

Podcast: Lara Ratnaraja – championing diverse leadership

SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Hannah Mason, Jake Young, Lara Ratnaraja

Jake Young 00:05

BAME is used by people who feel their job is done if someone BAME is on a panel or employed at an entry level post. This is a quote from Lara Ratnaraja, a freelance consultant specializing in diversity, leadership, collaboration, innovation and cultural policy implementation within the cultural, higher education and digital sectors. Today, Hannah Mason and Lara, unpick this quote for us as they explore the theme of championing diverse leadership. They'll talk about success being a male journey to barriers for people of colour between middle and senior management, the need to recognize colonial mindsets in order to change systemic practices and performative allyship by undiverse organizations, and how digital is democratizing access. You might also detect a few wise interjections from Hannah's dog Snoopy. Here we go with Lara and Hannah.

Hannah Mason 00:58

Hi, Lara. It's lovely to have you here today. I wonder if you could start off by just introducing yourself to the listeners and letting us know who you are.

Lara Ratnaraja 01:06

Thanks, Hannah. Yes, I'm Lara Ratnaraja. I'm a freelance cultural consultant, which basically is a phrase which means everything and nothing all at the same time. And according to my family, it means nothing at all. But I know what it means. But I work in the cultural and heritage sector. I work with arts organisations, I run projects, I do a lot of work around diversity and leadership. And I also kind of say that I'm a gamekeeper turned poacher. So I worked in the public sector, I was a director at Business Link, running their creative industries, and cultural programming for eight years until 2011.

Hannah Mason 01:40

You make it sound very easy. So basically, you never get a chance to sleep.

Lara Ratnaraja 01:45

No, it's um, I suppose sometimes. It's like where you're working, when you're freelance, your free life sort of kind of stops and starts. And I've got two friends who've said things to me over the years about, one of which is, "Isn't it great that you work with your hobbies and your passions!" and the other one is that "Oh, you work with your hobbies and your passions." So if I go away, or I go to museum or gallery, it's a bit like a busman's holiday, and I have got one or two friends, he won't really go with me to certain

places. If it's anything digital, they just like "Oh god, she's going to start now" if it's not good, then I'll start taking it apart slightly, so. And I once went away with a friend, who's in, he's a heritage consultant. Another one who's a director at a museum. That was a nightmare, because we just took apart all the interpretations. So we're always not fun to go with.

Hannah Mason 02:31

I love it. I am going to jump in with a massive question which is very long, you have a huge wealth of experience in developing and delivering programmes aimed at developing cultural leaders from diverse backgrounds. You've helped create a bedrock for change, but leadership in the sector is still predominantly male and pale. There's also a lot of success stories. Can you share a few success stories?

Lara Ratnaraja 02:56

Well, is still predominately male and pale, and it's definitely very stale. But there's lots of, there's well. I wouldn't say there's a lot of... there's great women in Birmingham, for example, there's Deborah Kermode at the Mac, there's Fiona Allen at the Hippodrome, there's Margaret at CBSO, Piali Rai at Sampad. Karen Newman at BOM, so that's Birmingham, you know, Cheryl, at Grand Union. So we've got a number of kind of great female chief execs in Birmingham, you've got Stella Kanu at Lift, you've got Ruth McCullough at Abandon Normal Devices. And in terms of ethnically diverse people, Skinder Hundal from New Art Exchanges has been made Director of Arts at the British Council, and I was thinking about this, and then I suddenly thought, but if you can name them, it's too few. Because if you said to me, how many white men over 50 are chief execs of arts organisations, we'd be here, we'll be using up the rest of the time.

So yes, I can name lots of people, one because, because I know them. But two, if you can name them, there are too few. And that's still less than 20 people, you know, so of course there are, I think also, it's what success means because success in that kind of concept is a really male kind of journey. It's like, you know, you've gotten to the top of your of your game, you're running a big venue now. And actually, there's loads of really successful freelancers that I know. And I think one of the things that's really interesting, hopefully, as we come out of the pandemic is that there's new ways of working, which might be that there's actually more accessible routes for women, for disabled people, for people that are LGBT, and for more intersectional kind of routes for people.

But if you look at the data I was looking at-I sadly look at Arts Council data quite a lot- and, if you look at the census data for the NPO's 18-19, 52% of national portfolio organizations are run by female chief execs, so that looks, that's great. But when you start looking at ethnicity, disability, and LGBT, it's much lower. It's like 10% of CEOs are ethnically and culturally diverse. 9% are disabled, 13% are LGBT. That's really, really low and none of it compares with National Workforce data. And the thing that actually what's really interesting is you've got chief exec level, when you come down to the next level down at manager level, it's much lower. And I think that's kind of where there's a bigger gap as to where people, I mean, if you can see more entry level or junior positions, then it's higher again. Which says an awful lot about this sector.

Hannah Mason 05:21

Yeah, it does. I think that brings me really nicely to one of the questions I was gonna ask about, sort of languishing in the middle. Many diverse cultural practitioners sort of feel like they're languishing in the middle, or there aren't the opportunities for them to get up or even reach a glass ceiling, that alone break through it. So, why do diverse practitioners get to sort of the middle, and not get further up into those senior management positions? Do you think that there are things that organizations could be doing to encourage that transition? Or is there something that's blocking it?

Lara Ratnaraja 05:53

Well, there's lots of things that could be doing. I was at an Ink arts conference that they're doing at the moment. And I was talking about and saying, if we're still having to talk about this, then it's still a problem. But equally, if I said to any of the people, I know that are leading arts organizations nationally, you know, do you, do you have problems around race? Or is unconscious bias or other issues around diversity in general? Apparently, there's none. So I'm not quite sure why we're still having to, because nobody I know has got any problems with any of this, but it's obviously there, when you look at the data, so. There seems to be a lot of 'it's everyone else's problem'. Not anyone, not their's. That's one thing.

Two, I think there's a lot of stuff around... have you read the The Class Ceiling, which is a book by Sam Friedman and Daniel Lorrison? That's really interesting, because they look at, it's mostly about class. And- one of the things that they talk about is the idea of a following wind, which is a gust of privilege, they refer to it as, and I think that's one of the issues here, is that when you get to that middle level, unless you've got your network, unless you've got your advocates, unless you've got your champions, unless you've got that old boys network, which is a very kind of middle class, private, male, private school educated male kind of network, then you stay in your languish. And so, it's actually the system that stops people from, you know, from carrying on. Secondly, it's quite exhausting. It's quite exhausting banging your head on that ceiling constantly trying to make it through and, and it's interesting, I kind of wonder why I'm still freelance. And that in some of that is because I've just a bit too exhausted to try and be perceived in a different way.

And when I was a Director of Business Link, people understood that because I had a job title and I worked for a big public sector body, but I can remember somebody saying to me, should I be in another local authority? Should I be talking to you or should I be talking to your, the person that's senior to you? They literally had this kind of chart, whether they should be talking to me or somebody above me, and I was like, having to explain that I was the one that made the decisions. But one, it's a woman. And two, it's an Asian woman, so they just couldn't get their heads around it. You can get this was a white man. And he was very lovely and I got to know him much better afterwards. But he just hadn't really come across women at that kind of senior level before.

Hannah Mason 08:14

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 08:15

But I think that sums up some of the reasons I think I'm freelance is that I can get to define and name, what level I'm at, and nobody else can do that for me.

Hannah Mason 08:24

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 08:25

Whereas institutionally, you know, and I, it's interesting, I was looking at when I left when we were in business, and it was closed down, sorry, because it was closed down by all of these public sector bodies were closed down in 2010. And I always said it was like the end of relationship. I kept all the partnerships. I kept the universities, I kept the councils, I kept the Arts Council. I kept all of these partnerships. But, I'm very lucky and very privileged. I never underestimate that. But it's because I've had that job that I've got those partnerships now as a freelancer. But it shouldn't be that way. Because everyone should have those opportunities that I've had. Yeah. And that's why I do a lot of my leadership programmes, because basically, it's a bit unfair right there. Still.

Hannah Mason 09:03

Yeah. Just a bit.

Lara Ratnaraja 09:06

It's a lot unfair.

Hannah Mason 09:08

it's a lot unfair out there. You're right, if we can name people, if we can count people on our on our hands, that it's still it's still unfair. So if you could advise an organization to do one thing to make space for diverse leaders, what would you advise? What would you say they could do right now?

Lara Ratnaraja 09:27

I think they need to, they need to actually recognize their own bias. How can we agree that nobody has got any bias? Apparently, nobody's got any bias. And that's absolutely ridiculous, because obviously, it's there. I'll be generous and say it's unconscious. I think in a lot of cases, it's conscious. And I think the the way that people are other differences as well. So I'll particularly say that as somebody who's Sri Lankan Tamil, and I get into this, that's it, I'm a South Asian diasporic woman. So anything that's if Asian, that's what I get to get I get invited to this. There's an article there In a different shape, exactly. I said, This isn't happened to the match. But at one point, they only used to invite me to Indian events. That was a I'm not even Indian. I'm Sri Lankan, but basically anything.

My colleague Helga I do my leadership programs with, we call them 'samosa events'. So you just gave it to them. Because it's always like, since emotions are the lingua franca of showing your cultural diversity at an event, it's always the most, and it's a redemptive Actually, it's to you, you are marginalized and playable. This is all one group people that's also as Asian people. This is all Asian people, this is all black people.

And then also what you're talking about is, are you saying that everyone has the same cultural experience, it's like somebody, they've got some race primer. So that, that say, I don't see more white people have got a common experience, I think that everyone has a singular experience. It doesn't allow for any intersectionality, if that's how you how you do things.

So organizations need to really look at themselves and own that as well. And because everything that we when you look at how work is produced in the cultural sector, it's completely from a heteronormative. It's a Western, and it's a very central kind of method. So everything is produced. And we we as individuals have to engage with the sector in this kind of monolithic kinda way. Well, that's not how audiences are gonna do it. And I think actually, if you look at lockdown, that's really shown. That's not how the general public that you know, the greater world sees itself. And actually, audiences want to see themselves reflected within organizations. You know, you can see that and, you know, the cultural sector wonders why it has a problem when it doesn't look like the people it's trying to, to engage with.

Hannah Mason 11:34

Yeah, yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 11:36

Yeah. So this is a common sense. It's still like people going, so what shall we do I get a lot of those. I go to lots of the meetings at the moment. What shall we do about diversity that might? Seriously, one, I might be the only I'll be the only cultured person in that room in that meeting.

Hannah Mason 11:54

What's interesting is that organizations are still looking to that one culturally diverse person in that meeting, to help them to understand what to do, instead of, you know, it's always asking other people, what should we do? Can you teach me rather than how can I learn to?

Lara Ratnaraja 12:15

Yeah, the emotional labor is always on the marginalized person. Yeah. And then it's sort of like, it's not my fault. So you need to teach me whereas I'm kind of like just don't be racist. It's quite easy. There you go. I've ended my career now, don't be racist. It's pretty common sense. But it's, it's also that kind of marginalisation and exoticisation that, that's what really drives me mad actually, is that when arts organisations talk about communities, that's another thing that really, I don't understand what you mean by communities. You know, what they mean is Black and Asian people. And I don't know, I know, there's so many arts organisations that do this. They will, they'll do a project with disabled people or for LGBT people, it's all categorized like that. And then you think you've done it, and you've ticked your creative case box with the arts council?

Hannah Mason 13:07

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 13:08

So that's actually not fundamentally changing how you how you are as you as an organization, it's the culture of the organizations that need to change. So actually look at your own systemic practices, look

at your how institutionalized you are, don't have that one person that comes in and then automatically, they're the head of engagement. They're always it's always fits in. There's Asian or Black heads of engagement, you can always guarantee before you meet somebody, and they are pigeon holed into that community role.

Hannah Mason 13:35

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 13:36

Whatever community is meant by that. So. So I think there's, there's that, that it's a, it's a patriarchal, it's, well, it's a really, it's a very colonial attitude to have.

Hannah Mason 13:45

Yes, it is.

Lara Ratnaraja 13:49

But how many people do you know, Hannah, that would say that they were colonial in their thinking?

Hannah Mason 13:53

No, I don't know any, anyone that would say that they're colonial in their thinking, or that they want to operate in a kind of a very patriarchal sort of Empire-y kind of old fashioned way, everybody thinks they're quite forward thinking and modern in the way that they approach things. But we're, we we may have, you know, a modern approach, but yet the things that we're doing may be very old fashioned in, you know, the actual steps we're taking. So how do people actually change what they do to match with how they want to be or where they want to get to? And change those sort of systemic practices? I think that's the hardest thing for for people.

Lara Ratnaraja 14:38

But I think that's because people have to be honest with themselves. You know, you have to recognize it. And yeah, I'm only half joking by saying that. There's a lot of well, there is actually a lot of racism in the arts, but it's masked, and I think that's the trouble in the in the cultural sector. It's marked masked under this kind of attitude of liberalism, and we're all in it together. And it's the words that people use around intent to be inclusive, for example, people use disadvantaged well, who are you who's disadvantaged in you? You know that it's, and however you say some business advantaged. And I'm certainly not disadvantaged by, by the, by dint of the fact that I'm sure I'm can, or that my skin color is different. It's not white, you know, I think actually, that's a huge privilege, that's a huge advantage.

So I thought I said to a group of artists I'm working with at the moment, I can't imagine what it's like to be very vanilla, mainstream, you know, that kind of, I can't imagine what it's like to be bland. You've got nothing that makes you look different, or, but I embrace who I am. And I'm certainly not going to be marginalized by somebody else. And I think we have to actually flip that narrative to, that's what I mean by colonialism, it's so patriarchal in a Victorian way, let's help you rise up and come to our way of thinking, where actually, if you have a far more inclusive and open recruitment practice, if you look at not necessarily having everyone come through formal education routes, because as we know, that

tends to default to very white, very middle class, you know, terms of universities, look at people that are coming through non formal education routes, like apprenticeships, you know, look, I learned experience, I haven't got an art degree. I've got, you know, a wealth of experience that comes from having done the job. And so why am I seen differently to other people?

Hannah Mason 16:26

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 16:27

And the difference is, I recognize my privilege, and I use it, the thing is, you use your privilege to broaden that access for other people. And I don't really see that in the sector an awful lot. There's some people that are amazing when there's some people that they still want to keep it very close. I think some programs like developing a creative practice at the Arts Council did absolutely amazing in terms of completely opening up the routine, not just the funding, but the route into people being able to develop that kind of arts practice in exactly the way the funding should be used from the Arts Council. And then it brought in more people that were not in that kind of mainstream art world. And I think that's, that's been really brilliant.

And I see the people in the programs that Helga and I have worked on, like was Represent and Astonish, that they're all beginning to come through, that they are far more generous as leaders, they collaborate together, that's the kind of things that organizations should be doing. I'm a freelancer, you know, I watched during lockdown how many people were, were on Twitter, reaching out and saying, we will help you do this, this and this and the emergency funds, and actually the people, I knew that were doing it in the background, were not being paid to do it. Because again, the people that I did it for what all ethnically and culturally diverse, because I didn't feel comfortable going to cultural institutions. So you can bang the drum on Twitter. But that doesn't really mean anything.

Hannah Mason 17:43

I think those cultural institutions is about, it's about being able to be honest with yourself. Yeah, as an institution is quite quite a difficult thing. I suppose. Those sort of little things like, like the funding changes by the Arts Council will make a big difference. Because if the Arts Council doing things differently, it kind of makes it okay for other organizations and institutions also try and do things differently, perhaps.

Lara Ratnaraja 18:08

But I'm an Area Council for Arts Council in the Midlands, and I have a slight issue that, that actually the Arts Council has to be that the stick to beat people with cars, actually, surely, you know, we talked about diversity, so much in the arts, maybe to cultural organizations should want to do this, maybe they should want to work with ethnically and culturally diverse artists, maybe they should really want, because diversity actually means to me about having a plurality of voices. Surely you don't want to have this sort of very boring, homogenous, let's have the same kind of story coming out again, and again, and again. And I think, I don't think actually, we're going to be able to go back and do that anyway. And one of the things that actually also collectors could do, and I mentioned them before, is them Inc Arts. Amanda Parker, they've been running a whole campaign about stopping using the

phrase, BAME rightly so, and they are actually running a series of events called Speak, Listen, Reset, Heal. And I think the next stage of events our organizations can, can go so they can hear some of those that kind of testimony and hear about actions for change.

So I'd like to see more organizations doing that out of their own will not because their funding and their credit case rating and you know, their quality, their best quality action plan is dependent on it. Yeah. Surely, also for me, surely the where's the curiosity in terms of creativity? Yeah, that's where for me that you know, when Creative Case first came out, that's where I find it really interesting was that you can look at diversity through creativity. So that is amazing. This is why I find it really I'm struggling with the cultural sector is where's that creative curiosity gone? Where? Why are you not seeking out different voices? Why do you know why, you now, just putting a black square on Instagram because Black Lives Matters and that's apparently has done the trick. I watched in horror at some of the organizations that were putting this stuff on Instagram. I was thinking, well, they're organizations that I either I don't feel comfortable being part of or attending their events. And I know lots of other people don't. But you put a black square on Instagram, apparently that makes you race friendly. Maybe that's what that's the new badge should be they should be making me race friendly or LGBT friendly.

Hannah Mason 20:20

Yeah, well not if it just means ticking boxes.

Lara Ratnaraja 20:24

Yeah. And I mean, you must have felt the same. Just watching that like kind of Instagram thing. I just like it. Just it... I find it offensive, actually.

Hannah Mason 20:33

Yeah, I think a lot of people did find it offensive, because there are lots of stories behind the scenes of people having really bad experiences, a lot of those organizations, it's very easy to stick a square on and say, you know, we believe in this, we support this, but there's no real sort of accountability. There's no really sort of, it's very sort of two dimensional that that action, I think.

Lara Ratnaraja 20:56

It's completely performative as well. So it's, it's performative allyship, you're saying, look, we're a really good organization, and quite a few of them I was looking and thinking, your staff is all white, your board is all white. You know? And, you know, okay, if you don't see anything wrong in that, but you're sticking a square, and so what do you mean by diversity, then? Because actually, what is this comes back to, let's make it about communities, let's rise that let's help people with that, you know, it's giving people a step up to whatever you think your platform is, I can see your eyebrows is raised.

Hannah Mason 21:30

Good job it's not a video.

Lara Ratnaraja 21:35

But you know what I mean and it's an interesting thing. And you think about I think you do I use the word BAME and I thinking, I'm not quite sure it's ever really bothered me. And actually, what I realized

was, of course, I've got, of course, I'm vain when I go into events, and I'm asked to sign a sign and evaluate, because I'm always asked to sign the evaluation forms. So say whether this is people that would say that to my face or not, that's how you're perceived. So you absolutely lose your identity. And you become that person. Great. There's another, you know, ethnically diverse person that ticks that box for us.

Hannah Mason 22:14

I loved your blog 'A rose by any other name' on your website. And I just want to say a quote that from that blog, 'BAME is used by people who feel their job is done if someone BAME is on a panel or employed at an entry level post.' And that just really spoke to me. Because I think anybody who is (and I am doing air quotes) 'BAME' will really resonate, that will really resonate with them, because we've all been that person who is asked to sign the survey. And yeah, I just wanted to sort of unpick that experience of being part of the panel for Inc Arts and, and how you felt their response has been on Twitter with the new with the new wording that they're going to be taking to Parliament?

Lara Ratnaraja 23:02

It's I mean, I genuinely was absolutely honored to be asked by Amanda. And actually, guess what, not everyone had the same opinion. What a huge surprise. Not everyone that's ethnically and culturally diverse has the same opinion. It's, it was such a shock, you know, so and, and I'm actually I'd said to Amanda, about the word BAME, did it bother me? It hasn't. But then it's, it's rarely been used AT me. But when you hear about other people's experiences, that I think that's the thing, so you can actually recognize that it might not affect you personally, but it has affected, you know, the where's the empathy and understanding that this is not everyone's experience, and actually, we did a closed session with them as part of their conference, the speak bit, which was about people giving witness and testimony, and that was actually horrific. It was they did it very well. They had counselors, they had therapists that you know, to support people that were being triggered. But everyone, including myself, had had stories, as he would you know, and, and actually, the thing that you forget, this guy's actually quite upset, actually.

But the thing that you forget is that you... Sorry. the thing you forget is actually how much you hide it or you bury it, you know, and I don't just mean, so your racism is, you know, everyone who's black or Asian who has that experience of racism. And actually, I'd completely forgotten about some really horrific stuff that happened in childhood, except somebody who was the director of an arts organization said, well, because I grew up in Solihull, I said, I didn't really have any bad experiences. It wasn't like it's finished, obviously. Because what I need is a white person telling me what racism is. So they said, they said, Oh, aren't you very lucky and I actually meant that because I was growing up in Solihull in the late 70s/ early 80s compared to what was going on in East London and Barking and places like that, where the National Front were really, really prolific, I wasn't at threat of violence or my house being burnt down or having feces put through my letterbox, which is what was happening in those areas.

So I was saying, actually, in comparison, Solihull is so middle class, if anyone's going to be rude about you, they're doing it behind your back anyway. And two they're more likely to have a go with you because you haven't got a pony, or you only got the one car, you know, and actually my dad was in the

RAF. So we, we grew up in this really middle class environment. So people, and he sounded so posh. So people didn't, weren't actively racist towards us in Solihull. In Birmingham, however, when I, when I started going into Birmingham, by myself with my friends, of course, there was loads of racism, you know, and it was in the 80s, not a pleasant time. But actually, I suppose, in a way, what it was, I was a teenager, and I was a very arrogant teenager. And so actually, as I got older, I learned to kind of own that, and especially as my dad works in, in race relations, and he was the commissioner for racial equality. So I grew up with a lot around the politics of this as well. But when I was a child, it was horrific. And to have somebody tell you, that you were lucky, and then you come up with you. And then you suddenly realize, Oh, actually, this happened when I was 11. And when I was 12, I've completely forgotten about it. Because what you do is, if you are marginalized, and you have a threat, there's actual physical threats about racism as well, you basically learn how to style it out, you put out and I said to somebody, that's how I learned to be a bitch, quite frankly, was actually having people spit in my hair when I was a child.

Because you actually, you harden, that hardens you. And that's not a great thing to say, but actually to have people in the culture sector turn around and say, 'you didn't experience it the way you that you should'. While I'm sorry, I didn't walk around with a big t shirt going on and on about it. I do now, obviously. But actually, it shows you that you have to really build up layers and layers and layers about this. And actually, I don't think that's very healthy, either.

Hannah Mason 27:05

Yeah, I think you're absolutely right, I think there's, there's a combination of us having to build up layers and learn how to, like you say style it out. So we're all out there styling it out. On the one hand, and on the other hand, this sort of stereotypical media representation of what a 'BAME' person is, and what their experience is, you know, so your people assume you're Indian, straight away. So they've got this narrative of your, your, you know, Indian, and you grew up in Birmingham, not Solihull. So you know, they know who you are just because of your, the color of your skin and your name. And you know, the combination of those two things, I think is quite... it's keeping that kind of diversity, sort of conversation really apart. So yeah, the fact that we're all styling out makes it look easy.

Lara Ratnaraja 28:06

Yeah, and actually, also, if you're, you know, I come from a middle class background, so therefore, you, you're part of the gang, you know, because you speak a certain kind of way, or you have the same kind of references, but actually, you know, the fact that I get people will just automatically go well, but you're injured, therefore, you have the same experience. And though we are claiming we are claiming, Kamala Harris is because she's Tamil. And so I was like, Yes, finally. But actually, that was another one. I mean, I know it's an American thing. But everyone was like referring to this first citation. What she said did tumble, actually. And from time on, he said, you can be quite specific. And actually, some of the things about the Obama campaign is, what do you mean by some of the phrases that you're using? Is it all Asian people? All Asian people are not the same? Yeah, you know, it's and then I guess, if you're referring to people of ethnic and cultural debates, you can say that, but if you're specifically talking about a certain group of people, talk about them. You know, I'm fairly open and very

public about that. I'm Tamil and Brahmin and all of these sort of things. And so actually, it's on my website, you can now look at it, you know, if you say that, this day, don't get it wrong. I don't make assumptions about people.

Yeah. You know, it's like when people are lazy by gender pronouns, just just just learn how to be respectful about other people's identities. And I think what I think in the arts, sometimes we just want to have these massive groups of things because that's easier. Absolutely. Because we did that. But that therefore means that the deep opposition is wide, it's straight. It's hetero-normative. It's male. You know, well, that's not that's literally not most of the roles default.

Hannah Mason 29:58

I think it's that kind Moving away from being able to sort of put people in boxes, like you say, is having a respect to understand who is you're talking to, or who you're dealing with, without having to categorize and, and, you know, sort of lump into this sort of a more false sort of blob.

Lara Ratnaraja 30:17

Yeah. But I think I think to be honest, it is changing. And, and I quite like it, because changing whether people like it or not, because the world moves on, time moves on, people are getting older, you know, and actually, you have, it's not just the sort of younger voices, but it's new voices, you know, and I quite like, you know, some of the programs that help and I've worked on, you know, some of the people that we've worked at are not, you know, their 20s and 30s. They're people in their 40s. And they're just, and they and they basically just didn't have the opportunity, mainly women actually, to move forward or to move on in the ways that they would like to, and now they're coming through. And I think that's really important, you know, that we're not just saying, this is about people coming in entry level jobs is, you know, the art is the art. So there are transferable skills.

So there are people coming in in different ways. I think that's really interesting. And also that, you know, one of the things that if the pandemic thought was anything is that the structure of work as we know it in the cultural sector, you know, not everyone has to be in a space, or in a physical building, I might miss whether I've missed being galleries, I miss, I miss go to the theater, and I miss all of those things. But equally, we can work in different ways. We don't have to work in geographical locations. So when we start looking at the access barriers, then actually they are going to they're going to melt away, whether people like it or not.

Hannah Mason 31:34

I think that's brilliant. You know,

Lara Ratnaraja 31:35

And I think, well, it's interesting, if you look at job titles, and, and, and salaries, you know, the inequity around salaries when it comes to ethnic and cultural people, the fact that there's more an entry, if you look at the Arts Council data, again, more entry level than there are in the middle there actually just start changing that. And increasingly, we'll see more and more organizations led by ethnic and cultural

based people, and that will change things. But also audiences audiences will vote with their feet or their emotes, you know?

Hannah Mason 32:13

Yeah, I think I absolutely agree with you. I think that one of the things that the pandemic has really brought us everybody in the art sector closer together, is this sort of idea that we can sort of lean into digital technology. Yeah, I think we've kind of been a little bit sort of like risk averse, and a bit worried, you know, maybe it's about not wanting to look like an idiot, you know, and not being able to cope with the tech.

Lara Ratnaraja 32:41

I think it's actually a bit different. I think. I mean, I've been doing Hello Culture, which is the kind of conference and events that I run, which I think that's what you're getting with that. I've been running that since 2012, eight years, eight years. And now I get to say, I told you, I was right. But you know, eight years of doing, you know that that's, there's really interesting ways of creating work. And I actually think what the main issue has been some of it's about not understanding the tech, some of it's also I used to run a digital hub at the university. And some of that is I will say that if you're surrounded by this tech, and it costs a lot of money, of course, you have a familiarity. So I absolutely recognize that as well. Because I remember a friend saying to me, and I was like, why don't you do this, this this moment? Because you're sitting in a in a hub team with 2 million pounds worth of kit and we haven't got any, you know, and Oh, yeah. Okay, actually realize that, yeah, that you need to have access to this sort of stuff.

So we need to see more spaces where people can, can experiment where they can r&d, because it's all very well getting some funding from the Arts Council to r&d things, but do you know what you're r&d'ing? So there should be more collaborations, for example, with universities around having that kind of sandbox approach where people can test ideas.

But the other thing is, people still also like creating work in the way they want to create work, which is that we create work centrally, and then you as the general public, you come in and you experience it on our terms. And actually, that's the bit the digital does, it completely disrupts that relationship and I think that's one of the things when, when digital works really well, is it properly democratizes access. And I think that lack of control, that lack of power, changing the narrative or changing the relationship, that's where some of the culture, some of the cultural sector have been really loath to let go. And actually, I always point out, it's, you know, why be so binary about something that is non binary, because it's a little computer joke. And but actually, because it's not an either or thing. It's not like, Oh, we do theater, or we do digital, or we do theater, we do live streaming, it can be again, this comes back to where's the curiosity in the creativity about looking at different ways of making work.

You know, so Home commissioned 'Homemakers' over the lockdown, and that was really interesting. So that was work that was made, but it was made for a small screen. So it's made for a laptop. And so that's actually worked really well. Some of those pieces because they were, they actually played with and incorporated the role of it being a screen, and not being a theater piece or being a live stream, for example. So it's a completely different nature. And I think those are things that are really exciting is that

you can actually make work in different ways. And I think the thing that's really interesting for me seeing they're like, you know, venues like Home, and other venues, and people commissioning work, as they go forward, you're leaving behind all these other arts organizations who have been saying, Well, I know we'll, we'll wait till it's all over. You know?

Hannah Mason 35:33

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 35:34

Well, we'll see what your audience thinks about that, as you know.

Hannah Mason 35:37

We're not going back.

Lara Ratnaraja 35:39

Yeah, how many years if we did about cold spots, hot spots? Yeah, low engagement areas, all this sort of stuff. But it's all people that be watching stuff all day during a lockdown. So that says an awful lot, doesn't it?

Hannah Mason 35:52

Yeah, absolutely.

Lara Ratnaraja 35:53

There's an awful lot about whether your venue is comfortable for certain people anyway. But actually, if you look at the data around cultural consumption online, and things like that, and what people have been watching, that's much, much more fascinating.

Hannah Mason 36:05

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 36:05

So I think it's a really, it's a real fertile opportunity. But I think, again, this will be this was what was what's going to sort out the organizations that go forward over the next five years. Yeah, absolutely. So they'll have that mythical new audience that everyone wants.

Hannah Mason 36:19

And I will, everyone will be chasing. It will be really interesting to see how Hello Culture kind of develops over the next eight years, after, you know, if there's an enormous shift over this one year. Have you seen a difference from the sort of the beginning or from last year, to this year.

Lara Ratnaraja 36:42

Well we always get really amazing speakers to be quite honest. And I tend to go for people that are doing really exciting things. What's been different, obviously, we've done it all online this year with the BBC. So, 've really missed, I did miss that kind of physical event. And it's been really interesting. What

has made it more interesting to me about doing online is you have to think very differently, we're producing it, it almost reduces the broadcast, I work with two producers, a technical producer, and a producer who kind of actually scripts it all for us and keys it all in. And I was like, do I need this? Oh, God, now I do really need it. You know, and, and actually, again, even I, we've had to learn from the first one, that you're not just putting a conference online, you're doing it very differently. But, but actually, it's so much more accessible, we have closed captioning, it's recorded, I can say all the things that I couldn't necessarily do budget wise, when we were physically as a conference, I can do more, and we can play around with it more. So we're getting we're just gonna issue all of subtitle recordings of the last two events. But also, you can tell, you know, we're all a bit more used to working on zoom now and things like that, but it's, it's equally, it's harder that you don't get a feel for people.

Hannah Mason 37:55

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 37:57

You know, so it's just different. And, but it's interesting to me, because some of these people I'm never going to meet or haven't met, yet. I have enjoyed it. I think it's been it's been different in terms of also what we're talking about. So, for in November, we've got Chris Halpin, he kind of describes himself as a cyborg disabled musician. And then we've got a panel headed up with Jo Verrant from Unlimited and, and some of that's in recognition, the 25th anniversary of the Disabilities Act, but also I love Jo's panel, its Digital and Disabled, we're not your metaphor. So it's actually looked at Yeah, taking disabled artists and practitioners who have been making work in lockdown. But, you know, some people are still shielding. Some people are, are still vulnerable. Also I love that phrase, 'but we're not your metaphor', how disabled people have been used in this kind of way to look at able bodied people who've had to stay in.

Hannah Mason 38:58

Yeah,

Lara Ratnaraja 38:59

You know, so that been really interesting. We've got the next one in January is with Chris Brown he's my co-creator. And we're looking at queer culture online. So one of the things again, about lockdown has been about safe spaces, and, you know, I'm on the board of Shouts, which is a queer Arts Festival. And it's kind of written by Birmingham, LGBT and just talking to them about you know, some of the issues that have been for queer people in lockdown, especially when they aren't necessarily in safe places with their families or things like that. So you've got to look at how digital has been really important in these spaces. And then the one in February which Javad Alipoor is chairing is looking at digital and protests because obviously, you know, one of the big things during lockdown not just Black Lives Matters, but actually what that started. And that digital has been a massive platform for protest.

And I think again, you know, when we talk about, you know, how the cultural sector will change? Those are the things actually will change it. You know, the revolution is going to happen, against, some people's will, put it that way. But so I think that's how it's changed. It's also that it's become, it's become more responsive to things that have happened, I was very interested about how people made work in

lockdown. And so I think it's been shaped very much by events in lockdown. So next year, I have no idea what it's going to look like, but but one of the things we keep talking about is about a hybrid experience. And I think that's where one of things I always want with Hello Culture is that it's where people in the arts can come in here, for the people that have done certain things, what worked, what didn't work, all those sort of things, because again, there's not enough spaces where you can try these things out. So we've done things on. We've had Nate Robertson for the BBC, he just loads about TikTok. And he's always really popular when we've had him before. Because actually, you know, I'm not necessarily gonna start a TikTok channel for myself, because that's not my audience. But when would you do that? And when wouldn't you do that, and I think that's really useful for arts organisations and arts professionals is to find that space, I always want it to be a space, particularly at the moment where people can kind of go and listen to some interesting people, hear some interesting things, but also think about what applies to them.

Hannah Mason 41:16

Yeah. Yeah, absolutely.

Lara Ratnaraja 41:18

I don't think there's enough of that sharing.

Hannah Mason 41:19

Yeah. And in doing that, it gives them sort of the opportunity then have a go to, to play to fail to, you know, like, do that sandbox stuff that you were talking about

Lara Ratnaraja 41:32

Yeah, cuz I think, how'd you know, I mean, I know I wouldn't do TikTok. I don't think the world needs to see me doing some ridiculous dance. But, but I'm not an arts organisation either. You know, maybe they do. There's not enough wine in the world.

Hannah Mason 41:50

You won't catch me on tiktok.

Lara Ratnaraja 41:52

But obviously, I have a different audience as well. And I sorry, I absolutely think it's an easy switch fun, there's not been a lot of fun. You know, one of the things I do like about Hello Culture is that the everyone's really generous with their time anyway. But it's also it's really good fun when when you kind of when people are talking about it when I think, you know, we have missed that connection.

Hannah Mason 42:13

Yeah

Lara Ratnaraja 42:14

The irony of running a digital conference online is I actually really missed some of those people. You know, I saw somebody that day I missed. I missed you know, the coffee which is really stewed at a conference or an event. And you're just like, Oh, God, and then you. And then at the beginning of

lockdown, I found I was in a farm shop, and I find these little conference biscuits that you get in a packet.

Hannah Mason 42:35

Yeah

Lara Ratnaraja 42:36

I can't remember what they're called. And I found them, I put them on Facebook, because everyone was like 'Oh, my God, I really missed those biscuits'. Because actually, that's about people being together and collaborative and communing, and obviously, you know, hopefully at one point we will be back there again, but I think if you can create that kind of collective kind of experience online, that's a really, really powerful thing. And I don't you think you'll lose that? I mean, I'll carry on saying things like this, for example. And for me going forward, I you know, I've programmed an entire 5 minutes of events for Hello Culture with Charlie Benson. He's like my producer, we've done the whole thing online and on Zeev. Yeah. But I think that what's interesting is because we have worked together before, but that's really, you know, that's taken our relation to a next level. That's, I think, with Zoom and do things online. The second everyone's relation to the moving in level now is if you've had to kind of make a commitment one way or another. Yeah, it's true. It's true. It's really intensified some of those relationships, it's absolutely escalated my working practices of some people in a really good way. But it's also it's kind of made me step away from a lot of a lot of people as well.

Hannah Mason 43:48

There's kind of there's almost nowhere to hide, really, on zoom in a lot of these experiences.

Lara Ratnaraja 43:54

Well, especially if you are going to go onto a Zoom and have people talking about diversity, especially ethnic diversity, and then you realize, because you can see everyone's cameras, and you can just sort of say, it's just me that isn't it. When you're invited to things. It's like, it's really obvious, actually, I say, so I think. I think also, one of the things about the lockdown did was, it made me realize, actually, I think he exposed a lot of people around how, you know, the highs of the medicines when it comes to diversity? Yeah. You know, because it's you said, You were like, it's just online. It's this stuff on Twitter, it's just on Instagram, it's on fire. It's not anything meaningful, because it is and you suddenly see how flimsy all is because you're not necessarily just in a building or you're just suddenly saying what the rhetoric looks like and the artists that they're working with and who they're, who they're supporting and how they're talking about communities. And that's in inverted commas, in air quotes, and that's really interesting. So for me, I know that I'm glad that things won't go back to normal. But you know, The venues that I've been in while I could be Museum, an art gallery, the Herbert, the Belgrade, Wolverhampton Museum and Art Gallery. For all of those amazing experiences, I went back then I felt very safe. And I got to see art. There's also lots of venues, I chose not to go into barbecues. And that's, and I and I'm, you know, that's how I'm making my choices. Now going forward is I know the organization's I want to go and support. So that was everything I wanted to go and support them as well as the fact that had some amazing shows on and but interesting, they're the most diverse programming I've seen as well, during lockdown.

Hannah Mason 45:35

Yeah, I think that's, that's really interesting, that idea that we are becoming much more sort of discerning as audiences, because we've had this time to think and explore who it is that we're giving our patronage to, who are we being loyal to? Who do we want to actually support going forward? So I think we have been questioning a lot of their loyalty as an audience member, as a patron of an organization. So how would you sort of give AMA marketeers tips on how to sort of nurture that kind of loyalty and that relationship, so we can come out of lockdown. So we can come past COVID? And keep this sort of momentum of change, disruption and creativity? How can we keep that going to make sure that we don't suddenly just fall back into the old sort of systems and the old ways,

Lara Ratnaraja 46:34

I think it's telling a different story. And I tell you, HOME did it really well actually, when Home reopened and then if you saw their video. So it was done in a brilliant performative way. So as you came in, where you hand sanitized etc and I thought it was really, really fun, it was fun, but it made you feel really safe. So I think of all the organizations I've been to, so they're three museums, Home and Vivid projects. I could have gone to a lot more, but I get to chose not to go to a lot of spaces. And they did it really well. And it's two things. One is looking at the marketing, but it's welcoming, as in the programming is interesting. And then it's because a lot of the some of the marketing I've seen has been a bit like how you would do physical, but just do it digitally. And actually, I'm not quite sure that kind of destination marketing works, you know, like this, we're going to be showing this at seven o'clock and I you know, on Zoom, it's not that I go to time is it on a same thing. Whereas if it had been the evening at an event, of course, I'd have gone to it.

So if you look at some of the data and consumption, it's dropped off quite a lot. Because as I pointed out, when we were back open again, you are also competing. I say that but you are competing with actually people going into pubs and bars. Anyway, it's quite easy when it's a proper lockdown, because at least you know what the rules are. And I think also maybe it's about welcoming people so it's about celebrating people coming together. We all miss being in a communal space with people. You know, I miss moaning about sitting in the theater, the seats, a tube and I've got quite long, long legs. So I always feel really cramped or I want to be sitting there being very passive aggressive about the armrest to somebody but they're on your half of the armrests. I want to do all those things, you know, because I want to have the person that's coughing really loudly, right? Not coughing, maybe nowadays, but you know, the person is sort of, like irritating you or has their phone go off in the middle of the theater. All of those things. I'm good. I've really missed being annoyed by lots of people, I can't believe it. But, but also, you know, and those are the kind of the welcome home stories that are really, really good.

I'm going to mention the Amazon ads and everyone's going to roll their eyes about Amazon being the brands and what's really interesting is that people I know they're being really critical. It's an amazing advert. It's an amazing advert if you see it the Christmas advert. They'd be in John Lewis and all and market events and all these other ones. But actually what's really interesting, it's about home delivery, they've maintained delivery, like everyone has watched has cried, including me they've made home delivery, like a bit sloppy, a bit romantic and a bit about family. It's home delivery. How is that exciting? It's been so well, you know, that is the sort of the marketing we should be talking about. And if even arts organizations could get half of that kind of everyone going, I know it's Amazon but that's the kind of thing and actually it's based on how you bring people together but also that you're keeping them safe. The art is just at the heart of it. I mean, obviously, it's always there. But it has to wrap around by actually, you know, are the places that I've been into, especially museums and galleries they've done so well that you felt perfectly safe in them? You know, there are one way systems, there are hand sanitizers, wearing masks, all that kind of stuff. So that actually, you need to have that kind of be quite clear.

Hannah Mason 50:36

And the ones that are doing well, are gonna be the ones that succeed.

Lara Ratnaraja 50:41

Yeah, most people I know, I think the museums all did videos, and I thought they were really good. But also do it. So it's inclusive. So it's not just welcoming to my building. Just I mean, it's welcoming to our building, you know, how do we share this experience? How do we I live I think if you look at Home's Twitter, I think it now says Welcome Home. And then when it was in lockdown, it was Stay Home, I just thought basically, these are really smart ways of doing it, they've got really good marketing. The video is about how you came in spaces, all the museums that I thought that was really, really good, and have a really clear booking system, you know, advertise that. Some of the booking systems are so complicated that this is my thing, my digital stop putting barriers in front of people. Because, for me, if I have submitted my password one more time than I did, I was trying to buy something yesterday come in, but it wasn't it and I forgot my password and it hadn't saved it I just didn't bother. So if I don't do that, and I will do, I'll get through as many barriers as I can to get to do digitally, then you just got to watch it you're competing. So also understand, actually, that people are doing you that if you know, it's there they that your privilege that people are coming to engage with you. Yeah. They take it for granted. Again. That would be my kind of tip.

Hannah Mason 52:05

Yes. Understand your privilege. Yeah. And it kind of it does turn it around. It's not that they are privileged to be able to come and see the wonderful things that you're doing. It's that you have your privilege in being able to share this wonderful work that you have this this creativity that you have this

amazing space. I really like that. And maybe Yeah, maybe that's something that this whole COVID thing has given us is a completely turned out perspective on things like that.

Lara Ratnaraja 52:38

And it's a partnership, I absolutely recognize when I go into a museum or when I was at Vivid or when I was in Hove, but those staff are taking risks as well. So I absolutely respect like it's not if you go to a shop, I absolutely respect all of the people that are coming to work, to make my experience a really good one. So I think now there's a much more shared experience.

Hannah Mason 53:01

Absolutely.

Lara Ratnaraja 53:02

You know, and that were much more respectful about, you know, the person that opens the door for you, or points out where your hand sanitizer is, I say thank you just so many people if I when I'm in a supermarket now, but actually I absolutely am so grateful that all those people are there.

Hannah Mason 53:19

Yeah.

Lara Ratnaraja 53:20

So I think there is there is something about that, you know, if we have that kind of conversation now that we're together.

Hannah Mason 53:27

Yeah, it actually means something. It's not just a slogan. Yeah, I find that when I'm thanking people, I actually mean it.

Lara Ratnaraja 53:34

Yeah. And I've got a big smile. That's why I like you and say, well, I've got a mask, I'm really I'm seeing what's there to say I'm smile using modeling, you know, they can see that smiling. Because I you know, I don't want to be that grumpy person that doesn't say thank you sounds like thank you very much. Like, they're like, Why are you yelling? Thank you, buddy. You know, but I, you know, and I think, you know, I can be a bit hard on our simulations, but actually, I do respect that people are taking a risk to their health by being in those spaces. And that's, that's, you know, I'm really respected. And yeah, I think there's, you can share that respect. Now. There's a very different conversation than we had before.

Hannah Mason 54:14

Absolutely. Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you wished I had? Or thought I should?

Lara Ratnaraja 54:21

I don't think so. I think can sometimes when I talk about diversity, I kind of just wonder how we how we got here. So yeah, you know, like, how did we get it quite so wrong? And I think that's why I'm answering this question really, which is around a much broader societal context, political context. You know, I think, I think incrementally there's obviously been a massive disinvestment in culture and that kind of values here. So I think there's a hole, I suppose. So I do want to how we kind of ended up in a place where I'm quite cross about lots of things all the time, you know, but I also do understand that there's a broader political context that we're all working in, or we have been working. And a lot of negative, you know, the narrative has been one of negativity constantly. And I think that, you know, the corporate sector is having to orientate itself constantly within that. And that's quite exhausting as well. But I also think, again, that things will have to change, there's an opportunity for us all to kind of collaborate and find a different kind of way of working. And I think that's the bit that's going to be really interesting. And, I think my question is, how d did we get here, but I think I'm probably now more interested in what do we do next? Yeah,

Hannah Mason 55:58

I think I'd agree with you. I think at the beginning, when things were looking a little bit shaky. I was I was a bit worried about where the sector was going. Yeah. And now you're right. We are here, wherever, you know, how do we get here? But also, how are we going to get out of it? Yeah. And that's kind of scary, but also really, really exciting.

Lara Ratnaraja 56:23

I always I always think about it, when I get a bit down about it, I then kind of go up about the whole thing about it is really exciting it and it will, it will be what I love. June lockdown, one of the things that was really amazing was seeing anyone perform, and just seeing how the sheer joy that artists have when they are performing. And I think we need to kind of get back to that excitement, that energy, that creativity because when you harness that, then it's where the corporate sector becomes really powerful. And when we talk about diversity and inclusion, it's about making sure that all voices are represented equally and equitably, you know, and I think that is when it suddenly starts getting very exciting. And if you don't get excited about it, well you get left behind anyway. So there you go.

Hannah Mason 57:09

That's a brilliant place to finish. I love it. Thank you so much, Lara, for joining us today and for chatting to me and sharing your wisdom and your experience has been brilliant.

Lara Ratnaraja 57:20

Thank you and I really enjoyed it.

Hannah Mason 57:22

Thank you so much.