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Taking Part: the next five years

The Taking Part Survey, which is an annual cross-sectional (and since 2011, also longitudinal) survey of adults and children in England, is the major source of statistics for which the UK Department of Culture, Media and Sport is responsible (DCMS, 2012), with the first wave of data having been collected in 2005/06. A lot has changed in the landscape that a state's department for culture might be interested in measuring, and the survey has had minor tweaks in the subsequent years; however, this report (DCMS, 2016) represents the outcome of a major review of the survey with the potential to transform the department's collection of data.

Taking Part is now a major part of the cultural landscape, having collected data on hundreds of thousands of people, and with its measures having been made an official statistic (UK Statistics Authority, 2013). It is well-used by academics, including those interested in variables commonly of interest to readers of this journal (eg Hand, 2009), and sport, where questions have been extremely detailed (eg Downward, 2011). DCMS has released quarterly estimates of levels of participation in various activities that the survey measures. Many of these can be considered as legacies of the previous Labour government's PSA 21, which effectively set targets for increases in participation in various forms of culture funded by arms-length bodies, such as attendance at theatre and at music. Perhaps because of these legacies, and more generally because of its position as the main source of data for DCMS, the questions inevitably vary in detail; there have been far more questions on different kinds of displays of visual art that respondents have visited than there are on the different kinds of video games participants play (for more detail on this issue, see Taylor, 2016). However, even those areas where Taking Part is less thorough are far better-measured than they had been in the previous survey landscape, where those interested in people's participation were limited to the occasional waves of the British Household Panel Study where relevant variables were available. Indeed, the survey is far more thorough and a more useful resource than comparable resources internationally; the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts in the United States is collected less frequently and is far less detailed, for example. The survey is also well-used outside of the academy, both in analysis conducted by DCMS (2015) and in market segmentations which are heavily used by the cultural sector itself (eg The Audience Agency, 2014).

This document represents the outcome of a review of the survey. The review consisted of several different elements, including consultation events with academics and other survey users, written submissions from a range of relevant stakeholders¹, and discussions with the department's scientific committee, and the two goals specified by DCMS were to increase the survey's impact and to reduce its costs. Consultation documents indicated that almost everything related to the survey was up for grabs; only a few questions were ringfenced, and issues around sample size, frequency of interview, mode of delivery, and variation year-on-year were all available for discussion.

¹ While academics were well-represented at consultation events and on the scientific advisory committee, only two of the 15 written submissions were from academics: a member of this journal's editorial advisory board, and me.

The major change to the survey consists of its data collection. Since 2012, half of the interviewees in the sample have been repeat contacts, recruited in 2011, while the other half have been only interviewed once; together, they constitute the cross-sectional sample used for estimates. This has meant that the longitudinal sample was entirely recruited in a single wave, meaning both that the sample is getting older, and that it has been affected by attrition. With this review, cross-sectional estimates of the adult population will be exclusively drawn from a fresh sample each year of around 8,000 adults, which reflects a large increase in the number of fresh contacts each year. Meanwhile, while the existing longitudinal sample will continue, fresh interviewees will also be invited to join the longitudinal sample. Crucially, while the cross-sectional sample will be interviewed face-to-face, the longitudinal sample will complete the survey online, in four shorter questionnaires. That the cross-sectional sample with face-to-face interviews will increase is to be celebrated; the review suggested reducing the sample size, or increasing the sample size while not continuing with face-to-face interviews (as in the new Active Lives survey). That the longitudinal sample will increase in number is also to be celebrated; while the efficacy of online data collection for this survey in particular is yet to be seen, the move to a mode-agnostic survey with heavy resource to encourage participants to continue as members of the sample is encouraging for the future of longitudinal analysis of the survey. It is particularly encouraging given recent pushes for the analysis of longitudinal data both from the Department and from the UK's Economic and Social Research Council.

Another change to survey administration which ties into ESRC priorities is around data linkage. Currently, users of the survey are limited to the survey content alone, with the exception that the child module is now linked to the National Pupil Database; in this document, DCMS states its plans to link participants' data on topics including health, education and employment. This is extremely promising, as it can both limit the detail that participants are asked about in the survey itself, and it can also provide far more detail about items of interest to researchers: not only providing more information than would come from the survey questions themselves, verifying it and minimising measurement error, and in the case of the cross-sectional sample providing information from other time points. If this is a success (and the existing NPD integration is encouraging) DCMS should be congratulated on this.

The changes to the survey questionnaire are also generally positive. Until this most recent wave, the survey question on personal income was esoteric; it asked for respondents' personal incomes in £5,000 bands, and similarly for the the highest earner if they weren't the household member being interviewed. This has now been aligned with Office for National Statistics guidelines, for ease of comparison with other surveys. Previous questions on what might be classified as "digital participation" were also esoteric, with the majority of questions asking whether respondents had visited websites associated with DCMS departments (theatre websites, for example), and what they'd done on them (like buying tickets). This has now been changed, with far more detailed and contemporary questions about respondents' digital participation. From now on the questionnaire will also include rotating modules, allowing the possibility of increasing the overall number of questions available to researchers (at the cost of some of them only being available for occasional waves). This approach has been extremely successful in a range of other surveys, including Understanding Society, although so far the range of questions suggested for rotation is limited to questions that have

been used in the survey before. Indeed, only two areas have been dropped: the 2012 Olympics and digital radios.

That said, while the changes to the survey questionnaire are generally positive, they are relatively few in number. Given that the scope of the review put almost everything on the table, and given that the response from stakeholders was in general quite radical - in particular, with strong support for developing the “free time” section at the start of the survey, to better understand people’s participation in activities outside of the DCMS purview - it is perhaps disappointing the survey content hasn’t particularly changed beyond questions that were obviously dated. The scientific advisory council was asked to consider whether Taking Part should “look at leisure time (or all time) as a whole rather than just DCMS sectors?”; as it is, this has not particularly changed. While data for a new Time Use study has been collected (Fisher, 2015), which goes some way to answer these questions, the possible value in this data being included in Taking Part is in the activities that people only participate in occasionally, so this might be considered a missed opportunity.

Beyond the general administration of the survey, this document reports two other major changes to its dissemination. The first is an online tool² through which anyone can get basic information from the survey such as overall levels of participation in particular activities, how these vary by relevant demographic variables, and how these vary over time and across regions of England. While this tool is of relatively little interest to the parts of the academic community who download annual releases of the full dataset from the UK Data Service for whatever analysis they choose, there was strong demand for such a tool at one of the consultation events, with other government departments and arms-length bodies in particular being keen to get relevant headlines quickly. Whether the tool in its current format - effectively a series of Tableau dashboards - fulfils their requirements is a question for them, but thus far DCMS has been responsive to suggestions, which is encouraging that the tool will meet stakeholder needs long-term.

The second major change beyond survey administration is a move to releasing a version of the survey as open data. While open data has been a priority in government in general recently, with Defra releasing a huge amount of their previously privately-held data as open data, this would represent the first major release of DCMS data as open data. This would involve anonymising the data to a greater extent than the UK Data Service version, and which variables this would entail losing are not made clear in the document; however, this would represent a radical step for the survey in that raw data would become available beyond the academic sphere and organisations that can afford to pay for it. Whether this will have positive effects within the sector in particular is partly a function of who works in it; the analysis of survey data with complex sampling design is not something that’s included in many Arts Management, Cultural Policy, and related degrees, and it is from these that the relevant people in cultural organisations have often graduated. Given there is a huge amount of resource online for people to teach themselves these skills, and given arts organisations’ training budgets do not always live up to their interest in professional development, this might be an avenue to investigate; teachers on degree programmes likely to produce people

² At the time of writing this is in live beta, and can be accessed from <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/taking-part-survey-data-analysis-tools>

working in the cultural sector might also consider whether such analysis might represent something that their graduates would find useful in their professional careers.

The future of Taking Part looks promising. Given that cuts to DCMS led to some concern about whether the survey would be able to continue at all (Doeser, 2015), it is very encouraging that such resource has been invested that the cross-sectional estimates will be improved, the longitudinal sample will increase in number, and the overall length and detail of the survey will be maintained. That the content of the survey questionnaire is relatively similar is not a problem in itself, given it means that estimates will continue to be comparable from 2005/06 into the future, and increased, more immediate sharing of the data to all relevant stakeholder communities is likely to increase the impact of the survey itself. It is disappointing that the scope of the survey has not increased, but it is difficult to criticise DCMS for not reaching beyond the department's major focuses. It now falls to both the academic community and the broader cultural sector to ensure that the most is made of this high-quality and internationally unique resource.

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