Culture Metrics—
Case studies of cultural partner organisations

The following paper introduces five of the cultural organisations involved in the development of Culture Metrics and describes their use of the metrics as part of individual test events. The information is based on a series of interviews held in June and July 2015 by the Culture Metrics research team of the University of Manchester.

Manchester Jazz Festival

The Manchester Jazz Festival is an annual festival run by six part time members of staff and volunteers. The festival collects data from its audiences and artists. This information is mainly destined for funders, especially Arts Council England. The festival hosts a wide range of events and some of these are not booked via a box office, so there is only limited data gathered about audiences. The organisation does not officially engage in peer- or self-assessment, but there are informal connections with the other Jazz Festivals of the UK. Ideally, they would like to compare their audience data with that of other organisations.

The Culture Metrics test event of the Jazz Festival was run in autumn 2014. At the time, they distributed paper surveys and the data-collection was volunteer-led. They received approximately 50 responses out of an audience crowd of 280. This response was deemed much higher than their normal surveys. Events often take place late at night and audiences are generally keen to get home after the performance. Once data was received from the Culture Metrics team, the team considered the responses and felt pleased about the audience’s positive assessment of the event. The results did not impact on decision-making within the organisation, but the festival hopes to compare them to further data-collection results this year. Once more information has been received, they would like to use it to target their audiences more specifically. As a small organisation, any ‘free’ information would be of an advantage. As the festival only takes place once a year, regular data-collection is impossible and needs to be planned very carefully. Manchester Jazz Festival is currently trialling the Culture Counts system at 6 events during the 2015 programme in August, and in autumn will be looking at sustainable integration of the system for future years.

Steve Mead, the Artistic Director of the festival, commented positively on the festival’s involvement in Culture Metrics: ‘I think what’s nice to us about this is that it’s come from the arts organisations upwards. It’s information that we feel genuinely shouts about all the good things that we do, rather than us just responding to a set of governmental data queries that don’t actually convey the quality, extent and reach of the art that we produce.’

Octagon theatre, Bolton

The Octagon Theatre Bolton produces a wide range of shows throughout the year. The team has been involved in a variety of self-evaluations, ranging from postal questionnaires to online surveys.
They now predominantly use Audience Finder to collect, access and understand their audience data and would like to use the program in conjunction with Culture Metrics. The organisation has particularly valued that Audience Finder allows data to be pooled and compared across different organisations. Peer-assessment takes place informally but at regular intervals. There is some worry that a more formal structure is needed due to the personal relationship with peers. The theatre also analyses its own box office data to foster data-driven decision making.

The Culture Metrics test event took place in spring 2015. Audience members of the show ‘View from the Bridge’ were emailed a link to the Culture Metrics questionnaire, which then had a response rate of between ten and 15 percent. This was substantially below the expected number of responses, however the majority of the audience consisted of school children whose teachers might not have passed on the opportunity to rate the experience. The theatre found the setting-up of the questionnaire very user-friendly and also praised the clear structure of the data report. Once the report had been received the management team considered the results but did not use these to make further decisions about their organisation as it was felt that the results would either need to be compared to other events or other organisations – the results would also need to be more robust as a sample of 60 responses would not be enough to base any decision-making on.

Overall, the team kept re-emphasising the need for more data but praised the overall ambition of the project. Helen Jones summarised that ‘I think it kind of feels like we’re still at the beginning stages and there’s probably still quite a way to go but it could be really exciting and really useful.’

**Manchester Museum**

Manchester Museum uses a wide range of quantitative and qualitative ways to evaluate its work. There are monthly surveys done by an agency using its paid staff, volunteers and the museum’s own staff to a standard template, qualitative data from visitor comment forms and anecdotal data from Visitor Service Assistants who staff the galleries. However, until using Culture Metrics the museum has not been involved in consistent measuring of quality and there is no formal peer-review process. Some self-assessment is part of the organisation’s structure but has recently been neglected due to other priorities. Data is shared across the network of university museums, and of museums in Manchester for advocacy and general comparison.

The museum has engaged in three test events as of summer 2015. This number is partly higher than that of the other involved organisations as Manchester Museum has been involved since the inception of the scheme. All three test events had a different structure. The last two took place in spring 2015 and included one exhibition, ‘Siberia’, and an interactive tour of the museum which included the performance of a local choir collective, ‘Wonderstruck’. Ipads were used on both occasions.

Once the data had been received, the museum realised that there would be very little sense in comparing data across different organisations but they are keen to compare the results across a
range of their own events. The self-evaluation data of the events was somewhat higher than the other results, but this did not surprise the museum as they understood that those undertaking the work are likely to have high expectations due to their personal vision and commitment. The data has not yet impacted on any decision making but the museum is currently in the process of creating a sustainable way in which Culture Metrics can be embedded throughout and in conjunction with Visitor Finder. They are hoping to develop longitudinal data which will allow them to assess the quality of their work over the period of each year, and across a variety of events. Future analysis could be compared to the results of the artistic assessment by the Arts Council and published reviews in museum journals.

Overall, the museum is extremely committed to the project and its potential impact on cultural advocacy. Nick Merriman, the director of Manchester Museum, said that ‘only using quantitative measures only ever very poorly captures what it’s about, so it seemed to me to be really worthwhile to explore whether we could agree on a common set. And it’s been quite surprising and pleasing how there was broad agreement relatively rapidly on what quality would look like across a range of kinds of organisations.’

**Hallé**

The Hallé Orchestra in Manchester were one of the first cultural organisations to join the Culture Metrics team. Before their involvement in the project, they only collected information about their audiences through the box office of the concert hall. This information was then used for postcode, demographic and preference analysis as well as some comparison with Audience Finder. However, many of the hall’s visitors are older and if tickets are not booked online but over the counter, often information is missing. The orchestra engages in some self-assessment but has been looked for a more structured approach. Data of orchestras if often shared with concert halls (and vice versa) but this depends on the individual policies of the halls which sell the tickets. Questions of ownership can sometimes lead to conflict but overall, the orchestra is pleased about their data sharing with their venue.

Hallé has taken part in one test event in autumn 2014. The event included opera excerpts by Verdi and information was collected via iPads. There were some technical issues which lead to a more limited number of responses than originally hoped for. In order to guarantee objective peer-reviews, professional reviewers were invited to the evening. The management team deliberately included some metrics which would not necessarily score very highly on the night (for example ‘innovation’) but believed that the true value of the results lay in a potential overlap of the reviews: As long as all parties scored the metrics equally, the organisation’s self-assessment had been confirmed. The orchestra would like to use the metrics for two reasons: In order to check the variety of events and validate their planning, and to capture the audience’s overall visitor experience.

Overall, the management team were slightly dissatisfied with the length of the project and had hoped for a final commercial product much earlier on. As time went on, more similar technical software became available and some of the novelty disappeared. However, they remained committed to the idea of the project. John Summer, the Chief Executive at Hallé Concerts Society
commented that ‘I think we get measured by our funder on all sorts of basis to do with financial performance, operational performance, demographic reach, social values, all the rest of it, GDP, but there has never been a way of evaluating what we do at all systematically.’

**The Royal Opera House**

The Royal Opera House (ROH) in London joined the Culture Metrics project in spring 2015. Before getting involved the organisation was already gathering audience feedback via surveys to customers at its home theatre and circulated via cinema chains screening productions. This data is then used to inform artistic planning and marketing. A great deal of audience interaction is invited online: Every production has a hashtag and a blog and the organisation is proud of its lively and vocal community of 115,000 twitter followers. There is some informal self-reviewing and peer-reviews take place in the form of Arts Council visits. Live cinema relays are a relatively new means of distributing cultural events and there currently little existing research available about the quality of experience of event cinema as a form. When co-production with other organisations takes place there is some informal target-setting but so far no streamlined self-evaluation has been adopted.

Primarily interested in seeing the same piece of work in different settings and measuring the audiences’ emotional connection with the work, the ROH chose to use an iconic part of the Royal Ballet’s heritage for its test event: a production of Swan Lake was evaluated both in London on stage and in two cinemas. The Odeon Printworks and the Quay Theatre in Peterborough had been chosen as the streaming venues due to their diverse settings and audiences. All data gathering took place on iPads. The ROH team felt that the resulting data was easy to understand the word cloud provided them with particular insight into their audience’s opinions. So far, the data has not been used to change the decision-making process of the organisation due to its limited samples size, but there have been some insights in the differences between venues.

It is not yet clear how Culture Metrics will be embedded into the culture of the ROH, but there was a distinct commitment to the project. Only having joined Culture Metrics a few months ago, the team felt that these were still early days. Lindsey Glen, the head of strategic funding at the ROH, summarised that ‘I think we’re still very much in the testing phase, we’ve only really done one event, it was a big event, but it was one event and we need to do some more really to understand the potential of it.’

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For more information about the Culture Metrics project please visit our website www.culturemetricsresearch.com.