

(En)gauging audience data & research within museums and heritage

A symposium held at the Tower of London on 26 September 2019

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Historic
Royal Palaces

Executive summary

This workshop was held as a result of the AHRC-funded research project *Lest We Forget: Poppies and Public Commemoration* at the Independent Research Organisation (IRO) and heritage organisation Historic Royal Palaces (HRP). The research team faced challenges around research practice within a heritage institution and wanted to explore these issues with peers from other IROs and colleagues in commercial and academic sectors to find a way to discuss the strengths and limitations of audience research within heritage sites, and hopefully pave the way for future research projects and collaborations.

Three themes were highlighted and explored

Audience (data) • Politics and Anxieties • Capacity and Solutions

Key discussions on these topics focussed on

- Defining audiences and how these are conceived of across organisations and the museums and heritage sector
- Where 'audience research' sits within organisations and how this affects current and future insight and understanding of audience engagement
- How and where audience research is gathered and analysed, and then shared within and across organisation

Key recommendations included

- To value the skills and time needed for good research design, fieldwork and analysis
- To explore methods to promote internal sharing of audience research
- To think about tools to share audience research beyond one organisation, that is more sector-responsive than the traditional academic publication model
- To think critically about the range of ethical implications for audience research, both for data subjects and for those undertaking the research
- To engage with new initiatives to create partnerships between academic and museum and heritage sectors, such as the Centre for Cultural Value



Blood Swept Lands and Seas of Red at the Tower of London in 2014

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Event Overview

The symposium arose from work on the AHRC-funded 'Lest We Forget' project at Historic Royal Palaces (HRP), led by Dr Megan Gooch.

Held at the Tower of London, this half-day symposium brought together practitioners, academics and stakeholders to consider current research around museum and heritage audiences.

Our thanks to HRP colleagues and volunteers for helping plan and deliver this event, and to all those who contributed towards proceedings.

Context

The growing number of leading institutions with 'Independent Research Organisation' (IRO) status - awarded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council - impacts the methods, capabilities and outputs for academic-led research. IRO-led work has generated collaborations, content for public programming and interdisciplinary innovations across a range of historical, archaeological, art historical and other subject-specific domains.

Most heritage and cultural institutions undertake audience research across departments, to understand audiences for programming, marketing and other business-driven aims. As IRO boundaries between 'scholarship', 'public engagement' and 'research' become increasingly porous, many in-house professionals face new challenges when seeking to understand and define audiences.

Event Remit

The focus of this symposium lay in thinking about audience research; in terms of who this is for, who it benefits, and what values it holds within museums and like-minded organisations.

Two key questions sought to think through these issues:

- What are the challenges of audience research in museum and heritage sites?
- To what extent is IRO knowledge distinctive and how does this fit within the boundaries of contemporary organisational research?

We held three sessions which prompted a multi-sector conversation around working practice and research cultures, from the perspective of representatives across various roles and (local and national) organisations.

Organisations Reperesented

Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) • British Film Institute • Clifton Suspension Bridge Trust • Coppice Research • Culture Hint • Fitzwilliam Museum • Gardens, Libraries & Museums, University of Oxford • Goldsmiths University • Historic Environment Scotland • Historic Royal Palaces • Imperial War Museums • Kingston University • Museum of London Docklands • Natural History Museum • Nesta • Roald Dahl Museum • Several museum freelancers • Tate • The Audience Agency • The Museum Consultancy • University of Leeds • University of Reading • Victoria & Albert Museum • York Archaeological Trust

Symposium Content

The event programme brought together a wealth of practitioner and academic expertise to address three interlinked themes:

Audience (data) • Politics and Anxieties • Capacity and Solutions

Keynote Paper – *‘Romantic Scotland in China’*

A captivating keynote was given by Rebecca Bailey (Head of Exhibitions and Outreach, Historic Environment Scotland). Her presentation focused on the challenges, realities and rewards of international audience research and knowledge exchange, as part of her involvement with the AHRC-commissioned and funded ‘Romantic Scotland in China’ project. This collaboration partnered Nanjing Museum (China), Historic Environment Scotland (HES), Nomad Exhibitions and the Scottish National Gallery, supported by university researchers from Xi’an Jiaotong-Liverpool (Suzhou, China), Liverpool, Bath and Bournemouth. An exhibition of paintings, photography and objects, titled ‘Romantic Scotland: Castles, Land and Sea’, was hosted in Nanjing. Over a four-month display run in 2017, it received 100,000 visitors.

An overarching project aim was to increase understanding and capacity for audience research within both countries. Rebecca’s talk outlined specific methods utilised to collect quantitative and qualitative data, for analysing Chinese visitor behaviour, experience and attitudes towards displayed material. It was possible to perceive individual responses to the art forms that represented the Scottish nation, giving individual visitors opportunities to capture their reactions.

The team carried out visitor observations using mobile tracking software to monitor behaviour, whilst formats, including a ‘graffiti wall’ for post-it notes, received a high number of responses. Opinion was also measured via a self-completion survey and a select number of focus groups. One of the most successful innovations for data capture proved to be a converted red phone box, in which visitors uploaded video diary messages and conversations in order to share thoughts about the exhibition content. What had been originally designed as something through which to conduct audience research ended up being treated as an exhibit in its own right.

Rebecca accounted for the fact that many Chinese visitors were keen to share their experiences, evidenced by the high number of personal reflections offered up. Extensive professionalising of museums across China additionally made it possible to secure comprehensive demographic data about who was visiting the exhibition.

Her main conclusions relayed the importance of integrating personal ambitions within the broader IRO framework of Higher Education Institutions, in the sense that this pursuit could combine delivering a high-profile exhibition with an academic research initiative. The project’s success lay in a willingness to share results, but more importantly, to create something that could be learned from and tangibly implemented within future research practice. The deployed evaluation techniques secured valuable feedback for engagement practice across cultural heritage organisations, thereby generating findings of value to future heritage and tourism initiative. A full data analysis and interpretation can be found within the bilingual final project report, ‘Romantic Scotland – Chinese Perceptions of Cultural Heritage’, which was published in October 2018.

Interactive Discussion Session

In order to gauge and advocate solutions to pressing issues within museum and heritage practice and internal structures, attendees were split into cross-sector groups. Each were tasked with responding to a series of themed questions, which included:

- What are the politics and anxieties of researching a museum or heritage site? Are they different with internal and external researchers?
- How can museums and heritage sites share knowledge and data outside their walls?
- Are academics responding to or producing 'turns' within museum and heritage practice?
- What is a heritage or museum audience?



One cross-sector group enjoying the process of advocating solutions.

Principal Reflections

This section draws on the content produced by the cross-sector groups during our interactive discussion session.

Defining Audience

Defining 'audiences' within museum and heritage institution terminology spans to anyone who can physically, digitally or tangentially interact or engages with (or could potentially engage with) these spaces (onsite, offsite or online). Often audience groupings (e.g. tourists, educational groups, specialist interest) are defined by how they engage with site content. This understanding could extend to include those working within these organisations, such as in-house catering teams, and to stakeholders such as funding bodies. Particular emphasis was placed on distinguishing potential engagement, on those who are yet to visit - recognising that audience research is not just about validating existing audiences, but gaining understanding of new visitors and their needs.

It was pointed out that audiences might not always be willing, with one group describing school visitors as a 'dragged along' subset. For others, audience implied an empty vessel, so was therefore too passive. Instead, the term 'participant' was felt to provide more positive recognition of difference between individuals.

There was also extensive discussion around the differences (and respective overlaps) between audience research and market research. For many practitioners, market research was linked to business and commercial opportunities, in relation to paying 'customers'. It was therefore considered

to be intrusive and orientated by numbers, in contrast to the demographic, opinions-based concerns of audience research.

As Rebecca Bailey's keynote had already evidenced, sampled audiences are often keen to contribute ideas and thoughts towards institutional practice. Indeed, there is an increasing willingness - even an expectation - amongst those visiting institutions, that the content they encounter should seek to challenge the status quo. Several representatives spoke of their own day-to-day experiences of encouraging visitors to question exhibition labels or similar authoritative categorisation; some had introduced alternative forms of interpretation, such as a label designed for children or citing personalised thoughts as an involved curator.



A family audience interacts onsite at the Tower of London

Who does/owns/shapes/keeps audience research?

For attendees, undertaking audience research meant merging a skills-based specialism with championing what you do, then embedding this learning in practice. Whilst those who commission research might be seen to 'own' that knowledge, audience research should ideally sit across organisations (ranging from exhibitions, learning, visitor services, digital and marketing departments). In other words, research and generated data might be 'on' audiences or 'with' audiences, but ultimately should be designed 'for' future audiences.

Organisations often prioritise wanting to keep (existing) audiences happy, so may resist facing up to the reality of reporting negative findings. This status quo neglects a pressing concern for institutions to really understand who

they are dealing with, especially at a time when museum content finds itself under a lot of audience-based scrutiny. This may be connected to the retrospective planning and implementation of audience research, to the extent that it appears superficial, irrelevant or something of an after-thought. Instead, practitioners advocated it being deployed as a planning tool able to ask targeted questions, of importance to organisations across the board. Some felt that aligning audience research within a business plan would help an organisation determine how it achieved its goals and therefore know that it had made a difference to its users. Such a move could help towards develop a sense of investment in audience research, as a corporate organisational priority.



The Lest We Forget team integrated into this artistic event and managed the audience evaluation

Capacity and Solutions

Attendees listed utilising public-facing outlets for disseminating audience research outputs. Forums such as websites, symposia, exhibitions, seminars, reports, research groups and articles all warranted merit. Professional networks and (online) consortia, such as the Visitor Studies Group and the GEM Mailing List were also recommendation for distributing findings amongst wider networks. Tailoring or condensing findings to suit targeted outlets, such as a public-facing publication or using research to inform exhibitions, would enhance exposure in amongst new audiences.

Two practical suggestions put forward were:

1. To make research more transferable – and, as a result, less competitive – by promoting engagement with other institutions.
2. To back the use of on-site warders and volunteers to contribute their experiences and observations of working with audiences, as a way of breaking down traditional ‘audience versus curator’ barriers.



Admissions and front of house staff have a wealth of audience observations

Observations & Recommendations

Audience research should be something we can all find, use and learn from. Learning from this research means taking findings on board, then making internal and external changes.

Symposium contributors outlined a number of techniques and strategies around audience learning and participation, designed to support future organisational research cultures:

Research Design

- Good research stems from commissioners or investors wanting to learn from results.
- It is easier to measure the impact of embedded, practice-based research, as an instigator for change (beyond upskilling museum professionals).
- Research design can focus too heavily on current activity, rather than planning ahead.
- Existing in-house literature and reports should be actively utilised as a source of relevant information. But can we (inherently) assume that organisations and practitioners are interested in comparing longitudinal data sets over time?
- Who research is for is a question for individual organisations – but audience research should have a degree of ownership across a whole organisation.
- Non-visitor insight should be sought as a way of shaping the offering of a particular organisation.



The Lest We Forget project team designed the audience survey with a detachable postcard image as a keepsake for participants

We are conducting some research to understand how people commemorate World War I in today's society. We would love to hear your thoughts. The survey should take a few minutes to complete. Your answers will be kept confidential. Please note that as this survey is anonymous, you will not receive a reply to your comments.

Sharing Inside our Organisations via Holistic Research Cultures

- Existing anxieties and individual department structures can lead to siloed interests.
- A positive, proactive step would see organisations looking to create a more holistic research environment, by instigating a strategy shift at a management level.
- Generated data from audience research projects must tell a story that is compelling and useful, that will speak across departmental divides. Findings must be useable, so that they can be embedded in practice.
- Innovative forms of dissemination ensures that tangible findings are shared beyond the departments and individuals that created the research.



How can we share inside our organisations?

Sharing Outside our Organisations

- Sharing within organisations is typically easier than sharing outside them. Market competition, concerns around data integrity, and a lack of time for writing up research in multiple formats are all contributing factors.
- Greater willingness and collaboration across institutions should be supported at a structural level; sharing final publications and outputs could be pooled into a central resource, as a way of discouraging possessiveness (though not necessarily exchanging data).
- Social media is not only a response tool, but can function as a useful evaluation tool for exchanges with (digital) audiences.
- The Audience Agency's 'Audience Finder' tool helps practitioners understand the cultural sector better, whilst the Centre for Cultural Value will encourage sharing within and beyond the sector.



How can we share outside our organisations?

Research Ethics

- GDPR regulations have placed renewed emphasis on and awareness of confidentiality, consent and personal data within organisations. Audiences are also more aware of the implications of giving data, leading to pushback and increasing suspicion of surveys.
- Legal, GDPR-compliant research isn't necessarily ethical research (e.g. scandals around the use of social media data).
- There needs to be broader focus and transparency within audience research projects on how generated data will be used/stored/shared, as a way of counteracting the isolation of findings.
- Research projects need to acknowledge and properly budget time for all those who input towards them (e.g. interns or volunteers).
- Informal knowledge secured by volunteers, museum guides, or kiosk staff, can also offer useful anecdotal insight into audience concerns (information not often captured).
- Methods must be congruent with the sensitivities of the subject matter.



Volunteers lighting lamps at Beyond the Deepening Shadows in 2018, but volunteers can be used beyond programming, for example in research projects

Partnerships

- Working with partners allows organisations to do research on a bigger scale, and produce new data that is rigorous, useful, and used.
- Academic research can equally amplify the work of one researcher, one department or one organisation (although this is not always recognised and valued across departments).
- But incorporating academic expertise or research cultures re-frames typical project outputs (as well as time and resources). Involved academics need to be flexible in not imposing ready-made perspectives, but willing to feed in ideas via a 'critical friend' model.



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Partnerships can be powerful

Audience Research Panel Discussion

Be they based within Higher Education or the museum sector, cultural organisations are tasked with delivering cultural interventions of real social impact, or that provoke change amongst those engaging with them. The need to identify and secure reliable audience data, before critically interpreting what this information tells you within the context of an individual organisation, is a challenge in its own right.

The third session in our symposium featured a panel with representatives from the University of Reading, the Audience Agency, Imperial War Museums (IWM) and the University of Leeds. Its overall structure was designed to share innovative practice and developments from leading organisations, as a way of advocating solutions and approaches to current audience research challenges.

The panel proceedings were chaired by Dr Emily Pringle, Head of Research at Tate (London). Emily has previously written about her own professional experiences via her online blog 'Practitioner Research in the Art Museum'. One of the important changes she identifies is how museums are attempting to, in her words, 'shift from being the exclusive holder and dispenser of expert knowledge to becoming a more discursive space'. This brings issues for institutions who are required to offer enhanced experiences for a more diverse public, not least the shift in curatorial knowledge, as organisations incorporate research processes to shape and support other activities. Emily is an advocate for a greater co-production of knowledge with audiences – with the broader consensus indicating that the future will hold more practice-led and practice-as-research initiatives (as exemplified within art-led IROs) as a way of communicating value and insight beyond departmental boundaries.



Our Symposium panellists
(L-R: Ben Walmsley, Jessica Lutkin, Emily Pringle, Gill Webber, Lucie Fitton)

Panel Discussion - Public Engagement Initiatives

Two panellists spoke about the work of newly launched public-facing initiatives; the Centre for Cultural Value (Professor Ben Walmsley, Associate Professor in Audience Engagement, University of Leeds) and IWM's Public Institute for the Understanding of War and Conflict (Gill Webber, Executive Director of Content & Programming and Executive Director of the IWM Institute).

The IWM Institute was launched as a pilot in June 2018, to lie in deepen understanding and raise awareness of the organisation's complex and difficult subject matter, by utilising interdisciplinary, cross-sector partnerships to challenge public perceptions. Furthermore as an IRO, an Institute platform offers a way of streamlining original research programmes, enhancing opportunities for funding and future stakeholder enterprises. By merging research and learning with innovative public engagement activities, this hub aspires to be not only a 'disruptor' to the sector, but a go-to site for expertise and historical context. For example, a recent exhibition addressed the contemporary conflict in Yemen, alongside a partnership venture with Historic England culminating in a programmed 'Culture Under Attack' season. A key point made by Gill was the Institute's role as a tool in seeking to identify and engage new audiences, known as development audiences. She observed one major pitfall of existing audience evaluation techniques being the over-sampling of the same users, thereby obtaining skewed results, and essentially revealing a lack of willingness to cater for new audience needs.

For the Director of the Centre for Cultural Value (University of Leeds), this new initiative had ambitions as a participatory conduit for plural and pragmatic perspectives on culture. The Centre will operate around strategic themes and subject areas (such as arts and health), working with university partners, creative practitioners, and membership organisations. Ben thus highlighted the Centre's importance as an embedded forum for disseminating qualitative-based knowledge across sectors; targeting contributions towards education, policy work around arts and humanities research, and wider evaluation practice. By stimulating and championing new research, the Centre's remit sought working in new ways across sectors, to ensure findings are distributed and applied beyond organisational bubbles.

Panel Discussion - Academia and Audience Data

Dr Jessica Lutkin (Impact Development Manager, University of Reading) provided our symposium attendees with an overview of the changing academic practices for assessing 'impact', within the context of Impact Case Studies and the Research Excellence Framework (REF). The AHRC's remit offers opportunity for creative, profitable and ideally long-term partnerships across different disciplines. Many academic institutions now prioritise heritage collaborative initiatives to deliver public-facing events and engagement activities, as a way of realising these aims; Jessica gave the example of the University of Reading's support towards an AHRC-funded initiative surveying audiences and embedding organisational learning and change at Glastonbury Abbey, led by Professor Roberta Gilchrist. Such research ventures must balance academic investigative rigour with evidencing practical, tangible recommendations of benefit for future research.

However, Humanities based-research is often perceived as too academic for public-facing initiatives, leading to potential complications in terms of authorship and ownership. Sustaining partnership expectations and communication channels can be challenging, especially given that the research impact model instigates (and emphasises) the effect of academic research on a wider community - thus reinforcing an unequal power dynamic for non-academic partners. Fruitful co-curation with community groups or other stakeholders can work well through the clarity of a shared goal, but requires significant time and resource to implement. Other anxieties manifest around ensuring that museum worker skills and career development are truly valued within academic-led research projects.

Lucie Fitton (Head of Learning and Participation at the Audience Agency) outlined that sharing resources, and the pursuit of creative inquiry via partnership ventures is facilitating changes around the nature of bespoke audience consultancy practice, especially in terms of 'big picture' approaches and standardised data. Collecting data from 150 museums for the Museums Audience Report, and analysing heritage-funded projects working with young people, were two examples of new cross-sector strategies adopted by the Audience Agency.

What was clear from collective discussions and provided examples was the need to embed clear objectives from the outset of audience research ventures. Where subsequent findings might be considered to only apply to certain areas of departmental practice, structural constraints duly limit, rather than enhance, wider organisational stakeholder learning. Instead, deployed methods need to enable knowledge-diffusion across departments, as a driver for changing practice and empowering professionals.

Closing Remarks

In order to produce valuable sector learning, organisations need to determine what they want to get out of their audience research and why (something that currently varies across both departments and organisations). All institutions need to know who their audience is, as well as who it isn't. Utilising audience research offers a pathway to incorporate the expertise of multiple practitioners, as a way of improving the value of organisational research endeavours, and stimulating positive change as a result.

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