

Researching with arts networks: shaping questions, sharing knowledge Proposal for a joint research paper

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Abstract

Audience research in the live arts often necessitates collaboration with arts organisations. However, many studies take place with small numbers of industry partners, raising questions around the specificity of research findings. In addition, while audience studies often have the noble aim of improving understanding of audiences across the sector, it can be a challenge for projects to affect large-scale change. Working with larger numbers of partners may offer a solution.

Understanding Audiences for the Contemporary Arts (UACA) is a 2.5-year AHRC-funded project starting in May 2017 with the aims of understanding current engagement, implementing findings to recruit and retain audiences, and establishing networks of contemporary arts organisations in the UK to share best practice. The UACA pilot study (2014-15) saw contemporary arts organisations in Birmingham form the Birmingham Contemporary Arts Network. Five core partners gave us access to their audiences, with whom life history interviews and audience exchanges were conducted. A larger group of organisations attended network meetings, shaping the research questions, responding to the findings and sharing best practice for audience engagement. The network has since continued independent of the research project and its success has led to this new national phase, which sees this network model being extended to London, Liverpool and Bristol.

This paper reflects on our experience of establishing a network of contemporary arts organisations within a regional city, in order to conduct research with and report findings to multiple partners. In addition, we discuss how this network has facilitated the second phase of study in Birmingham, in which we are working with organisations on an 'action research' project to implement learning from the pilot study and monitor its impact. We will share some initial findings from this longitudinal phase of the study, and also our reflections on the challenges and possibilities of working across art forms and across cities in audience research.

