Cultural policy research in the real world: Curating ‘impact’, facilitating ‘enlightenment’

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Cultural policy research in the real world: Curating ‘impact’, facilitating ‘enlightenment’

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**BIO**
Eleonora Belfiore is Professor of Communication and Media Studies and a member of the Centre for Research in Communication and Culture in the Department of Social Sciences, University of Loughborough. Her research explores discursive formations around funding for the arts and culture, the place of ‘impact’ in justification of arts subsidy, and its function as as a proxy for cultural and social value in both the cultural sector and Higher Education policy. Within the UEP project Eleonora leads, with Lisanne Gibson, a history-focused work package, and is lead with Abigail Gilmore of a dedicated work package exploring the research-policy-practice nexus.
Abstract

The very identity of cultural policy studies as a distinctive field of academic pursuit rests on a long-standing and widely accepted tension between ‘proper research’ and policy advocacy, which has often resulted in resistance to the idea that robust, critical research can – or even should – be ‘useful’ and have impact on policy discourse. This paper tries to navigate a third route, which sees policy relevance and influence as a legitimate goal of critical research, without accepting the pressures and restrictions of arts advocacy and lobbying.

This is accomplished by exploring in detail the journey ‘into the real world’ of preliminary quantitative data produced by the UEP project in the context of its development of a segmentation exercise based on Taking Part data. The exercise used cluster analysis to identify profiles of cultural participation, and showed that single most engaged group corresponded to the wealthiest, better educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the English population. This data fed into the consultation and evidence gathering process of the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value, and was eventually cited in its final report *Enriching Britain*. The paper looks at the trajectory that ‘the 8%’ statistic has travelled, charting its increasing prominence in English cultural policy debates and argues that, despite the impossibility for researchers to exert control over the use and misuse of their data, policy influence is nonetheless a realistic objective if understood in terms of ‘conceptual influence’.

**Keywords:** cultural participation; research impact; cultural consumption; arts policy; access
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Introduction: The problem with the ‘torn halves’ rhetoric

The very identity of cultural policy studies as a distinctive field of academic pursuit rests on a problematic but well-established and widely accepted tension between ‘proper’, and advocacy-driven research. In this dichotomist view, the former is characterized by intellectual and methodological rigour alongside a critical and genuinely questioning stance. Advocacy driven research, on the other hand, is seen as subservient to the needs and priorities of policy advocacy. In this case, the argument goes, the formulation of research questions, methodological approaches and the development of methods is subsumed into the requirements and expectations of policy makers and the sector, with all the problems that inevitably follow. As Scullion and Garcia (2005:120) put it, “what the cultural sector really wants from research is the killer evidence that will release dizzying amounts of money into the sector. Its expectations of research can be unrealistic”.

The tension that Scullion and Garcia explore between the expectation that ‘research users’ might have, and the values and ways of working of professional (and particularly academic) researchers is a real issue. More problematic, however, is the way in which this tension between ‘critical’ and ‘instrumental’ research has been characterized in quasi-ontological terms as inherent and inevitable and something that needs to be, at best, acknowledged rather than reconciled. Oliver Bennett (2004:246), for instance, refers to these two forms of cultural policy research as “the torn halves that never add up to a whole”, suggesting that it may be the case that “research can be practical, or it can be critical, but it can never be both at the same time”. The resulting quasi-mythological dichotomy has played an historically significant role in the development of cultural policy studies - particularly so in Anglo-Saxon countries (Bennett 1992, McGuigan 1996), yet it flies in the face of much activist research and the mounting evidence of the real-life impact that academic research can have (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler 2014; Lingard 2013).
The lively debate on what the ideal distance should be between cultural policy scholarship and its object of enquiry has been further complicated in the UK and beyond by the rise of the so-called ‘impact agenda’. In order to be seen as a legitimate area of spending, publicly funded research is now expected to deliver demonstrable public benefits in the form of economic, cultural, social impacts or the facilitation of policy change (Belfiore 2013 and 2015). Assessing to what extent research might achieve such impacts whilst remaining scholarly rigorous and ‘excellent’ is however not an easy feat, so much so that the suggestion has been made that the ‘costs’ of the elaborate systems now in place to assess both research quality and impact might in fact exceed the benefits that might accrue from quality, impactful research (Martin 2011).

Concerns for the implementation of the impact agenda often merge with anxieties over blurring distinctions between scholarship and advocacy, thus exacerbating the uneasy relationship between academic cultural policy research, policy advocacy and the policy-making process. Paradoxically, for a discipline with a focus on policy, cultural policy studies has seemingly failed to develop a sophisticated, reflexive and critical articulation of its own position in relation to its object of study.

The Understanding Everyday Participation (UEP) project as object of analysis

This article tries to navigate these tensions constructively: it argues that policy relevance and influence represent legitimate goals of critical research and that this does not necessarily entails accepting the pressures and restrictions of arts advocacy and lobbying, or the relinquishing of accepted scholarly criteria of research excellence.

The discussion presented here thus constitutes a first step towards the elaboration of the framework that will guide the UEP’s team approach to its ‘impact work’. Inevitably, the intellectual project of capturing, documenting, questioning and discussing any impact that UEP might have on policy and
creative and professional practice is far from being, at this stage, a completed process. It is, in fact, an on-going iterative learning process, which properly starts now, as the first formal UEP outputs are published in this special issue of Cultural Trends.

In so far as it takes aspects of the UEP project itself as object of analysis, rather than presenting findings emerging from it, this article is somewhat different from the others in this Special Issue. It does not present a discussion of empirical data gathered by the project team in the local 'ecosystems’ (see Gibson and Miles in this issue) nor does it expound the theoretical or methodological foundations of the project. In this respect, this article, unlike the others in this UEP special issue, aims to offer not a contribution to the study of everyday forms of cultural participation, but a preliminary reflection of what kind of impacts the UEP research might have for cultural policy as an area of both scholarship and practice.

Intellectually then, the article is located in that interdisciplinary area of investigation that focuses on ‘research utilization’, to use the phrase commonly employed in the 1970s, when this work started to gain prominence, especially in the US (Belfiore and Bennett 2010). As the ‘impact agenda’ has risen internationally, this once highly specialized field of scholarship has acquired a wider significance, and much energy has gone into defining what impact ‘is’ and how to achieve it.

**UEP and the impact challenge**

The definition of impact adopted by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, which funded UEP, understands impact as the influence of research, or in other words, its effect on “an individual, a community, the development of policy, or the creation of a new product of service”, whilst Research Council UK (the umbrella organization that brings all the disciplinary-focused Councils together) emphasizes the demonstrable nature of the contribution research makes to society and the economy as the hallmark of impact (in Denicolo 2014: viii).
The assumption (or indeed the expectation) on the part of funders then seems to be that the process through which research has influence on society is a linear one: a problem is identified, insight from research is brought into deciding what measures to take to solve it, resulting in an evidence-based intervention that addresses the initial problem. Yet, there is plenty of evidence showing that the reality of achieving ‘impact’ is anything but linear (Cairney 2016, Smith 2013). The dominant assumption is also that delivering research impact is a job for researchers themselves:

The responsibility of researchers and academics is to think their research through carefully from the outset, paying at least some attention to what ‘works’ in terms of reaching and influencing other researchers or external audiences (LSE Public Policy Group 2011:11).

This article aims to help problematising current approaches to the research impact agenda by exploring two main issues: Firstly, the article demonstrates that we need to acknowledge that researchers only have limited control over the ways in which their work might have impact; secondly (and following from the first point) the article calls for a more nuanced notion of impact that acknowledges the value of conceptual and discursive influence alongside more traditional forms of ‘linear’ impact.

These points are illustrated via a detailed exploration of the journey ‘into the real world’ of a preliminary (and until now unpublished) quantitative data analysis produced by the UEP project in the context of its development of a segmentation exercise based on the Taking Part survey. This piece of Taking Part data analysis (which is fully discussed by Taylor in this issue) provided key evidential foundation for a set of recommendations in the influential report Enriching Britain: culture, creativity and growth, published in February 2015 by the Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value. It therefore offers an opportunity to reflect on UEPs involvement in and contribution to live cultural and policy debates and to display the relatively little control the UEP team had on how their material was received, interpreted, understood and used (or indeed, misunderstood and misused).
Joining the conversation: curating public engagement for impact

The Warwick Commission on the Future of Cultural Value was a 2-year large scale, cross-campus public engagement project launched by Warwick University in 2014, with a budget in the region of £450K. Funds came, for the most part, from the university's Communications department, from the Warwick Business School (WBS, where the project was administratively located) and, to a lesser extent, the Faculty of Arts. Additional funds were acquired through various competitive internal funding streams (mostly linked to public engagement and impact, such as, for instance, HEIF resources). The Commission’s intellectual leadership resided with myself and Prof. Jonothan Neelands, from WBS in our role as Directors of Study¹.

The Warwick Commissions constitute an ongoing profile-raising initiative that started in 2007 (so, pre-impact agenda) and which, according to Warwick University’s own description has the “aim of drawing on the scholarly expertise of Warwick academics as well as practitioners and policy makers to address issues of global importance”². The University’s web site emphasizes the independent and scholarly nature of the Commissions it runs, based as they are on Warwick’s staff recognized areas of expertise. However, the website also makes it clear that the goal is to make “practical and realistic recommendations” on how to move a particular debate forward. In this instance, the University intended to enhance the visibility of its internal research expertise in cultural policy and arts education, and the contribution that Warwick staff had made to the emerging ‘cultural value’ debate (see Belfiore 2015, Gibson and Miles, this issue, and Crossick and Kaszynska 2016 for a conceptualization of cultural value and the surrounding debate).

It is precisely in this double role - as a member of the UEP project team and as Director of Study of the Warwick Commission - that I was able to facilitate, witness and document the way in which UEP’s new analysis of Taking Part data

¹ http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/mis sion/ [last accessed 7th March 2016].
² http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/ [last accessed 29th February 2016].
came to play a pivotal role in the work of the Commission. Being exposed to UEP research directly influenced the Commission’s direction of thinking, the focus of discussions, and the effort to develop fresh policy recommendations. This influence resulted in a firm stand on unequal access to the arts and culture, lack of diversity at both cultural production and consumption levels, as well as a plea for a broader and less arts-focused understanding of ‘participation’ in policymaking that are key features of the Enriching Britain report. UEP data was also widely cited and referred to in the international press, TV, the international blogosphere and was heavily referred to in the national debate on manifesto pledges ahead of the 2015 general elections.3

On making an impact: getting the cultural sector to listen

The case study of UEP impact at the centre of this article is based on Mark Taylor’s hierarchical cluster analysis of Taking Part data, which he discusses in great detail in his contribution to this Special Issue (Taylor ????). Taylor presented the outcome of the analysis to the assembled Warwick Commissioners during one of the formal evidence gathering sessions that fed into the development of the report’s recommendations, alongside briefs offering a critical review of the available literature produced by the Warwick team (Belfiore & Holdaway 2014; Belfiore, Firth & Holdaway 2014; Belfiore, Hart & Neelands 2014).

Levels of participation in publicly funded arts and culture have long been a central ‘problem’ that arts policy has attempted to address through a whole range of ‘access’ ‘participation’, and ‘inclusion’ strategies over the years. Indeed, widening access to the arts is one of the two core aims (together with promoting excellence in the arts) of the Arts Council. They were inscribed in its original Charter and retained in subsequent renewals. The ‘issue’ of limited participation in subsidised culture, however, remains ‘unsolved’ (Jancovich 2015; Stevenson 2015). As a result, non-audiences, which are seen as ‘disengaged’, ‘excluded’, ‘inactive’, ‘disenfranchised’, and so become targets of policy intervention to

3 See: http://padlet.com/elebelfiore/cylt9cznqjxe [last updated in March 2016].
address the assumed deficiencies of their cultural consumption, in what is obviously a deficit model of policy making (Miles & Sullivan 2010).

It is clear why ‘participation’ (or, more correctly, lack thereof) is politically a very delicate issue: limited access to publicly funded cultural opportunities severely undermines the very basis of the ‘case’ for subsidy for culture deriving from general taxation (Belfiore 2012). However, as Taylor (2016:??) notes, Taking Part data shows that “the fraction of the English population that can be described as inactive is far smaller when different activities are taken into account”. In other words, the ‘participation problem’ exists for heavily subsidized forms of cultural activities, but ceases to be a problem if we adopt a notion of cultural participation that extends beyond the arts into spheres of everyday creativity and participation.

In April 2014, Mark Taylor presented an early version of the taxonomy of various styles of cultural participation and engagement that he discusses in this Special Issue to the Commissioners, on behalf of the UEP project. On that occasion, Taylor explained that, using all the available Taking Part datasets, he had carried out a cluster analysis to identify distinctive profiles of cultural participation, with the most two engaged groups accounting for 15% of the broader English population. The single most intensely and consistently engaged group corresponded to the wealthiest, better-educated and least ethnically diverse 8% of the population. These, crucially, were also the groups most engaged in those cultural forms that attract the majority of public subsidies, alongside other sporting and recreational activities. As Taylor (????:??) himself puts it, this classification “raise[s] questions about policies surrounding participation: current policies aimed at increasing participation in state-sanctioned activities are likely to target those with already busy cultural lives, just not cultural in the way the state anticipates”.

The policy implications of this conclusion are clear: the audience development approaches currently endorsed by policy makers, arts funders and the cultural

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4http://www2.warwick.ac.uk/research/warwickcommission/futureculture/themes/value/commissionerday2/ [accessed 9th March 2016].
sectors have not worked, and take up of the cultural opportunities subsidized by the state remains socially stratified along the lines of class, ethnicity, education and income, even after 70 years of continued policy commitment to access (at least at the level of policy rhetoric). This also invites a questioning (as indeed UEP does) of the cultural relevance of state-supported public culture to the lived cultural and creative experience of the vast majority of the English public. Coming as it did merely two months before a general election dominated by the theme of austerity and the necessity of further spending cuts, the ‘funded arts benefit the most privileged 8%’ headlines made for very worrying and uncomfortable reading for many in the cultural sector.

**Making sense of ‘the 8%’**

Patterns of citation and reference demonstrates that the 8% statistic was consistently and regularly drawn upon to support argument and arts policy debates from the time of the report’s publication in February 2015 pretty much without interruptions for the rest of year, and with particular intensity in the period immediately before and after the general elections in May 2015.

And yet, in itself, ‘the 8%’ statistic is hardly surprising data. This was a conclusion reached by the Warwick Commission too in the first critical literature review published in January 2014 to support the work of the Commissioners (Belfiore and Holdaway 2014). The review noted how a previous analysis of Taking Part data by Arts Council England, published in 2008, in the report *From Indifference to Enthusiasm: Patterns of arts attendance in England* identified a “top engagement group” composed of 4% of the population, which shared similar demographics to the UEP’s 8%. The review also highlighted comparable findings in a later analysis of Taking Part data published by ACE in 2010 (Bunting, Martin & Oskala 2010). Through different data sets and methodological tools the team of the ESRC-funded *Cultural Capital and Social Exclusion* project (Bennett *et al.* 2009), one of the most academically influential recent studies of taste, cultural participation and class came to similar conclusions in relation to engagement with publicly funded culture.
All the materials produced by the Warwick team were free to download from the Commission’s web site, including a critical literature review (Belfiore, Hart & Neelands 2014) that cited the 8% statistic. It was however, with the publication of the *Enriching Britain* report in February 2015, and the coverage it received in the national and international press, the blogosphere, and policy and professional circles, that the 8% data acquired a popularity and a policy influence beyond what both the UEP and Warwick Commission teams could ever have imagined.

So, how to explain the widespread international interest and influence generated by UEP’s 8% statistics?

The 8% statistics and additional analysis Mark Taylor did of the Taking Part dataset used for the UEP project were highlighted in the report: they appeared both in its main body and key figures and their implications were also emphasized by appearing in a large textbox in vibrant colours and conspicuously placed on the page (Warwick Commission 2015:33). The same data was also prominently quoted during both the press launch and the cultural sector launch of the report. Here the UEP’s 8% statistic and the accompanying analysis was presented in a slide as the key evidential backing for the report’s recommendations relating to the promotion of participation. The recommendations highlighted the importance of ensuring broader participation in culture by supporting cultural education in school, amateur and volunteer participation and nurturing a wider range of creative forms and pursuits than just what is traditionally labeled as ‘the arts’ (Warwick Commission 2015: chapter 3 and 4).

The wide circulation and influence of the *Enriching Britain*, and the 8% statistic within it, was unquestionably made possible both by the open access nature of the report (Antelman 2004) and the format of the publication: short and concise, written for a non-academic audience, with key statistics and arguments made easily noticeable by striking custom-designed graphics, typescripts and data visualizations. We know these are all features of the publications that tend to be more effective in achieving impact (Bastow, Dunleavy and Tinkler 2014).
However, it is also of significance that, differently from the many other reports lamenting the social stratification of arts attendance, this report had been produced with the involvement of a number of the most senior leaders of organisations that represent the English cultural establishment (Tate Museums, The British Library, the BBC, Nesta, the Arts Council, and The Young Vic to mention just a few).

The power of the *Enriching Britain* report was that its conclusions - and the failure of 70 years of access policies they evidenced - were based on robust academic research (and supported by extensive references to the research literature) and effectively endorsed by ‘the Great and the Good’ of the cultural sector through the Commissioners’ involvement, thus lending this report a legitimacy and validation that distinguish it from other reports or policy-focused critical literature reviews.

As the sector braced itself for the uncertainty of the outcome of the 2015 general election and for cuts that seemed inevitable (even if, in the event, they did not happen) and started lobbying, the 8% statistic begun to circulate in arts and policy circles raising to great prominence and visibility. There is no room here to paint a detailed map of all citations of the statistic, but I have collated the full range of mentions in an online bulletin board I have created using the application ‘padlet’, which allowed me to include links to online articles, blogs and videos, and upload policy documents and articles.5

The ‘privileged 8%’ were explicitly mentioned in six Guardian articles, mostly (but not exclusively) around the time of the report’s publication. The large spread that was published on the 18th of February, the day following the formal report’s launch, written by Mark Brown (2015) also features an original graph produced by the Guardian design staff to illustrate the key report findings where ‘the 8%’ figures prominently. The 8%, was also widely reported in the specialized press, with two mentions in The Stage, and citations in ArtsProfessional, The Arts Newspaper, Dazed Digital (where it had been shared

5 [http://padlet.com/elebelfiore/cylt9cznqjxe](http://padlet.com/elebelfiore/cylt9cznqjxe) [last updated February 2016] The links and full documents can be accessed by clicking on the title of the source below the header image.
around 1.6K times by 26th February 2016), and The Red Letter among others. It featured prominently in newsletters, news clippings and news web pages produced by arts sector’s organizations, including the Royal Academy of Arts, and Music Mark (the UK Association for Music Education). There were several mentions in blogs internationally, which are all recorded in ‘padlet’ but are too numerous to list here.

It is notable that beyond this extensive international reach of ‘the 8%’, in less than a year, and ahead of the publication of the underlying research, UEP’s analysis of participation data had already achieved significant influence on policy debates, on electoral manifesto pledges, and high-profile public initiatives by bodies such as the BBC.

Indeed, the 8% featured prominently in Tony Hall’s speech at the launch of the BBC Get Creative Campaign, a “year-long celebration of British arts, culture and creativity”, which officially presents itself as a result of the Warwick Commission report. The 8% was cited in several policy-oriented reports and briefings, such as for example, Clean Break’s evaluation of the work they do in prisons (Abraham & Busby 2015) and the report on arts funding and philanthropy published by the think tank NPC (Kail, Simmonds & Bagwell 2015). Most notably, the 8% was cited by Labour MP and Shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport Chris Bryant, in a speech he gave on the 26th of February 2015 as debates over the main parties’ general election manifestos started to intensify.

By the Spring of 2015 ‘the 8%’ had become such a recognizable, iconic feature of cultural policy and creative industries debates that ITC (the management association for theatre’s independent sector) on the 2nd of April published a

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6 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02kn961/player](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p02kn961/player) [last accessed 10th March 2016].
7 [http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3P7n390cZc3VBpn7cPn0F5T/about-get-creative](http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/articles/3P7n390cZc3VBpn7cPn0F5T/about-get-creative) [last accessed 10th March 2016].
8 [http://www.labourartsalliance.org.uk/you_re_beautiful_government_and_the_pursuit_of_beauty](http://www.labourartsalliance.org.uk/you_re_beautiful_government_and_the_pursuit_of_beauty) [last accessed 10th March 2016].
feature on their website simply entitled: “What does 8% mean to you?” where they offer their own analysis of ‘this deeply worrying and depressing statistic’.9

The most recent and most notable evidence of the way in which ‘the 8%’ has become embedded in the cultural sector’s consciousness is the central status it was granted in the strategy document that ACE published in early 2016, ‘Achieving great art and culture for everyone; much done, many challenges remain’.10 The document section on ACE’s so-called ‘goal 2’ (that is, ensuring that ‘more people experience and are inspired by the arts’) opens precisely with an explicit reference to the privileged 8% as a spur for ACE’s ongoing commitment to access and participation and its call to the sector to collaborate with ACE in achieving its policy goals.

Needless to say, in its travels through journalistic writing, the blogosphere, newsletters of organizations big and small, policy reports and conversations amongst professionals and policy wonks worldwide, the 8% statistic was on occasion mis-represented, misunderstood, and even completely turned on its head, so that its contribution to debates was not always as constructive as it might have been. This is a frustrating but certainly not rare occurrence for researchers who are used to engage policy makers, the press and the public with their research. Still, it was a source of some irritation that one of the inaccurate references to the 8% should have come from no less than the very influential Will Gompertz, arts correspondent of the BBC. On the 9th March 2015 Gompertz published a video blog on the BBC website in which he obviously misinterprets the 8% as indicating the only proportion of the English population engaged in the arts (as opposed to the most highly and consistently engaged section).11

Whilst Gompertz’s main point – that more people would be engaged in arts and culture is we started to include more everyday activities in what gets classified

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9 http://www.itc-arts.org/blog/what-does-8-mean-to-you [last accessed 10th March 2016].
as arts and culture – is remarkably germane with the inspiration and the intellectual basis of the UEP project, the misunderstanding and mis-citation of the 8% statistic still reveal how precious little control researchers have on how their data is used, interpreted, and cited. When the erroneous citation comes at the hand of an influential ‘research user’ and opinion influencer, negative consequences might occur that researchers can do little to fix (as any rectification will never have a reach comparable to that of a household name in BBC broadcasting) or indeed prevent. Even more worryingly, a report by the international professional network IETM completely misunderstands the UEP data and maintains that according to the UEP analysis, only “8% of minority representatives” are engaged in the arts (IETM 2015:7).

**UEP and the ‘enlightenment’ model of impact**

The 8% example can be taken as a typical exemplification of the phenomenon described by Max Singer in his famous 1971 article ‘The vitality of mythical numbers’, which argues that once a statistic is produced (no matter whether rigorously or incorrectly) and starts being quoted, it takes on a life of its own. As a result, the imaginary statistics might enter the official debate on cultural policy, being quoted for years without their original source and its reliability ever being verified. Whilst ‘the 8%’ statistic was by no means ‘mythical’, it seemed to become so in the way it was used as a rhetorical tool in the intense debates around cultural policy and arts funding that took place in the months that preceded the 2015 UK general elections. This shows how, contrary to what much of the official HE policy guidelines seem to suggest, the ability of researchers to determine or even ‘curate’ the impact of their work, and to ensure its correct interpretation and use, is actually rather limited. Researchers can certainly play a key role in disseminating their research findings and in widening the reach of their work, but there is little that they can do to ensure it is correctly interpreted, deployed and translated into policy or practice change.

Nonetheless, the story of ‘the 8%’, whilst highlighting the complexity of the research-policy nexus, does in no way lead to the conclusion that ‘impact’ is not a
valuable pursuit for researchers. On the contrary, the impact agenda, even with all the caveats it calls for (Belfiore 2015 and Oancea 2011), constitutes one way of navigating an alternative to the traditional dichotomy between critical research and policy advocacy in cultural policy research, provided we work with a more nuanced sense of what non-linear impact might constitute equally important significance and influence.

For example, the case of ‘the 8%’ shows that UEP’s contribution to the participation debate conforms to the research utilization patterns that Carol Weiss had already identified in the late 1970s, whereby “government officials use research less to arrive at solutions than to orient themselves to problems” (Weiss 1977:534). In this conceptual, discursive model of impact, non-academic professional communities use research “to help them think about issues and define the problematic of a situation, to gain new ideas and new perspectives”. In other words, they use research to help formulate problems rather than to find ready-made solutions for them. Furthermore, Weiss (1977:534) observes that “much of this use is not deliberate, direct, and targeted, but a result of long-term percolation of social science concepts, theories, and findings into the climate of informed opinion”. The UEP/Warwick Commission experience is an effective exemplification of the ‘enlightenment function’ that research can play in policy debates by way of exerting “conceptual’ influence on how ‘participation’ is understood in cultural policymaking (Weiss 1977).

UEP and the Warwick Commission, as I have shown, are by no means the only two projects that have provided quality data and analysis to demonstrate that access to the heavily funded arts is still socially stratified along lines of wealth, class, education and ethnicity: far from it. However, it is precisely because they fit into a broader body of work that they can make an important contribution to a cumulative shift in perception of the ‘access question’. Impact, in this view, is a collaborative, collective effort on the part of the scholarly community, rather than the almost miraculous, forceful and planned effect of a single piece of research on individuals and the world. Arguably, in addition to the reasons identified above, the Warwick report was able to gain significant status and influence because it was published as part of a broader body of thinking and
writing on the value of everyday participation and the equanimity of current funding practices that concentrate investment on traditional, Western, legitimate art forms.

Perhaps, once the popularity of the 8% statistic has eventually waned, having been supplanted by the latest attention-grabbing statistics and headlines, what might remain as the most durable contribution of UEP could well be its conceptual reformulation of notions of cultural participation and of the politics of valuation of different forms of participation within cultural policy, educational and arts funding debates. In other words, the impact that it is both likely and desirable for UEP to have is of a conceptual nature: in challenging current, limited notions of participation and the deficit model of arts policy they give rise to.

In this respect, UEP’s aspiration to have impact and policy influence is best understood not as a heroic ambition to have immediate and quick impact on immediate policy debates and decisions. Rather, UEP’s ambition is to make a contribution to a collective and collaborative effort which brings together UEP researchers and stakeholders, and the myriad of other research teams and partnerships engaged in policy-relevant research. In this model of ‘impact’, Smith (2013:9) explains, “it is the ideas of a body of research that usually influence policy (as opposed to specific studies) and that this influence occurs in a diffuse manner, by gradually changing the way actors think about particular issues, over long periods”.

UEP’s contribution to this area of work might be precisely to begin to map one of the possible ways in which the relationship between research, policy-making and practice development might be made effective and mutually beneficial for the involved parties. Whether this will be the case remains the object of ongoing investigation as we begin to map, research, reflect on and trying to understand how the UEP project might contribute to enlighten contemporary and future policy debates, and begin to bridge the gap between the ‘torn halves’ of cultural policy research.
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