

## Theorising big data and quantitative methods in the arts.

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### Abstract

In this session we take various theoretical and practical approaches to interrogate, test and conceptualise ideas around 'the audience' for the arts. We question whether the very idea of 'the audience' is stable, and pose reasons for this 'ontological precarity' (Fisher, 2009). In light of the repeated challenges made to empirically based conceptions of the arts audience, we raise questions which challenge how the discourse of 'the audience' functions within the policy framework of arts subsidy (Stevenson, 2016; Hadley, 2017) and further question whether conceptions of the arts audience need to change in light of the current global socio-political context. Acknowledging that the term 'audience' fulfils a variety of discursive functions, most particularly in terms of definitional boundaries (audience vs non-audience), we analyse this stability via consideration of the empirical data in The Audience Agency's *Audience Finder* software and articulate a sense of what, institutionally, we *can* say about who the audience is (noting the operational parameters of what Audience Finder does (and importantly doesn't) show), alongside how the data outputs might be considered as evidence for policy-making. Drawing on the relationship between the perceived and observed characteristics of the creative economy workforce, and the implications of this for cultural production and consumption, we further consider the cultural tripod of employment-production-consumption (O'Brien et al, 2017). This approach questions whether, if employment in the creative industries is socially narrow and elite, does this restrict the art that is presented and therefore the audience? If so, how can we expect to diversify audiences but not the sector?

### References

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