

Seminar: Museums Data Collections

Sara Selwood, Principal Lecturer, Department of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of Westminster

This seminar focused on the current state of play of museums data collection, and how it has developed over the past five years . It presented a resume of the main data collections in England, and the availability of the data collected. It also described the lessons learnt from the current collection of data for Renaissance in the Regions from the 160 plus museums in the regional hubs, which report back to the MLA.

Visitor Data in 2000

What was available 5 years ago?

Who was collecting it?

What exactly did it cover?

There were regular annual data collections:

- The annual *Sightseeing in the UK* report was based on the four national tourist boards Survey of Visitors to Visitor Attractions, and started publication in 1997 (although it initially focused on England). This covered data from the previous calendar year. *Sightseeing in the UK* provided visit numbers (including some variables e.g. percentage of child visits and visits by overseas visitors) from data collected from self-defined museums and galleries, at which it was 'feasible' to charge admission, and which had more than 10,000 visits pa. The response rates were around 50%, from approximately 1,700 – 1,800 institutions.
- The Chartered Institute of Public Finance and Accountancy provides the annual CIPFA *Leisure and Recreation Estimates*. These are estimates of visit numbers to local authority museum services. There are always considerable holes in the returns. The response rates tend to be around 80%, with grossing up used to compensate for the non-returns.
- *DCMS Annual Reports* publish overall visitor figures for its sponsored museums and galleries in England. These refer to the previous year.
- The former Museums and Galleries Commission collected visit data from registered museums in 1994 and again in 1999. These were primarily intended for internal use, and the two years worth of data were published in volumes called *Museums Focus* 1998 and 1999. Again, each referred to the previous year.

In addition to these regular surveys in 2000, there were other collections of visit data that were ad hoc, irregular or basically comprised collations of existing data.

Ad hoc data collections (these were usually surveys of people, not institutions and were based on interviews with representative samples of the pop):

- MORI *Visitors to Museums and Galleries in the UK*. Originally commissioned by MGC and subsequently by Resource. This was carried out in 1999. One report was published in 1999, the other in 2001.

The 1999 report was based on interviews with 1,845 adults carried out in February 1999. The research published in Feb 2001 (therefore not available in 2000), somewhat oddly (in terms of comparability) focused on data collected from 5,011 people interviewed in November and December 1999.

- Stuart Davies' two-part book for MGC by *Popular Demand: a strategic analysis of the market potential for museums and arts galleries in the UK*. This was still the most comprehensive account out there in 2000, but at one level seemed to be getting pretty outdated. It's worth asking how much has changed? This was published in 1994 and drew on 240 pieces of exiting local research going back to early 80's. It aimed to provide a baseline understanding of the museums market. There are two volumes – one was an analysis, the other a data appendix – but they were not widely distributed.

Data that existed but was not available:

- AIM (Assn of Independent Museums) Comparative Trading Survey – a benchmarking exercise of 22 individual museums.
- GLLAM (Group for Large Local Authority Museums) data, collected from a self-selected group of 22 local authority museum services in England and Scotland for benchmarking purposes. This has since been published but was not available in 2000.

Using the data

There is inevitably some overlap between what was available, and what museums were being asked to contribute to surveys that asked similar, but slightly different questions. Again it's worth asking; 'what's changed?' The most obvious candidates were the museums participating in the GLLAM surveys likely to be covered by CIPFA and (like some of the individual museums in DCMS) by the tourist board's surveys too.

Because different questions were asked and different definitions used there are problems of consistency and comparability from survey to survey. It is not necessarily possible to add the findings of one survey to those of another. For example the DCMS defines children as being 15 and under, but the tourist

boards provide no such definition. Visit numbers may refer to calendar years/ represent financial years and may have been collected by different counting methods with different levels of accuracy and so on.

In 2000, quality was getting to be an issue. DOMUS was the most publicly criticised, not least in subsequent reports commissioned by Resource. The quality of data captured by it was considered poor for a number of reasons:

- Respondents' lack of understanding of the meaning of questions that they were being asked.
- The fact that there was no verification of the information at local level.
- The amount of time that lapsed between the collection and dissemination of the data meant it was over a year out of date.
- Response rates varied considerably, between regions, over times and in response to different questions.
- Respondents saw no direct benefit to completing the questionnaire. They already had to answer a return for MGC Registration scheme – so DOMUS was regarded as an additional burden.
- Lack of IT coordination between MGC and the area museums councils meant that the returns couldn't necessarily be accessed.
- There was little evidence that DOMUS was ever put to strategic use – which was a real discouragement.

What's available in 2005?

Data sets that have now ceased publication:

- The annual series *Sightseeing in the UK* ceased publication in 2001.
- *Visits to Visitor Attractions* from the same database continues to provide data. The latest data available was published by Visit Britain in 2003 and is for 2002.
- DOMUS ceased publication with the abolition of MGC and the establishment of Resource in 2000. A report for Resource *UK Museums Retrospective Statistics Projects* (2001) pulled together all DOMUS data, and drew a line under it. This can be found at:
http://www.mla.gov.uk/information/evidence/ev_stats.asp

Regular publications of data:

- After a three-year gap, there is a new MORI *Visitors to Museums and Galleries 2004* research report available – again for MLA. This is based on a sample of 4,039 adults in GB (as opposed to the UK) in January to February 04. It is available on the MLA website.

New regular publications of data:

- In October 2004, DCMS announced its intention to publish monthly data from its sponsored museums and galleries. These are currently available on its website for the period April – December 2004.

- http://www.culture.gov.uk/museums_and_galleries/monthly_museum_visit_or_figures/v_w_museums_g.htm

The landscape of the data available is also changing in relation to regional museums, and this is largely due to the data collections associated with Renaissance in the Regions.

Evidence of change taking place in the regional museums' outputs is one of the most important tools that has MLA has with which to persuade DCMS and the Treasury to increase the money available. If quality of data was becoming an issue in 2000, it's now recognised that it's to everyone's advantage that the most robust data possible is generated. Poor data is now recognised as a liability.

The evidence for Renaissance in the Regions is being gathered through two regular surveys. One is an annual exit survey, whilst the other is more like consistent monitoring than a survey per se. They both serve a similar function

The exit survey was carried out in October/November 2003 and 2004 in some 40 to 45 museums distributed amongst the nine hubs. These surveys generated returns of around 17,500 interviews. MLA's intention is to gather information about the social class and ethnicity of museum visitors for its PSA target 2: to attract additional 500,000 visits to regional museums by new users predominantly from social classes C2 D E and ethnic minorities by the end of 2005/6.

Two analyses are available on the MLA website:

1. *Further analysis of the baseline exist interviews 2003* by Stuart Davies based on that first tranche of data:

(http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/ren_baseline_exit_rep.doc).

2. MORI Topline National Report based on the 2004 survey:

http://www.mla.gov.uk/documents/mori_hub_exit_survey.doc

The data from the continuous monitoring of all the hub museums from May 2002 is not currently available. This covers the 165 museums in the 9 hubs. Visit data is now collected quarterly and the returns also provide detailed information about schools visits and adult education take up – education being a major theme of Renaissance in the Regions.

The monitoring has been running since August 2003. The data going back to May 2002 is 'retrospective'. The data is getting more robust and reliable as the exercise continues.

The performance indicators were revised in December following detailed consultation with the hubs. See Appendix 1. The detailed definitions and guidelines are in the guidelines, hopefully on the website now

The intention was to overcome the difficulties of DOMUS, and answer the criticisms of it:

- There is more consistency in the way that respondents understand the questions that they are being asked.
- The officer responsible for data within the regional hub verifies data.
- There is no issue of time lapse.
- Response rates to different PIs are improving all the time.
- There is every incentive to file returns. Data collection and management could well be part of the criteria for increased funding.
- Everything is done on excel spreadsheets so there is no question of IT incompatibility.
- There is plenty of evidence that the data is put to strategic use - not least in terms of being used in Spending Review bids.

Other data not available:

- While in 2001 the GLLAM data was published for 1998/99 and 1999/2000, since then only selected figures drawn from the five years of data from 1998-2003 has been produced in an advocacy document *Enriching Lives* (available from GLLAM).
- *Egeria*, a report by Adrian Babbidge, for GLLAM and funded by MLA is not available.
- GLLAM is about to collect the 2003/04 and 2004/05 data.
- The MLA is also sitting on other data, in particular TGI data.
- In 2002 Resource purchased back data from GB TGI (*Target Group Index*) and, I believe, continues to subscribe to it. This includes data on museum attendance going back to 1988, and on art galleries since 1996. It draws on an annual sample of about 25,000 adults (aged 15+) collected quarterly. Access and use of this data is heavily restricted for copyright reasons. It was used in the section on museums, which I wrote for the *MLA Overview of Data in the Museums, Libraries and Archives Sector*. (http://www.mla.gov.uk/information/evidence/ev_stats.asp#5).

Ad hoc data collection:

- A new ACE/Resource omnibus report was published in October 2002, which has a section on museum attendance. The report, published by the ACE as ***Arts in England: attendance, participation and attitudes in 2001***, is based on an ONS survey of 6,042 people in England carried out between July and November 2001.
- Since then, the *Arts in England 2003: Attendance, Participation and Attitudes* has just been published (http://www.mla.gov.uk/information/evidence/ev_stats.asp#5). Like *Focus on Cultural Diversity: the Arts in England: Attendance, Participation and Attitudes* (http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/information/publications_title.php?page=7) both touch on museums, rather than exploring museums attendance in any great detail.

DCMS:

A table comparing attendance at the always free museums and the formerly charging museums from 1999/00 – 2003/04 is available on the DCMS website.

Cultural trends:

There are two forthcoming articles on longitudinal data collection. The article by Adrian Babbidge is based on the Rosse Report – *the Survey of Provincial Museums and Galleries* published by the Standing Commission on Museums and Galleries in 1963. The article compares the results of that survey with information collected in and around 1999/2000, and in so doing tries to measure the impact of government policy and interventions over that forty-year period. The other is an update of *By Popular Demand* by Stuart Davies, which re-visits the conclusions of that study ten years on. These will be published in Cultural Trends 53 (forthcoming).

Dr Sara Selwood
Department of Journalism & Mass Communication
School of Media, Arts & Design
University of Westminster
selwood@wmin.ac.uk

Editor: Cultural Trends

Website: <http://tandf.co.uk/journals/titles/09548963.asp>