IRISH JOURNAL OF ARTS MANAGEMENT & CULTURAL POLICY
ijamcp
ISSN: 2009-6208 (Online). Journal homepage: https://culturalpolicy.ie/

Data as Practice: Navigating the Intersection Between Mission and Markets in Arts Management

Lucy Costelloe

To cite this article:

Costelloe, Lucy (2026). Data as Practice: Navigating the Intersection Between Mission and Markets in Arts Management, *Irish Journal of Arts Management & Cultural Policy*, 12(1), 56 - 66

Published online:

January 2026

Corresponding author(s):

Lucy Costelloe	lucycostelloe@gmail.com	https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2285-3050

Funder acknowledgment: This research was supported with funding from Research Ireland and conducted in collaboration with Ticketsolve.

Acknowledgements: With special thanks to Dr Annmarie Ryan and Dr Niamh NicGhabhann-Coleman, University of Limerick for their supervision.

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

Abstract

This article examines how digitalisation is reshaping practices within nonprofit arts organisations (NPAOs), focusing on the often invisible labour required to sustain data-driven work. Drawing on doctoral research conducted in collaboration with sector professionals and technology partners, it introduces data as practice as a framework to explore how digital tools, infrastructures and expectations are negotiated within the everyday life of organisations. The study builds on a series of think tanks, The Arts and Culture Collective, which convened 56 professionals from 33 organisations across Ireland, Northern Ireland and the UK. These workshops created space for peer-led dialogue on sectoral challenges, including the pressures of fragmented platforms, the demands of funders, and the realities of under-resourced teams.

Findings highlight that digital transformation is often embedded in mundane practices and is shaped as much by cultural negotiations as by technical change, reflecting the constant interplay between mission and market imperatives. Participants described the hidden work of coordinating ticketing systems, responding to market signals, and managing compliance requirements, revealing the emotional and strategic dimensions of digital labour. By surfacing these dynamics, the research challenges narratives that frame the sector as slow to change or lacking innovation. Instead, it shows that digitalised practices are already embedded in incremental, negotiated forms of organisational work.

The article argues that recognising data as practice allows for a more nuanced understanding of digitalisation in the arts. Valuing invisible labour and addressing the conditions under which data is produced and sustained are crucial if the sector is to realise the potential of digital tools. These insights carry implications for policy, funding and management, underscoring the need for investment not only in infrastructure but in the people who make digital change possible.

Keywords: digitalisation; data-driven; data as practice; invisible labour

Data as Practice: Navigating the Intersection Between Mission and Markets in Arts Management

Introduction

In early 2025, headlines revealed that the Arts Council Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon had spent €6.7 million on a failed IT upgrade (Department of Culture, Communications and Sport, 2025). The controversy raised questions not only about trust in public institutions across the creative and cultural sectors (Bodó and Janssen, 2022), but also about the robustness of digital infrastructure in the arts (Grantmakers in the Arts, n.d.). In this reflection, I call for urgency in reconsidering the expectations placed on cultural organisations to become more data-driven, more efficient, and more digitally visible in an increasingly digitalised climate (Arts Council England, et al., 2013). Behind these

ISSN: 2009-6208. https://culturalpolicy.ie/

expectations lies a quieter reality: the labour required to sustain digital practices in the arts is often invisible, undervalued, and misunderstood.

Digitalisation in the arts is shaped not only by technology partners, consultants, and tools, but also by the arts professionals who manage database systems, prepare funding reports, and navigate fragmented platforms to keep organisations running. Drawing on my PhD research and professional experience, I introduce data as practice as a framework to trace and value the negotiations between mission-driven and market-driven practices. This approach positions data not as a static resource, but as something enacted and interpreted through everyday organisational challenges. By foregrounding these dynamics, this reflection contributes to a deeper understanding of data as a site of negotiation. One that intersects with programming relevance, sectoral investment, organisational sustainability, and broader questions of cultural value and societal cohesion through impact.

The Sectoral Challenges of Data-driven strategies

Over the past two decades, scholarship on digitalisation in the arts and cultural sector has shifted from early explorations of audience engagement and digital tools (Selwood, 2002; Kaple, 2002) to more critical inquiries into infrastructure, labour, and value (Boyd and Crawford, 2012; Bopp et al., 2017; Bruce et al., 2017; Nuccio and Bertacchini, 2022). While the sector has often been positioned as a site of innovation, the literature increasingly recognises the uneven distribution of digital capacity and the tensions between policy ambition and organisational reality. These tensions are particularly evident in the growing reliance on digital platforms, fragmented systems, and the expectation that arts organisations will become more data-driven without corresponding investment in skills or infrastructure (Bloomberg Philanthropies, 2024).

Recent work by Melissa Terras et al (2024) has advanced the conversation by framing data-driven innovation (DDI) as both a technical and cultural process. Their work, based on the Creative Informatics programme, shows that supporting DDI requires skills training, clear ethical guidelines, and strong partnerships. Their work cautions against assuming that digital transformation is universally accessible or beneficial. It has been observed that the book is relevant to arts management and cultural policy, especially in how it discusses sharing value between organisations, managing digital resources, and the benefits of collaboration for innovation (Costelloe, 2025).

At the same time, Chris Bopp et al. (2017) warn that data practices in the arts can lead to the erosion of autonomy, data drift, and fragmentation, particularly when organisations are pressured to collect metrics that do not align with their core mission. Deborah Kaple (2002) similarly highlights the longstanding challenge of obtaining reliable and relevant data in the sector, noting that data often fails to inform strategy in meaningful ways. These concerns are especially acute for arts organisations navigating artistic, social, and financial imperatives simultaneously.

In the Irish context, recent policy developments—including the Digital Arts Policy (2023–2025) and the Basic Income for the Arts pilot scheme—signal a shift toward recognising digital and artistic labour. Yet, current reviews suggest, these initiatives risk reinforcing output-focused metrics unless they also address the conditions under which digital work is produced, supported, and sustained (Teppo and Mc Quaid, 2025; Woronkowicz et al., 2025).

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A Digital-EcoSystem: Partners, Products and People

The evolution of the ticket offers a useful entry point into understanding the digital ecosystem of the arts. From paper stubs exchanged at box offices to QR codes stored in digital wallets, the ticket has become a site of transformation. It reflects broader shifts in how arts organisations interact with audiences, manage data, and navigate digitalised markets. The first theatre to sell tickets online did so in the mid-1990s, marking a turning point in the sector's relationship with digital infrastructure. Today, ticketing is embedded within a constellation of systems: customer relationship management (CRM), websites, payment processors, analytics dashboards, and social media platforms. These systems do more than facilitate transactions; they shape how organisations define success, engage publics, and articulate their missions.

As a recent special issue of the journal argues (McCall Magan, 2023), cultural research must move beyond surface-level metrics and attendance data to explore the relationships that underpin cultural production and participation. Without such inquiry, we risk perpetuating assumptions about value and visibility that obscure the lived realities of cultural labour and organisational practice (McCall Magan, 2018).

This research draws on my professional experience working with Ticketsolve, a leading ticketing partner. During this time, I worked in a Head of Marketing capacity while also conducting doctoral research into the use of data in nonprofit arts organisations (NPAOs). Existing literature has documented the sector's increasing adoption of digital tools for audience engagement and programme delivery (Thomson et al., 2013; Besana et al., 2018; Mueser and Vlachos, 2018; Markopoulos et al., 2020; Cetinic and She, 2022; Baía Reis and Ashmore, 2022). However, there remains limited research on how these tools are embedded into strategic decision-making and how they shape organisational behaviour in relation to mission.

NPAOs often operate across artistic, social, and financial imperatives, and their adoption of digital tools is frequently shaped by external pressures, including funders, policymakers, and audiences (Gilmore et al., 2017; Selwood, 2002; Umar and Hassan, 2019). These pressures are accompanied by expectations of impact, efficiency, and evidence-based reporting. Yet the systems that enable these expectations are rarely neutral. Drawing on market studies literature, particularly the work of Callon (2007), Araujo et al. (2008), and Kjellberg and Helgesson (2006), this section foregrounds the concept of agencement as the arrangement and coordination of heterogeneous elements (technologies, actors, routines) that enable action. This perspective emphasises that nonhuman elements, such as digital platforms and algorithms, actively shape organisational priorities and practices.

Understanding these human and nonhuman dynamics is essential for exploring how digitalisation shapes organisational strategy, and for recognising the conditions under which data practices become meaningful, contested, or constrained.

The Arts and Culture Collective: Researching with the sector

This study brought together 56 arts professionals from 33 organisations across Ireland, Northern Ireland, and the UK in a series of think tanks called The Arts and Culture Collective (ACC). The ACC

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was co-designed with sectoral experts, practitioners, and Ticketsolve (a leading ticketing partner), and supported by Research Ireland, to ensure the research reflected the lived realities and priorities of those working in the field. All interviews were conducted in accordance with University of Limerick's research ethics guidelines. Interviewees are anonymised and referenced by participant codes to protect confidentiality.

When I started working fulltime in arts marketing in 2018, 'data-driven' was everywhere, from conference panels to whitepapers and sector events. Yet I often found that the language did not match the day-to-day realities of arts organisations. This research was motivated by a desire to demystify data-driven work, to understand not just how digital tools are implemented, but what needs to shift in organisational culture and practice to make space for meaningful use of data.

The ACC unfolded in two series. The first was segmented by geography, with online workshops for Ireland and the UK, and a unique in-person cohort in Northern Ireland, delivered in partnership with Thrive, Northern Ireland's leading arts sector audience development agency (Thrive, 2025). This partnership enabled the inclusion of council venues and sector stakeholders, providing a rare opportunity for face-to-face dialogue and collaborative problem-solving in a region often underrepresented in research. These workshops challenged assumptions about data, surfacing practical challenges such as resource constraints, undervalued digital labour, and the realities of using or not using data in everyday work.

The second series expanded the ACC into a wider, cross-sectoral initiative, drawing in new participants and voices, including industry consultants, stakeholders, and other digital technology partners. These sessions introduced case-based practices, including dynamic pricing and benchmarking, to prompt deeper discussion of sector controversies and divergent approaches.

Analysis for this research was grounded in a reflexive, situated approach that recognised the in-between or liminal spaces I occupied as both practitioner and researcher (Murphy and Ryan, 2020). I engaged with the data as a series of conversations and collaborative encounters, drawing on video transcripts, participant contributions, and online whiteboard board reflections to capture the richness and diversity of voices involved. This process included diverse modes of communication, such as video calls, participant observation, note-taking, and collaborative online whiteboards, always questioning how my position and experiences shaped what I noticed and valued. I sought to hold open the spaces of uncertainty, tension and negotiation that emerged in the think tanks, rather than forcing consensus or closure. Thematic coding on NVivo was combined with ethnographic journaling and participant-led insights, enabling a deeper engagement with the complexities of data-driven practices in the arts and foregrounding the lived, negotiated nature of digitalised, sectoral change.

This work also responds to a recognised gap in the sector for structured, peer-led forums and think tanks that enable collaborative learning, knowledge exchange, and sectoral innovation. Recent calls in the field, including those published in Cultural Trends (Alimen and George, 2025), highlight the need for more sustained, cross-sectoral spaces for critical reflection and practice-sharing in arts management and cultural policy (Torreggiani, 2025). While such initiatives exist in pockets, there remains a need for more robust, democratised dialogue and co-created knowledge that is both rigorous and grounded in practice (Callon et al., 2009; Amilien et al., 2019).

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Invisible Labour

As the workshops unfolded, it became clear that the most persistent challenges for participants were not simply about adopting new digital tools, but about the invisible labour required to make these systems work in practice. Early discussions focused on resources, time, and staffing, but as the hybrid forums developed, participants began to articulate the hidden work that underpins even the most routine digital tasks.

One vivid example is the 72-hour rule introduced by a marketing team to manage the process of putting shows on sale. 'We had to make that rule because we were just running ourselves into the ground… It's not just a case of putting it up on sale; it's the box office team doing that, then us trying to coordinate the announcement' (Participant [P6, OrgROI2, ROIA], Nov 2022). The rule became a way to push back against last-minute demands: 'If someone says, "I need it to go on sale ASAP," we'll say, "Well, we only got the image from you half an hour ago."' (ibid.) This boundary-setting mechanism was necessary in an environment where, as other participants put it, time is consistently scarce.

The invisible labour of digitalisation is not limited to ticketing and announcements. It extends into pricing decisions, where the expectation to use data and benchmarking can create new pressures. One participant described:

> We had a situation recently where tickets for an opera were around the €35 mark... and there's a competing bigger venue, a concert hall in the same city... they were that expensive, slightly more expensive, actually. We found that it really hurt the box office in the sense of the booking. It wasn't the patterns of booking for opera, it just didn't pick up. It didn't spike at all for us… By that time we weren't actually able to change it. It was too late... The tickets were already advertised, the posters were out, the social media campaigns were out. It was already selling (Participant [P14, OrgROI7, ROIB], Nov 2022).

This example highlights how invisible labour is not just about technical tasks, but also about the emotional and strategic work of responding to market signals, making adjustments, and absorbing the consequences of decisions made under pressure.

Throughout the workshops, participants described how these pressures were compounded by the expectation to do it all and to meet the demands of consultants, funders, and boards, often with limited resources. As one participant put it, when presented with a list of best-practice recommendations, 'we're doing that and then we're trying to make use of the feedback that we get' (Participant [P48, OrgUK5, BM], June 2023). This moment, shared in dialogue with an external consultant, encapsulates the reality that much of the sector's invisible labour is already happening, woven into the everyday routines of overstretched teams.

By surfacing these stories, this research challenges the idea that the sector is simply slow to embrace change or lacking in digital ambition. Instead, it reveals that digitalised practices are already being woven into the everyday, often through quiet, incremental shifts and the invisible work of participants. Recognising and valuing this digitalised labour allows us to deepen the traditional

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narrative of an under-resourced sector. The real challenge is not just a lack of time or money, but the persistent expectation that staff will absorb new technical, analytical, and interpretive responsibilities. These responsibilities are often added without changes to roles, training, or recognition (Participant [P6, OrgROI2, ROIA], Nov 2022; Participant [P14, OrgROI7, ROIB], Nov 2022).

As digitalisation continues to reshape the sector, these forms of invisible labour are not going away. Addressing new forms of digitalised labour, supporting more specialised skillsets, and ensuring that roles reflect the realities of analysis and interpretation are all essential if the sector is to thrive. By naming and valuing this work, we can move beyond deficit narratives and begin to advocate for policy, funding, and organisational change that supports the people already driving digital transformation. These changes are happening quietly but persistently.

Data As Practice

Throughout the workshops, it became clear that data was not simply a technical resource or a reporting requirement, but an ongoing, negotiated practice embedded in the everyday life of organisations. The way data was understood, shared, and acted upon shaped not only decision-making but also the distribution of labour, authority, and value across teams.

One participant described how, for years, data was seen as the domain of a single individual:

> I used to have a thing in the organisation, at the executive level, where people would talk about “Jackie data.” Jackie was the finance director, and they thought all the data belonged to her—that they were gathering it for her. We spent years trying to get the point across to people that it wasn’t Jackie data. Yes, she would make use of the data, but actually, that data was important to all of them (Participant [P41, P/C3, INDPARTE], Dec 2022).

This story highlights how data can become siloed, limiting its potential to inform decision-making across teams and reinforcing the invisible labour of those tasked with managing and interpreting it.

The challenge of embedding data practices was echoed by others where:

> so often we hear, “Oh, we’re collecting this because it’s the Arts Council’s data”—or whatever territory’s data. But it’s not their data; we’re using it for our purpose. If you only think about it from that point of view, then you’re never going to get to the point of any real insights or doing too much with it—unless it’s completely by chance. And the Arts Council is just one example (Participant [P42, P/C4, INDPARTE], Dec 2022).

These reflections point to the need for a cultural shift, where data is seen as a shared asset and a tool for organisational learning, not just compliance.

For many, the responsibility for championing data fell on individuals rather than being a shared organisational priority. The experience of ‘banging that drum’ was a recurring theme, highlighting the isolation faced by those pushing for greater data use. These conversations highlighted that quite

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often, embracing data internally requires a cultural shift, where all staff recognise its relevance to their roles and the organisation's goals.

Yet, there were also glimpses of how data could become a tool for collective action and insight. A UK participant described how:

> it's essentially looking at every element of interaction with the customer from their perspective—not from our perception as staff of what we think is or isn't most important—getting data from everyone across the organisation… That helps us prioritise which areas should be focused on. It helps us identify which elements are most likely to make customers really happy, so we focus on those, and which risk making customers really angry, so we avoid those negative paths with poor customer experiences (Participant [P/C3, INDPARTE], Dec 2022).

These stories show that data as practice is not just about tools or technologies, but about creating organisational conditions that enable meaningful engagement with data at all levels. When data is siloed or seen as someone else's responsibility, its potential is limited. When it is shared, interpreted, and acted upon collectively, it can become a powerful force for organisational learning and adaptation.

Recognising data as practice means acknowledging both the visible and invisible work involved in making data meaningful. It requires investment in skills, time, and culture, not just systems. By moving beyond compliance and towards shared ownership, organisations can unlock the value of data for decision-making, audience experience, and sectoral change.

Conclusion

Thinking about data as practice invites us to move beyond technical fixes or compliance, and instead to recognise the ways that data is shaped by relationships, skills, reflection, and even gut instinct. The stories and examples shared here show that digitalisation in the arts is not just about new systems or outputs, but about the everyday negotiations and understandings that make data meaningful.

This perspective suggests that the value of data lies not only in what can be measured or reported, but in how it is interpreted, shared, and embedded across teams. As digital expectations continue to grow, there is value in making space for the quieter, less visible work that underpins digital change. This work draws on experience, collaboration, and a willingness to adapt.

By thinking differently about data, we can begin to see digital transformation as an ongoing, collective process. It is built on trust, learning, and the everyday expertise of those working across the sector.

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