

The real front line

People working in the arts know all about the impending funding crisis but Tim Wood, AMA board member and director of communications at The Place, believes only arts audiences can prevent the worst fears coming true.



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Images

Royal de Luxe, The Sultan's Elephant London, May 2006
Produced by Artichoke
Photo Sophie Laslett courtesy Arts Council
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Slava Snow Show, Wales Millennium Centre

N-Dubz at Saga Gateshead Outside in Festival
Mark Savage Photography



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No one can say that we didn't see this coming. Funding bodies have been open in their planning for a chastened future, with Arts Council England regularly briefing clients on what to expect after October's Comprehensive Spending Review. The discussion has been amplified by the media, and The Guardian alone has published 36 articles tagged "arts funding" in the past month. Prominent supporters of the arts have been appearing on Newsnight, the Today programme and in the press, arguing for the success of the mixed funding model. The conversation has re-echoed around social media spaces: 750 members have joined the online community at artsfunding.ning.com, there have been over 5,000 #artsfunding tweets. The counter-arguments are also familiar: How important are the arts, when compared to, say, health care or defence? Why should the arts be supported, when other industries have to survive on their own? Does arts funding just subsidise the minority pastimes of a liberal, metropolitan elite? And, the most implacable argument, how can the government be expected to eradicate the overwhelming public spending deficit the country faces without cutting the arts? This was the context when 500 people whose job involves encouraging public engagement in the arts gathered at the recent annual conference of the Arts Marketing Association. The vulnerability of the arts was felt keenly, and reflected in the accompanying social media chatter (over 2,000 #ama10 tweets). "What's the collective noun for a group of arts marketers?" asked one tweeter. "A redundancy of arts marketers" came the reply.

I remember discussing at another AMA conference 10 years ago the national target for the arts imposed in the early days of New Labour. It was that two-thirds of people should engage with the arts, and there was scepticism: it felt unattainable and, logically, immeasurable. But we had not foreseen the impact of the rapid advances in arts marketing practice that were already taking place. Where once marketers adopted a belt and braces approach - abiding by the truism that they knew only half of their activity was effective but not which half - increasingly sophisticated methods of profiling, segmentation and analysis were making the business of selling the arts a much more

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exact science. National participation is now measured by Taking Part, a survey on a once-unimaginable scale, normally interviewing tens of thousands of people each year. It has revealed that over three-quarters of the population now engage with the arts. More sophisticated arts marketing has driven costs down – fewer brochures are produced, fewer leaflets mailed, fewer adverts placed. Arts marketing is funded not by government but by ticket sales at the box office, ringing tills in the gift shop, responses to fundraising appeals, and such earning is achieved by better understanding our own customers and improving our offer to them. And the arts marketer is changing as technology reshapes how we all interact with each other. We have become the early-adopters within arts organisations of new digital technologies, which initially offered faster and more cost-efficient ways of promoting our offline activities. Now online communication is much more than just a promotional tool, it is a vehicle for artistic engagement. A survey from early 2009 found that 56 regularly funded arts organisations in England were producing high quality, distinctive and engaging public service content, and that number is growing fast. The arts may be successful, well-run and efficient, but the threat remains, reinforced by the relentless question: why should the arts be given special treatment? In short, because cutting the arts helps nobody and hurts everybody. The arts have already been dealing with cuts, in lottery funding, subsidy and awards from trusts and foundations, and most arts organisations have absorbed them, not by cutting activity but by





streamlining it. The result is an arts industry that is vibrant but vulnerable. 16% of arts organisations believe they are facing closure in the next 12 months, with a further 29% anticipating the need to scale back activity. Jeremy Hunt has asked the arts to look for ways that “frontline services” can be preserved in these austere conditions. But where is the frontline? For some, the frontline is our artists. The creative fountainhead is a fragile one – it is this fragility, above all else, that brought about the need for funding for the arts to thrive. For others, the frontline is the business of the arts, which generates £2 for every £1 invested. At stake are not only the funded arts organisations (and it is the smallest businesses in the areas of least provision which are most vulnerable), but the countless other businesses that provide goods and services for arts clients. I believe that we need to draw the frontline at the threat to the public, the 40 million people who participated in the arts last year. Cut the arts and that number will go down. Cut the arts by 25%, and it will fall drastically. Our audiences and visitors need to understand this. They need to know that at risk is the provision that they enjoy, the low ticket prices and free admission, the schemes to extend access and widen participation. They need to believe all this is worth 17p per week. A national campaign is being developed by the National Campaign for the Arts to give individual members of the public the chance to show how much they value public investment in the arts and to keep them informed of threats to arts provision in their area. They think they might get a million people signed up to www.ivaluethearts.org.uk in the coming months. Artists,

and those of us working in the arts, cannot win this fight on our own. As with everything else we do, involving the audience is crucial next step.

This article was informed by crowd-sourced research coordinated by the Arts Marketing Association: [HYPERLINK "www.a-m-a.co.uk" www.a-m-a.co.uk](http://www.a-m-a.co.uk). The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of everyone who took part, and especially Jonathan Goodacre, Andrea Perseu, Roger Tomlinson, Tom Hunter, Melissa Milner, Simon Thomas, Steven Hadley, Fiona Moorhead and Katie Anderson and all the Twitter correspondents to the #ama10 and #artsfunding hashtags, including @amadigital, @lauramalteser, @stripsocksrock, @BrandinyourHand, @JonnyGoodacre, @SimonThomas41, @theatreis, @onthefarm, @TallgirlonaBike, @clydefish, @_ClaireWill, @audiencesdavid, @AIR_artists, @mcpmarketing, @SarahABGee and @JoeyTaylor. All opinions and errors are the author’s own.