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Uses of evidence in local cultural policy: performance, legitimation, problem representation, and learning in two Australian municipalities

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Taking an interpretive approach to evidence-based policy, this article illustrates the rhetorical and situated uses of evidence in two case studies of local cultural policy. Broadly defined as policy-relevant knowledge, evidence is selectively used by council officers in the development, delivery, and evaluation of arts programmes at two Australian municipalities. This article identifies four main uses of evidence in this context: rituals of accountability, advocacy, programme design, and improving practice. A narrow definition of evidence as scientific data or research would fail to account for the broad range of knowledge that informs the practice of local cultural policy.

key words cultural policy • local government • policy practice • policy-relevant knowledge

Introduction

Cultural policy has long been a site of contested meaning and power struggles. It is now emerging as an interesting arena for the interpretation and application of indicators and other forms of evidence. Challenged by 'the audit society' (Power, 1997), austerity measures (Knell and Taylor, 2011), and the authority of numbers (Espeland, 1997; Miller, 2001; Porter, 1996), arts and cultural departments are facing increased pressure to justify their expenditure and very existence (Belfiore, 2004). At the local level in Australia, this is exacerbated by state-imposed restructures and public management reforms, which have caused broad changes to organisational structure and culture over recent decades (Aulich, 2005). Recent requirements to develop strategic plans with measurable outcomes oblige local government officers to engage in evidence-based policy and planning. Yet little is known about how, if at all, these planning frameworks and measurement regimes influence the design and delivery of policy and programmes by local governments.

This article explores the rhetorical and situated uses of evidence in local cultural policy through an interpretive analysis of case studies from two Australian city councils. Seeing policy as the arrangement of political organisations, discourses, and practices

(Bacchi, 1999; Colebatch, 2005, 21; Fischer, 2003), it examines uses of 'policy-relevant knowledge' (Tenbensel, 2006) by local government officers in relation to two arts programmes. It finds that the choice and utility of particular types of evidence varies according to the political, institutional, and interpersonal context. After outlining the research context and methods of data collection and analysis, this article discusses the uses of evidence in four main ways: in rituals of accountability; legitimation or advocacy arguments; problem representation to inform decision making; and evaluation for learning and improvement. Within each of these functions, council officers selectively use various forms of evidence, including quantitative indicators, imagery generated by artists, and feedback from audiences and partners. By paying attention to a multiplicity of meanings, purposes, and contexts, the article demonstrates the advantages of taking an interpretive, practice-oriented approach to studying the uses of evidence in policy.

Interpreting evidence in policy analysis

Evidence-based policy (EBP) was founded on the scientific model of knowledge discovery and dissemination in evidence-based medicine (Lin and Gibson, 2003). For proponents of EBP, strong evidence can be used in at least five ways to improve policy making: identifying policy issues; informing the design and choice of policy; forecasting the future; monitoring policy implementation; and evaluating policy impact (Segone, 2008, 7–13). Although the scientific model of knowledge privileges the findings of positivist research (Innes, 1990, 3), a broader understanding of evidence has developed as the principles of EBP have been applied to various fields of policy practice (Lambert, 2013). Researchers have also demonstrated the complexities involved in using evidence for policy-making and evaluation, encouraging a move away from early linear models of knowledge production and transfer (Boaz and Gough, 2011; 2012).

Building on critical and practice-oriented approaches to evidence and policy, this article treats the scientific model of EBP 'as a technocratic wish in a political world' (Lewis, 2003). It recognises that policy making is a struggle between competing discourses, which are articulated by policy makers and enacted in practices (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003; Laws and Rein, 2003; Stone, 2002). As Lewis (2003, 259) points out, policy makers' selection of evidence 'is always determined by and set against a particular context of cultural understandings that consist of prevailing norms and values, and political, organisational and economic factors'. A critical approach to EBP typically takes into account specificities of context, competing rationalities, logics of practice, policy as a process of argumentation, and the social construction of knowledge (Black, 2001; Lin, 2003; Head, 2008).

The question of 'what counts as evidence' is a common thread in scholarship on EBP. There are numerous possible definitions of evidence, depending on its function and context. As Lin (2003, 13) states, evidence 'has little meaning without an understanding of who is making the decision, for what purpose and how information is to be used'. Arguing that the traditional understanding of evidence as research is severely restrictive, many policy analysts put forth a broader definition of the term. Marston and Watts (2003), for instance, include literary and media texts, official files, photographs, and ethnographic accounts in their list of sources that count as evidence, based on the richness and complexity of social reality. Because policy is

not primarily about making explicit choices between well–defined alternatives, and research-based knowledge is not the only legitimate input into the decision-making process, scholars such as Tenbensel (2006) and Head (2008) prefer to use the term 'policy-relevant knowledge', which includes political and professional knowledge about institutional structures and other actors' motivations. Adopting this critical perspective of evidence in policy, this article's analysis of the discursive practice of local cultural policy considers various types of policy-relevant knowledge, paying attention to the specific circumstances and audiences of each.

Taking an interpretive approach, this research follows both the 'argumentative turn' and the 'practice turn' in policy studies, inspired by Lipsky's (1980) street–level bureaucracy, Schön's (1983) reflective practitioner, and Majone's (1989) account of policy analysis as a craft based on argumentation. Studying 'policy as discourse' (Bacchi, 1999) and as practice, or craft, necessarily recognises the political context. It thus 'undermines managerial or technical understandings of the policy process' which, having placed too much emphasis on theory and patterns, have resulted in little knowledge about the daily activities of policy actors (Freeman, Griggs, and Boaz, 2011, 132). This article pays attention to the forms of knowledge and evidence used in the field of practice, recognising the need for ambiguity in some political processes and the existence of different types of knowledge, particularly the importance of tacit knowledge (Yanow, 1996; Tenbensel, 2006). Taking a practice-oriented approach to policy draws our attention to the experience of many policy workers who learn on the job, use 'ordinary knowledge' (Lindblom and Cohen, 1979), and see their administrative tasks as 'common sense' (Spicker, 2006, 11–12).

My understanding of evidence builds on Majone's (1989, 10, 48) definition, as information used 'in order to persuade a particular audience' of a particular fact, and Gottweis' (2006) conceptualisation of persuasion, which is broader than rational argumentation and takes into account ideas such as the credibility of the speaker and the emotions of the listener. This definition makes clear the rhetorical function of evidence, which Belfiore (2010; 2012) has recently explored in the context of cultural policy. The symbolic and relational dimensions of cultural policy make it a particularly interesting terrain to study EBP. The crucial tension between artists' ways of knowing and (local) government's ways of working (Mulligan and Smith, 2009, 10) shapes what constitutes evidence and how it is used by policy workers in this domain. In this analysis of local cultural policy, evidence becomes synonymous with policy-relevant knowledge, and is used for several different purposes by local government officers.

Research design: two case studies of local cultural policy practice

In order to better understand meanings and uses of evidence in cultural policy practice in specific local circumstances, this article focuses on two case studies of arts programmes at metropolitan councils in Victoria, Australia, where local government is the third tier of the federal system. Characterised by uncertain and intangible outcomes, diverse institutional structures, dynamic relationships, ambiguous data, and multiple subjectivities, local cultural policy is an interesting site to explore the tensions and complexities that arise in the relationship between evidence and policy. While the selected municipalities share some common traditions, a similar sociocultural context, and equivalent statutory duties, each programme and council is unique and

could not be substituted for another. This research takes an interpretive approach in its use of case studies to capture detailed information about the policy process (Fischer, 1995; Yanow, 1996; Flyvbjerg, 1998) and its recognition that the issue of access is more important than positivist case selection criteria (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, 69–71).

The councils were chosen for their capacity to conduct research and evaluation, and their location in a State where local government legislation demands calculative practices (see below), making them potential users and creators of evidence-based policy. I developed these case studies in consultation with council officers, deliberately selecting arts projects that had recently been designed and delivered by the local government in the aim of achieving quality of life outcomes, which the officers were considering how to evaluate. Both case study programmes were managed by officers in the councils' dedicated arts and culture division, in collaboration with artists, another branch of council, and/or external partners. In order to protect the identity of the research participants, the pseudonyms Cordelia City Council and Oswald City Council denote the case study sites, and individual participants are all presented as being female. Listed in full at the end of the article, interviews with case study participants are referenced using abbreviated in-text citations. 'CC1', for instance, refers to the first arts and culture officer interviewed at Cordelia City. Documents from the councils are referenced similarly, for example, 'OAS' refers to the Oswald Arts Strategy.

Although not fully anthropological in methodology, this research has an 'ethnographic sensibility' typical of interpretive policy analysis (Pader, 2006; Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, 12; Bevir and Rhodes, 2003). After a period of negotiating access and gaining consent from the chief executive of each council, I developed both case studies by collecting documents and carrying out semi-structured interviews. My primary focus was on the arts and culture division, but since the case study programmes were 'joined-up' initiatives, I also invited officers from several other departments to take part in interviews. Of the 15 officers interviewed at these councils, this article mostly cites eight arts and culture officers, largely due to their key role in the case study programmes and the pertinence of their comments. This research deliberately focuses on the 'street-level bureaucrats' who engage with artists and community members, and whose decisions, routines, and techniques 'effectively *become* the public policies they carry out' (Lipsky, 1980, xii; emphasis in original). Once fully transcribed, I analysed the interviews and three policy documents to which participants commonly referred at each council. The interviews helped me to understand the social life and political significance of these documents (Freeman and Maybin, 2011), which represent the typical artefacts used within the various levels of the business planning framework.

As well as gathering information from additional internal and public documents, I conducted a thematic analysis of the 15 interview transcripts and six policy documents, using NVivo software. This 'abductive' methodology (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012, 27) involved first identifying the prevalent themes in these texts, then moving back and forth between close analysis of the primary texts and relevant literature to delineate the main ways in which officers used policy-relevant knowledge. This analysis helped to identify the types and uses of evidence in the formulation, implementation, and evaluation of the case study programmes.

The Oswald City Council case study involves two separate arts programmes that fall under the policy of late night cultural activation: late night programme funding and

a site-specific artistic intervention. Safety issues and the development of a '24–hour city' have been a priority area for this council since the mid–1990s. In recent years, through the development of a 24/7 City Policy and various initiatives of councillors and staff, cultural activities had been explored as a new vehicle to shape perceptions of, and behaviour in, the city at night. In 2010, at the mayor's request, arts officers provided funding to several major festivals to trial late night programming. Following the perceived success of these grants, Oswald City Council offered further funding to arts and cultural organisations for late night programming through an increasingly transparent application process. Meanwhile, another council officer coordinated a participatory arts project at a major public transport depot in 2010–11. Entitled 'At Night', this project responded to safety issues, functioning both as a means of research and consultation and to animate a problematic site at night.

The Cordelia City Council case study centres on the evaluation of a public art exhibition that took place on a major transport corridor in that city in 2011. The exhibition was an annual event designed to respond to Cordelia's distinct urban landscape. Pieces and performances selected for the show were exhibited over several weeks in train stations and along the main train and cycle line that traverses the municipality. A collaboration between Cordelia City Council, three transport agencies, and a local tertiary institution, the aims of the public art exhibition included: enhancing residents' public transport experience; improving perceptions of safety and a sense of place around train stations; encouraging social connections by creating talking points; and generating community engagement through organised tours. The arts and culture unit manager coordinated an evaluation of the 2011 exhibition to gather information about the population groups reached and to assess the extent to which the programme's aims were achieved, mainly through surveys of tour participants and public transport users. I studied this evaluation as part of the development of an evaluation framework for the arts and culture unit, which I undertook as a research project in 2012, in close consultation with the unit manager.

As well as offering a means to access 'communities of practice' (Yanow, 2000), these case studies enabled the generation of grounded and contextualised information about the complexities of knowledge production in local cultural policy. By analysing policy as discourse and as practice, this interpretive research design helped to develop an understanding of the functions of evidence in particular circumstances of policy making.

Uses of evidence in local cultural policy

Considering the question of 'evidence of and for what?' (Csordas, 2004), the remainder of the article examines specific uses of policy-relevant knowledge by the research participants in four areas, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Functions and types of evidence in the local cultural policy case studies

Evidence of…	Evidence for…	Types of practices	Forms of data
Performance	Rituals of accountability	Strategic planning Professional development reviews Research and consultation	Performance indicators Outcome indicators
Legitimacy	Promotion and advocacy	External evaluation Internal advocacy Research and consultation	Programme evaluation Performance benchmarks Video of event
Problems	Informing decision making	Problem definition Programme design Partnership development	Population-level statistics Relational knowledge Artists' imagery
Learning	Evaluation for improvement	Internal reviews Programme evaluation Reflective practice	Programme evaluation Performance benchmarks Relational knowledge Anecdotal evidence

Evidence of performance: rituals of accountability

The most common use of data by the council officers interviewed was performance measurement. Required by the business planning framework and state legislation, performance indicators were used as evidence that officers, programmes, policies, and the council as a whole were operating well. In accordance with other statutes introduced to the public sector during the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s, Victoria's Local Government Act 1989 requires all councils to develop four-yearly strategic resource plans and produce annual reports that contain a performance statement on Key Strategic Activities. Similarly, the Public Health and Wellbeing Act 2008 requires Victorian councils to prepare a four-year Municipal Public Health Plan that identifies evidence-based goals and strategies for creating a local community in which people can achieve maximum health. Officers marshalled evidence to meet the reporting requirements related to these plans and, in doing so, performed rituals of accountability.

Describing a similar practice that represents 'the "myth" of rational goal setting', Yanow (1996, 196–202) explains that such rituals create an 'aura of success' and perpetuate 'the myth of rationality' whilst distracting attention from the inability of the agency to achieve the goal. Calling them rituals – or referring to 'the cult of the measurable' (Belfiore and Bennett, 2007a, 137) – is not to deny the importance of these accountability practices. Performance measures within monitoring and evaluation systems can be used to indicate 'that a council is well managed, and thereby, deserving of legitimacy and access to resources' (Tan et al, 2011, 392–3; see also Van Thiel and Leeuw, 2002, 270; Power, 2000, 115). Such measurement practices do not necessarily

contribute to improving policy or programmes, although they may do so; those that are used for learning purposes are considered later in this article.

The council plans presented a number of strategic indicators, corresponding with the statutory requirements described above. The councils commonly used community satisfaction ratings to measure performance in this context, such as this target in Cordelia's Council Plan (CCP): over 80% of surveyed residents will agree they have access to 'arts and cultural opportunities'. In Oswald's Council Plan (OCP), however, only two key performance indicators related to arts and culture, and both were broad, vague measures sourced from internal data. Although the unit manager developed these indicators with arts and culture team leaders, and their director approved them, she revealed that these statistics were 'not very important… I don't think about them until I have to report' (OC6). Since city safety was one of Oswald City Council's Key Strategic Activities, late night programme funding was closely monitored by the council, and officers developed measures, notably 'milestones and key targets' that they reported on monthly (OC2).

Oswald's arts and culture manager suggested that officers perceived the measures in these monthly and annual reports 'as an additional layer of work that they view as a form of compliance, rather than a way of generating concepts and innovation around a program' (OC6). A programme manager at Cordelia City Council also expressed the tension between corporate planning requirements and the motivations of arts officers:

> I think the sorts of things that the more 'corporate beasts' want to see evaluated or identified within evaluation results are not necessarily the things that arts and culture is about… It's a real juxtaposition of competing outcomes, because the corporate beast wants to see that you've had huge amounts of people involved in something and that they have all walked away happy, with exactly the same kind of experience. It's all about numbers and quantity, whereas, as an arts and culture worker, if … you've been able to impart a valuable experience for any one of those people, or you've been able to empower someone in some way, or enlighten them in some way, then that is what it's all about. (CC1)

These comments highlight a tension between the kinds of evidence sought by different branches of the council.

Officers at these local governments had annual professional or performance development reviews (PDR), which aligned with council plans and outcomes. The PDR represented an opportunity to identify achievements and track progress towards targets, using performance measures to prove that goals were being met. Some officers saw the PDR as a 'generic tool' that failed to fully reflect the range of activities in which they engaged (CC1, CC3), or as a compliance activity, which largely involved 'cutting and pasting into a corporate template' (OC1). Although one officer at Oswald suggested that the PDR could be a useful, collaborative exercise in reflective practice (OC1), and the arts and culture manager at Cordelia rejected the view that the PDR measures were 'limited because it is a generic tool' (CC2b), for most of the officers interviewed, this annual review represented a ritual of accountability.

The arts administrators hardly mentioned evidence in the form of research, but it appeared several times in the policy documents examined from Oswald. The Arts Strategy listed a number of research partnerships between the arts and culture

department, tertiary institutions, artists, and communities (OAS), but this academic research was not perceived to be terribly useful by the manager: 'I find that the research with that tends to be of more relevance to the university than to the [council] programme' (OC6). Oswald's 24/7 City Policy (O24CP) aspired for 'improved data collection' through the council's research and partnerships with universities 'to develop and provide an evidence base' as the policy was implemented. Unlike the Arts Strategy, or any of the policy texts examined from Cordelia City Council, the 24/7 City Policy had a monitoring and evaluation framework, which set forth six impact indicators to determine whether the council was achieving its goals. To date, however, neither these indicators nor an implementation report were publicly available, and only one of these indicators was mentioned in interviews.

There is a growing interest in outcome indicators, not only within the arts and culture teams but throughout both organisations – and in the public sector more widely (Ryan, 2006; Tan et al, 2011). The arts and cultural strategies and corporate plans contained descriptions and measures of outcomes, and officers at both councils spoke of the 'shift to outcomes' occurring, as their organisation sought evidence of the results of its activities. At the time of fieldwork, both councils were in the process of adopting a Results Based Accountability (RBA) framework (see Friedman, 2009), although neither organisation had yet adopted population indicators through this process. Recent efforts to evaluate the results of Oswald's arts and cultural policy and programmes included the sub-contracted development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for late night programming, the exploration of cultural indicators by the arts and culture department, and the construction of 'creative city' indicators for monitoring and reporting on the long-term community plan. The officer in charge of the 'creative city' indicators noted:

> Yes, there is a lot of interest at [this council] in measuring outcomes… It's no longer good enough to say, 'We put this much in and we got this much out, as an output'. The next question is: 'What effect did that have?' People want to be able to demonstrate now that they're having an effect. (OC5)

At Cordelia City Council, the arts and culture manager similarly stated, 'Progress towards identified outcomes is obviously one way that [we ask], "Are we getting there? Are we actually delivering what we said we were going to deliver?"' (CC2).

There was thus a common culture of performance measurement at these councils, and officers at both were striving to develop relevant outcome indicators. These measurement practices constitute rituals of accountability, performed by officers aiming to show evidence of appropriate behaviour. Representing authoritative and objective knowledge, indicators had symbolic power for a council, helping it to maintain legitimacy as an institution of advanced liberal democracy (Espeland, 1997; Radin, 2006). Several officers interviewed in this study expressed the tension between the institutional requirement for clear and quantifiable outputs and the subjective and unpredictable nature of arts experiences. Other researchers have also observed this tension in evidence use within human services departments of local government (for example, Tan et al, 2011) and in cultural policy more broadly (for example, Holden 2004, 21).

Evidence of legitimacy: promotion and advocacy

In an environment characterised by competition for resources and legitimacy, officers sometimes used evidence to promote their work, strengthen partnerships, and advocate for further funding. A particularly important audience from and for whom officers sought legitimation was the elected council. The officers interviewed took two divergent approaches to communicating the value of their work: using evidence collated from external organisations and developing creative forms of evidence to represent artistic experiences.

Although both councils had a research division, the arts unit sometimes commissioned research or evaluation by an external consultant. This was the case for the evaluation of the late night programme funding pilot and the subsequent development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the programme. The evaluation of the late night funding pilot focused explicitly on successes rather than shortcomings, fulfilling its main objective to 'establish the success, benefits and outcomes' of the project (OER). Two officers suggested that a key advantage of appointing consultants was that councillors were more likely to follow their recommendations than those of council employees. Discussing her plans for using some 'arm's length research' on public art, Oswald's arts investment coordinator stated bluntly, 'Council likes to hear what the views are from reputable firms rather than staff' (OC3). For one programme manager at Cordelia, this preference for external consultants limited internal capacity building in relation to evaluation practices (CC2). These comments about 'independent' research and evaluation point to some of the tensions between knowledge types and sources, particularly the role of technical expertise within political argumentation and some councillors' desire for 'objective' knowledge.

Officers also used external benchmarks for legitimacy purposes at Cordelia City Council, to advocate alternative uses of resources and persuade councillors and community members of the benefits of arts funding. The arts and culture team compared their activities quantitatively with other councils, 'to then put forward an argument to reduce the amount of delivery we had' (CC1). A programme manager explained:

> In the first year and a half that I worked here, we did quite a bit of benchmarking... to make some changes with what we were doing and how we were doing it, so benchmarking around festivals and events, and what other like organisations were doing, and how they were structured operationally, particularly in terms of human and financial resources. (CC1)

An Australian study of service reviews in local government suggests this is a fairly common practice, with half of the 11 councils it surveyed benchmarking areas such as 'levels of service (quality, timeliness, etc.), costs, processes, and resources' (Walker and Gray, 2012, 17).

A key objective of the proposed evaluation framework at Cordelia was to recognise 'and advocate' the role of art and the contribution of artists to the municipality (CACS). The Arts and Culture Strategy noted the importance of drawing explicit links between arts-related 'investment' and 'outcomes,' especially in what it described as an 'economic rationalist environment'. It suggested that improving evaluation and 'communication strategies' would help to build 'a solid rationale for the arts' (CACS).

The councillor holding the arts portfolio noted the value of identifying measures of success for arts and culture, especially to persuade 'councillors who think the arts are a waste of money' (CAB).

Officers found the results from the public art exhibition evaluation to be a useful way of communicating the value of the programme to partners, who were shown survey results, such as graphs depicting how many of the respondents had noticed new work, and the percentage who agreed that 'the art gave [them] something to talk about' (CEF). The programme manager explained:

> The evaluation information, once it was analysed, was really useful… because the project that it was evaluating had very strong external partners, so it really helped me when I reported on the project to be able to back it up with some initial responses. (CC3)

Her manager agreed that the partners 'responded really well to charts and graphs and a bit of hard-ish data' (CC2). In this way, the evaluation results were used as evidence of positive results in order to promote the programme and strengthen its partnerships.

Oswald City Council officers considered an audiovisual medium to be a particularly effective means of communicating evidence for legitimation purposes in the case of late night cultural activation. Borrowing techniques from a video ethnography project conducted within the safety department, officers arranged for the projects delivered with the pilot late night programme funding to be filmed, and the edited video played to councillors when the programme was later reported on. Presenting a montage of photographs from the funded events and interviews with event organisers and participants, the video concluded with a brief written summary of key performance statistics, including the number of events funded. The programme manager reported that this video 'was very well received' by councillors (OC2). The safety officer observed:

> The evaluation that was done by a consultant… was really useful, but it was the video that really tipped it over the edge, that [made] councillors… understand the issues… in a more powerful way. It was much more raw, the consultation method, so I think it just allowed them to act with a bit more confidence than they may have had through a traditional research report or a survey. (OC7)

She explained her motivation for using video:

> I thought without having some real contextual understanding of what these events were doing and what people thought of the events… the councillors could quite easily have just turned around and said, 'Oh that was a nice exercise and we won't do it again'. So we went and filmed at every festival late at night. (OC7)

The video was also considered useful for demonstrating the project to senior management within council:

> Ten minutes is not a lot of time in a manager's life, so if they just spent ten minutes looking at this video, they got most of the complexity that would take two hours reading a report. It was quite a powerful tool. (OC7)

The use of this video resembles Prince's (2013) description of a case study as valuable cultural expertise in the context of a consultancy project for a British local government.

The arts and culture manager at Cordelia also saw the potential for generating and communicating evidence through creative methods in order to engage councillors:

> I think that there is potential to use images and videos much more than we currently do. I think it's very, very problematic to try and describe and promote a creative idea through the limited language of a council report. (CC2)

She described preparing a recent report on a cultural exchange initiative:

> I tried to include the powerful and quite imaginative and subjective statements by the artists themselves describing their work, but they got taken out [before the report went to council]. The opportunity to inspire and engage is sometimes very limited in these sorts of [local government] environments. (CC2)

The manager suggested it was advantageous when a politician could

> see and experience firsthand what that experience was all about. So, yes, we do evaluations, we do reports, and we learn from those, and they are important, but it never replaces the personal, subjective, more immersed encounter. (CC2)

Despite these observations about the power of evidence that communicates the 'feel' of an artistic environment or experience, officers were actively searching for quantitative indicators to demonstrate the value of their programmes. The presentation of a list of potential performance and population indicators was an important component of Cordelia's arts and culture evaluation framework (CC2a), and officers at Oswald expressed a growing interest in cultural and community indicators, as noted above. In spite of their tacit understanding of the value of the arts, and the experience using video at Oswald, officers' awareness of the political context led them to believe more conventional types of data were necessary forms of evidence for legitimation purposes.

Evidence of problems: programme design

In accordance with the principles of EBP, population-level indicators sometimes informed the design and development of a particular policy or programme. The individual programmes at the heart of these case studies, however, were shaped more by officers' personal experience and professional relationships than scientific evidence. At times, data was used to indicate a site for intervention, although the ways in which officers used such indicators suggest that they served more to justify a particular action than as the source of 'objective' knowledge about a problem.

Population-level data was used to identify and justify the location of both Oswald's participatory arts project and Cordelia's public art exhibition. The choice of site for At Night was based on the programme manager's awareness of 'enough indicators' of 'alcohol-related violence' and 'traffic issues' (OC1). Her colleague in the safety department reiterated, 'We chose a space that people have been talking about for many years, about being unsafe… We knew from our crime stats and injury stats that it's a hot spot' (OC7). The rationale of Cordelia's public art exhibition in 'bringing art to a potentially new audience, on train stations, to commuters,' according to the programme manager, responded to well-known rates of cultural participation: 'It's reasonably well documented that in the northern suburbs of [Cordelia], the participation rates in arts and culture, and exposure to [it], is a lot less than it is in the southern parts of the municipality' (CC3). These findings were seen to be confirmed by the public art show evaluation, which revealed, in the southern suburbs, 'a community that were more engaged and had more experience of arts and culture activities' (CC3). The survey of public transport users more broadly identified low levels of participation in community and cultural activities, which, according to the public art officer, 'really reflected the deep-rooted problem across society generally, that people are disengaged,' and reinforced the council's justification for the exhibition (CC3). In these ways, population statistics were used to demonstrate evidence of a problem, and justify the means and ends of particular arts programmes.

Political directives and professional relationships were stronger factors in the development of Oswald's late night cultural activation policy than any conventional form of evidence. The safety officers responsible for the 24/7 City Policy 'had decided that it was important to have… an ongoing relationship with branches who could impact change' (OC7). They identified four teams, including arts and culture, as potential partners for a cross-department initiative. Meanwhile, an arts administrator had become concerned about media representations of 'night-time violence' in the city, and began thinking about the possibility of a relevant project and 'having conversations with other people within council,' notably the safety officer responsible for the 24/7 City Policy (OC1). That conversation led to the pair engaging a trio of artists to explore a central city site and perform a series of live art works at a busy intersection there between February and April 2011. The late night programme funding was a separate initiative of the mayor and another councillor (OC6), who instructed the arts and culture department to 'assist with finding appropriate partners for meeting the initial pilot idea' (OC3). The arts and culture unit then approached six festivals already receiving funding from the City and invited them to apply for a one-off grant for a late night project. Officers' choice of festivals was based on existing institutional relationships, rather than any 'evidence-based' analysis of potential for impact.

An innovative aspect of the At Night project was the use of evidence generated by artists to inform the redesign of a problematic site. Images and narratives created by the artists were communicated to council working groups by the officers responsible for the arts project. While the 'process-driven project' was full of challenges, according to the programme manager, it influenced the dialogue between council branches about the site redevelopment (OC1). In particular, it drew attention to the aesthetics of the site, resulting in 'traction happening around the imagery that the artists created from the site, the beauty that's already there', and suggesting that 'to sanitise the place isn't the right thing to do' (OC1). Officers from outside arts and culture also saw the value of the artists' insights and representations:

[The artists] told us things like… No one had any ownership of the space, and… it was such a disorganised chaotic space that it felt a bit like a vortex. Having artists explain emotions and feelings fairly succinctly and coherently, although somewhat abstractedly, does allow a different interpretation, which researchers can't provide. (OC7).

In particular, officers suggested that the video of the At Night project that they showed to council colleagues 'cut through all the complexity quite quickly', and that the imagery and stories created by the artists 'stuck in people's minds' and prompted 'a much more realistic expectation amongst the engineers and designers that there is a need for change' (OC7; OC1). The participatory arts case thus provides an interesting example of the potential for a more creative approach to evidence, with the images and narratives generated by artists becoming powerful tools of persuasion.

Evidence of learning: evaluation for improvement

These case studies demonstrate three main forms of evaluation for learning or improvement: internal reviews, programme evaluation, and reflective practice. Each uses different forms of evidence and takes place in different circumstances. Internal reviews occur at the branch or institutional level; programme evaluation focuses on a particular project; and reflective practice is personal, or interpersonal.

Internal reviews at these councils typically used external benchmarks to identify areas for improvement by comparing the quantity and cost of particular services delivered with that of other institutions. These reviews and benchmarks sometimes served an advocacy purpose, as noted above. At Oswald, the results of a major review of the arts grants were treated as evidence that changes were required to the funding programme and to role allocations within the branch. The review began in 2009 with a benchmarking exercise undertaken by a consultant, which produced results described by one officer as 'challenging', since 'it demonstrated that we're very costly at delivering some of our grant services, and to that end we embarked on an efficiency review of that… programme' (OC3). Another officer reiterated, 'We started benchmarking ourselves nationally and internationally, and what came out of that review was that the granting programme was in desperate need of change' (OC1). Consequently, arts administrators at Oswald participated in an efficiency review, which resulted in a restructured grants programme and streamlined officer responsibilities.

In addition to advocacy and legitimation, a key objective of the public art show evaluation at Cordelia City Council was organisational learning. As a member of the Arts Board argued, 'Evaluation needs to be meaningful and acted upon, especially when public money is involved. We need to know if we're achieving our objectives and, if not, how we can do better' (CAB). The unit manager explained her motivations for the public art show evaluation: 'I'm not just interested in the outcomes… I'm interested about how that [evaluation] process develops relationships and understanding' (CC2). According to the programme manager, the evaluation 'provided the opportunity to identify with [the project partners] where some areas for further development and focus might be for the next [exhibition]' (CC3). In particular, the evaluation results 'showed where there were people who weren't noticing [the exhibited art],' and the officer planned to use this information to drive improvements and advocate for increased investment and 'a slightly different model for the project' (CC3).

On an everyday basis, officers used feedback, observation and self-assessment as informal evidence of their job performance. I asked all interviewees: 'How do you know if you are doing a good job?' Every arts and culture officer at Cordelia, and some at Oswald, said this involved gauging how their relationships with colleagues, community groups, artists, or other organisations were faring. Many of the officers identified 'interpersonal feedback' (CC2) as a means to determine how well these relationships were functioning and whether they were doing a good job. For example, 'You can gauge it on the relationships that you're building within the community… You can gauge it by the way people respond to… invitations extended to them to participate or be involved in something' (CC1). An arts administrator at Cordelia listed the following signs as evidence of a good relationship: 'An element of trust is developed; there's an opportunity to listen, to provide advice or guidance, to think about things from a different perspective' (CC6). Sometimes this information was collated in an end–of–project report, which might contain such information as:

> Who's been involved, both internally and externally; what kind of audience we've attracted; what kind of individual feedback we've collected, whether it's been through formal surveys or people taking the time to give us feedback without being asked. Also, lessons learned, like any issues that have come up, and any lessons that we've learned from that particular programme or project. (CC1)

At times, officers treated these forms of feedback as anecdotal evidence, which was not systematically recorded or reflected upon. A programme manager at Cordelia, for instance, described her response to feedback received about a festival several weeks after the event. She thought, 'What do I do with that [feedback]? It's in my head. Oh, hang on, I've now moved on to the next thing' (CC1). Her manager was aware of the perceived lack of time and space for her team to reflect on any kind of evidence, suggesting that the arts and culture officers were 'so operationally focused, that there's not much time made for more reflective discussion. It's very much about operations and resources' (CC2). A key objective of the arts and culture evaluation framework was to provide a structured space for such reflective practice and learning to occur. The unit manager at Oswald was also eager to encourage such thinking in her team, and planned to create a role focused on strategic thinking and evaluation (OC6). In these ways, the arts and culture managers were attempting to create more structured opportunities and strategic uses of certain forms of evidence for learning and improvement, as well as advocacy and legitimation.

Concluding discussion: the many meanings and uses of evidence

Data and indicators were sometimes used by officers at these local governments in ways consistent with the conventional evidence–based policy paradigm, including to identify issues, inform policy reviews, monitor implementation, and evaluate impacts (Segone, 2008). By interpreting the function and application of indicators from the perspective of practice, however, this article has shown that these numerical forms of evidence are not always the most important determinants of action. Council officers use a broad range of evidence types in the context of relational practice and legitimation strategies. The environment in which these officers work makes certain

kinds of evidence, at certain times, seem more legitimate and more effective than others.

At the institutional level of corporate plans, performance reviews, and council reports, officers must produce quantitative types of evidence, which are considered to be a reliable and transparent form of knowledge. In their everyday practice, however, local policy workers rely on less formal modes of calculation and evaluation, privileging interpersonal feedback and local knowledge to inform their practice. Local government's reliance on 'objective' numbers and 'neutral' bureaucratic language can make it difficult to communicate the process and outcomes of cultural policy in mutually acceptable ways. This research has shown that an edited video of events and artist-generated images and narratives can become useful forms of evidence for legitimation and decision making. Such creative forms of evidence are not, however, always accepted in the local government environment, where there tends to be some scepticism about qualitative and subjective data and interpretive analysis, despite their pertinence in officers' work practices and studies of 'policy as discourse'.

Strategic planning and performance measurement frameworks oblige local government officers to 'police' their work in accordance with statutory requirements. Although these rituals of accountability have little connection with the everyday practices of some policy workers, they encourage officers to think about identifying and measuring the outcomes of their work. There are, nonetheless, significant tensions between the measurements required to assess institutional performance and the knowledge sought by local cultural policy workers in order to communicate the value of their programmes, inform council decision-making processes, and improve policy practice. There is a risk that the current interest in results accountability places too much emphasis on narrow numerical measures at the expense of more ephemeral forms of policy-relevant knowledge. This risk seems particularly high in symbolic domains of policy and planning, as this discussion of local cultural policy has illustrated.

Early approaches to EBP privileged one type of knowledge: rational-technical. But this is not the only, or even dominant, form of rationality deployed by local cultural policy workers. By defining evidence according to its rhetorical function, and considering it in the context of policy practice, this article has illustrated the deliberate and tacit uses of evidence to persuade particular audiences in specific circumstances. In the case studies analysed, various forms of policy–relevant knowledge were used by local government officers in their everyday discursive practice, aiming to persuade their colleagues and elected representatives, either that council services were being delivered well, that a certain arts programme was worthy of (more) funding, that a project should be designed in a specific way, or if and how a programme could be improved. This analysis has drawn our attention to the political and institutional context in which local cultural policy is made in Victoria, Australia, and to the multiple forms of knowledge needed to effectively design, deliver and evaluate arts programmes in this context. More broadly, it has highlighted the value of an interpretive approach that recognises the multiplicity of meanings and uses of evidence among a community of practitioners in a symbolic policy domain.

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CAB: Cordelia Arts Board, notes from meeting (participant observation), 14 June 2012
CC1: Programme Manager (Community Cultural Development), Arts and Culture, interviewed 17 April 2012
CC2: Unit Manager, Arts and Culture, interviewed (part one) 18 April 2012 and (part two) 27 April 2012
CC2a: Unit Manager, Arts and Culture, notes from phone conversation (participant observation), 30 October 2012
CC2b: Unit Manager, Arts and Culture, email re Evaluation Framework, 12 November 2012
CC3: Programme Manager (Public Art), Arts and Culture, interviewed 19 April 2012
CC6: Programme Manager (Art Gallery), Arts and Culture, interviewed 27 April 2012

Documents from Cordelia City Council

CACS: Arts and Culture Strategy 2011–16
CCP: Council Plan 2009–13
CEF: Arts and Culture Evaluation Framework 2012

Interviews at Oswald City Council

OC1: Programme Manager (Cultural Development), Arts and Culture interviewed 8 September 2011
OC2: Programme Manager (Arts Investment), Arts and Culture, interviewed 13 September 2011
OC3: Coordinator (Arts Investment), Arts and Culture, interviewed 13 September 2011
OC5: Research Officer, City Research, interviewed 22 September 2011
OC6: Manager, Arts and Culture, interviewed 30 September 2011
OC7: Policy Officer, Community Safety, interviewed 5 October 2011

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