focusing on relationships between organizations and audiences, but developing this line of research has been identified as a priority for research over the next 10 years (Markusen 2014). A specific question to be addressed is whether the data on how individuals are affected can be aggregated and interpreted in a meaningful way for the purpose of informing policy-making.

### **Dispersion of the nonprofit arts infrastructure and its information needs**

While major social changes were underway throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, by the late 2000s and early 2010s, these changes had risen to the fore of arts policy research. Prominent trends include expanded technology usage, shifts toward an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse population and a growing participatory cultural ethos (Novak-Leonard and Brown 2011; Novak-Leonard et al. 2014; Novak-Leonard et al. 2015b). Speaking generally, these societal shifts were welcomed as opportunities by some, but posed further challenges to other nonprofit arts organizations. Additionally, national indicators of arts participation, stemming from the SPPA, continued to indicate that smaller portions of the US adult population were attending arts events and that disparities between racial and ethnicity groups persisted (National Endowment for the Arts 2009a). Some *de facto* arts policy-makers recognized, as Kreidler (2013, p. 152) describes, the “diminishing returns” of the supply-side focused policy paradigm.

In recent years, the inertia behind the singular supply-side arts policy paradigm started to fade as policy-makers sought alternative policy paradigms, with a key alternative being demand-side policies (Zakaras and Lowell 2008; Kreidler 2013). Such approaches look at the ways individuals learn about, become familiar with and create arts outside of professional arts settings. The basic theory underlying demand-side policies is that investment in people’s arts activities outside of professional arts settings could develop demand for the professional arts offered by nonprofit arts organizations. However, arts policy discourse also reflects a growing recognition that investing in demand is highly valuable in and of itself. With this realization has come an expanded sense of what aesthetic forms are considered “art,” are meaningful to people in the US and should be part of an expanded arts policy discourse (Ivey 2008; Novak-Leonard et al. 2014). In a sense, this expanded view represents a return to a nineteenth century arts policy paradigm more focused on democratic ideals. Other scholars have written poignantly on the deeply rooted participatory spirit of democracy in the US and the role that arts participation plays within that spirit, as well as the historical role of democratic participation in the arts (DiMaggio et al. 1978; Tepper and Gao 2008; Conner 2013; Clark et al. 2014). This raises a critical question that is currently shaping this time of change in arts policies in the US—how, or whether, the current deeply rooted infrastructure surrounding nonprofit arts organizations can serve as bridges to achieving real equity/diversity of art forms and means of engagement.

#### *Readiness for research*

Just in recent years within the US, advances have been made in measuring and studying a broader range of “arts participation,” not exclusively defined by attendance at nonprofit arts

organizations. It is important to note that since its first wave in 1982, the SPPA has included measures of activities besides attendance, but the historical body of research using SPPA data overwhelmingly focused on attendance. While some earlier studies examined participation in acts of making art, such as Peters and Cherbo (1996) and Ostrower (2005), it was not until a few years ago that research looking at arts participation indicators other than those of attendance garnered attention amongst policy-makers and nonprofit arts organizations. Arguably, the confluence of social forces and a continued decline in the national rates of arts attendance prompted attention to such research.

Using the 2008 SPPA, *Beyond Attendance: A multi-modal understanding of arts participation* (Novak-Leonard and Brown 2011) fully leveraged the indicators available to analyze how patterns of individuals' arts participation varied across attendance behaviors, engaging in art making and consuming arts through various technology-based means. Even though the analyses presented in Novak-Leonard and Brown (2011) considered art-related behaviors beyond those typically connected to nonprofit arts organizations, the subsequent discussion of these research findings has largely focused on implications for nonprofit arts organizations, and such discussion is essentially still written in a manner that focuses on the health of arts organizations. Following this increased attention, major substantive changes were made for the next wave of SPPA in 2012 in an effort to collect more data on arts-related behaviors, generally, rather than focusing only on those behaviors specifically associated with traditional ways of engaging with nonprofit arts organizations. At the same time, international calls were issued for research tools "elaborated in the last century" to be revisited in order to better reflect contemporary life and "the rise of new cultural paradigms and behavior" (UNESCO Institute for Statistics 2012, p. 12). For example, the 2012 SPPA asked where people attended performing arts events and how they used digital devices to create different forms of art. However, balancing the inclusion of innovative questions in this survey instrument while preserving valuable, long-standing measurements is a challenge, and ultimately the emphasis on evaluating attendance remained (Novak-Leonard et al. 2015c).

More recent survey efforts focus on collecting data on arts attendance balanced with data on arts-making, arts-learning and other modes of arts participation. The Benchmark to Basic new Annual Arts Benchmark Survey (AABS) helps to adjust this imbalance. Starting in 2013, the AABS' two alternating questionnaires are to be used in the years between the SPPA, which is fielded every 5 years. The AABS includes much-abbreviated versions of the SPPA questionnaire, with a greater emphasis on arts making and learning in balance with attending events.<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the AABS questions pertaining to attendance are broad and not genre-specific, which reflects a response to the critique that the SPPA genre-specific questions comprise indicators left over from the survey's earliest days and are reflective of mid-twentieth century policy approaches (Novak-Leonard et al. 2015b). Such shifts are also reflected in some innovative regional surveys. The *California Survey of Arts & Cultural Participation* is a new instrument crafted to measure participation using each individual's own definitions of art, aesthetics and creative expression (Novak-Leonard et al. 2015a; Novak-Leonard et al. 2015b).<sup>4</sup> Sponsored by the James Irvine Foundation in California, this survey also represents the aforementioned trend in which major foundations are seeking to reassert their role in shaping policy at precisely the same time that the activity of arts research centers founded in the late 1990s/early 2000s is waning.

It remains unclear whether foundation-sponsored research is positioned to innovate at a large scale. It is clear that substantial innovations have been made in survey design and that some policy-makers are indeed considering activities well outside traditional nonprofit arts organizations activities. However, as Toepler (2013) explains:

there are no strong indications that the foundation field at large pursues innovation at a significant scale. Rather the data suggest a fairly high degree of continuity of foundation funding priorities over 25 years despite the major public policy upheavals of the 1990s.

(2013, p. 178)

Indeed, the NEA-sponsored Arts & Culture modules of the 2012 and 2016 waves of the General Social Survey (GSS), one of the most highly regarded and frequently utilized sources of data on adults' attitudes and opinions in the US, focused on measuring individuals' motivations for, and barriers to, attending live performing arts events and art exhibits (Blume-Kohout et al. 2015). This data collection effort mirrors its predecessors by focusing on informing the supply-side policy paradigm addressing issues of access.

The competing priorities for research for policy-making purposes are teetering between a continued sense of wanting to serve nonprofit organizations, in their traditional sense, and the need to inform policy that takes a broader purview. At the time of writing this chapter, the NEA is finalizing the design for the next wave of its SPPA, which will be fielded in July 2017 (National Endowment for the Arts 2016). In contrast to the GSS, the draft 2017 SPPA instrument used for pilot testing strikes a balance between the competing priorities for research. The draft instrument maintains the questions used for trend analyses, which are highly valued by the nonprofit arts sector, and includes updated and new questions. The revised questions aim to be inclusive of a broad range of artistic forms and activities and to document more detail about how people engage in art, including where and why they participate. While the term "arts participation" for many years was synonymous with arts audiences, the updates included in the 2017 SPPA pilot test questionnaire demonstrate greater parity of measurement among creating art, consuming and making art via and with technology and arts attendance. The broader range and greater balance of measures offer the possibility of informing a broader range of "arts policies" discourse.

## Conclusion

"Cultural policy" in the US is in a period of great flux. This flux largely stems from reckoning a deeply rooted support and infrastructure system with contemporary society, including incorporating data and research into policy- and decision-making. Research focusing on arts audiences and the manners in which people engage with art has evolved over the past 10 years and continues to evolve. Whereas in the early days of audience research it was difficult to draw inferences from disparate studies to inform systems-level policy conversations, a current challenge arises from disparate nonprofit arts organizations' efforts to reconcile the findings of systems-level research within the context of their own work. Research is needed to elucidate how to develop sound, systemically comparable, yet organizationally specific, capacity and means to enable disparate organizations to document their own audiences and participants. Specifically, there is a growing desire among arts organizations to document the demographic composition and behaviors of their own audiences and to explore the degree to which the organizations' programs are relevant to their lives. As understanding of how people engage with art and artistic endeavors evolves, research is needed to understand whether and how the roles of artists are changing. Particularly as the modalities with which people engage with artistic endeavors touches on broader aspects of civic life, research is needed to help understand how and whether perceptions are changing as to who is considered an artist and the role that person plays within local communities.



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Whereas in earlier decades, interest in audience and audience-related research stemmed from an established supply-focused policy paradigm, currently research is helping to inform the next policy paradigm, yet to be firmly shaped (Toepler 2013). Bennett (2004) discusses two factions of cultural policy research, one serving as formative and informative for the practical development of cultural policies, and the other reflective and critical of cultural policies. In a sense, this chapter can be understood as discussing how audience research began as the former and evolved into the latter, with developments in “audience research” over the past decade providing critical commentary on the relative narrowness of what has been the arts policy paradigm in the US. In the near future, understanding gained through this recent and ongoing research just might help drive the next cultural policy paradigm to take shape in the US.

## Notes

- 1 The purpose of this chapter section is not to fully address what “cultural policy” is, either in a conceptual or operational sense, within the US context or as it relates to international cultural diplomacy efforts. Rather, the purpose is to describe a dominant and unique aspect of “policies” related to art or culture—meaning forms of aesthetic and artistic expression as opposed to a full anthropological approach to culture, for example that would include language—in the US.
- 2 The Center for Arts and Cultural Policy Studies (founded in 1994) at Princeton University and the Cultural Policy Center (founded in 1999) at the University of Chicago, and later The Curb Center for Art, Enterprise & Public Policy (founded in 2003) at Vanderbilt University.
- 3 At the time of writing this chapter AABS data had not yet been publicly released so I cannot provide commentary on the effectiveness of the AABS or its results.
- 4 Additional efforts had been made in recent years to measure ‘arts participation’ with broader or different definitional frameworks than the SPPA. Examples of such efforts include Brown, Novak and Kitchener (2008), Klineberg, Wu and Aldape (2012) and LaPlaca Cohen (2014).

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