

## **Book Review: *Audience Development and Cultural Policy* (Steven Hadley: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)**

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## Abstract

Steven Hadley's *Audience Development and Cultural Policy* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2021) examines the positioning and practice of audience development since its emergence as a field. He debates the impact that a lack of clear policy direction, combined with the soft power exerted by the cultural management elite of the time, has had on it. He also examines the ongoing debate of whether audience development should be concerned with cultural democracy or the democratisation of culture. Hadley successfully argues that it is the cultural 'tradition' in which individuals within the cultural management elite are based that contribute to this binary. It is his description and analysis of both the academic and grey literature and, more importantly, interviews with those who were instrumental in the creation of audience development as a practice that fills an important void in the recording of its history. While his research directly concerns actors and literature within the English arts tradition, this is still an invaluable resource for anyone interested in audience development whether in practice or academia. Not only because it offers a broad insight into the contested nature of audience development, but also because of the suggestion of the impact an influential body of people in practice, can make on policy development.

**Keywords:** audience development; cultural policy; arts marketing; cultural democracy; democratisation of culture.

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## Book Review: *Audience Development and Cultural Policy* (Steven Hadley: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021)

Lizzie Ridley

### Introduction

Audience development has existed in cultural policy since the early 1990s yet there are increasing claims that, despite decades of policy and practice, it is still not working, and that it simply serves to replicate the cultural hegemony. It has been argued that a fixed definition remains elusive with 'audience development' consistently functioning as an umbrella term, which allows it to operate variously as an ideology, a process, or a tool, to change, diversify or increase audiences, or engage and enrich them (Kawashima, 2000, Walmsley, 2019, Hadley 2021). There is also a burgeoning body of research analysing and critiquing its purpose and success (Jancovich, 2017), its function within the industry itself (Kawashima, 2000, Hayes and Slater, 2002), as well as potential new directions it should take (Walmsley, 2019). However, it more recently appears to have slipped down the agenda within UK cultural policy. A recent European commission report (Bollo et al., 2017) into audience development, although important as a study served to illuminate

the ongoing schism between policy and practice. If part of understanding why something is, is understanding where it came from, then Hadley's book fulfils the important task of filling that gap. His analysis of what remains of industry literature, combined with interviews with the people originally involved in implementing audience development illuminates how they believed the policy emerged and the impact its development had on itself as a concept.

Through his research Hadley argues that the reason audience development has not left its ontological phase and remains in a state of functional ambiguity is that an initial void in policy direction during its implementation within the arts was subsequently filled by the leadership within a cultural management elite (p.121). The classification of the industry actors working within the arts in the period under investigation as the 'cultural management elite' (p.83) is an important distinction that he specifies early on. Hadley is clear that this elite is distinct from a more traditional understanding of cultural elites in that the cultural management elite existed within a small industry, had power and influence and their own tastes and beliefs, and yet did not have the ultimate power to officially influence policy and spending. This definition is key to Hadley's argument that it is those individual actors' tastes, beliefs and networks, alongside influences from academia and their experience of practice, that filled the gap left by a policy black hole and guided audience development in its earliest phases.

## **Summary and Analysis**

Hadley presents an overview of the arguments within the book in chapter one, describing his empirical approach to understanding audience development through interviews with those involved at the time. The framework he employs is that of the ongoing cultural policy debate around democratisation of culture versus cultural democracy, which he then links to Mark Bevir and R.A.W Rhodes (2002) framework of dilemmas and traditions, both of which are expanded upon further within the book. Through this, he argues that it was an absence of direct policy intervention that led to audience development proceeding instead through individuals' actions, and that it was therefore influenced by those cultural elite's personal belief systems (however well meaning). He contends that this process allowed the practice of audience development to grow in simultaneously opposing directions because the lack of definition suited both agendas.

Hadley devotes Chapter Two (Democratic Cultural Policy) to tracing how English cultural policy emerged and to setting out the key theme of his book, which highlights the simultaneously binary and yet complementary nature of the policies of democratisation of culture and cultural democracy. The former is usually concerned with opening access to existing cultural forms to all, and the latter with encouraging individual creativity and engagement. In Chapter Three (Audience Development), he situates audience development as it currently stands, claiming it is caught between contested definitions and conceptual ambiguity. In this chapter Hadley also identifies the dual position that audience development currently occupies in both management and policy, whereby it exists both as a process, identified by its frequent conflation with arts marketing, yet also as policy, with a core function of increasing audience access.

It is in Chapter Four (The Development of Practice: Two Dilemmas), that Hadley introduces in detail the theoretical framework from political science which he has applied to his research, that of dilemmas and traditions (Bevir and Rhodes, 2002). To summarise:

The dilemmas are key moments in what we might call 'the history of arts marketing and audience development' in that they are identified as specific moments of fundamental change, reorientation or shift which had a major impact on audience development (p.79).

The three dilemmas that Hadley identifies within audience development during the period under investigation are those of marketisation, social inclusion and later, in Chapter Seven, failure. During the marketisation dilemma, arts marketing as a practice became increasingly professionalised within the industry with the introduction of databases and adoption of accepted marketing practices. Hadley defines the following period as the social inclusion dilemma: in this time, access to the arts was (and arguably still is) considered a solution to social ills which again affected how arts audiences were perceived and communicated with. The interviews with those involved in the creation of audience development illuminate Hadley's argument that it was the responses of the cultural management elite to the external dilemmas of marketisation and social inclusion that so heavily influenced the progression of audience development. They reveal the initial distrust of the first dilemma, marketisation, that was introduced in the Thatcher era, followed by the cracks that the cultural management elite discerned between Arts Council England's policy direction and the needs of the industry. It was this which led to the subsequent dilemma, that of how to embrace the social inclusion agenda. Hadley then argues that it was the traditions or individual belief systems within which the cultural elites operated, namely the art lover tradition for whom these elites want to share the power of art, and the social justice tradition in which the outcome and transformative nature of the art is more vital (p.112), that impacted on how these individuals understood and reacted to these dilemmas.

The next two chapters cover the traditions and characteristics of audience development. These are key chapters within the book exploring why audience development could be argued to be caught in its ontological phase, wedged between the dilemmas of marketisation and social inclusion and the traditions of art lover and social justice. In Chapter Five (The Traditions of Audience Development), Hadley gives further consideration to the topic of cultural management elites and argues that it was the opposing traditions to which these cultural elites belonged, that exacerbated the ongoing conflict between the two purposes of audience development. In this regard, Hadley argues that it was the lack of clear policy direction and ongoing ambiguity regarding the purpose of audience development that allowed industry actors to move it forward simultaneously along the binary concepts of cultural democracy and democratization of culture.

The ambiguity as to whether audience development was considered policy or was in fact more of a management process also added to this conflict. Hadley notes that industry books and manuals from that time were predominantly devoted to tactics or the process of developing audiences rather than considering its ultimate purpose. He also observes that it was the distaste some interviewees had for the management term 'arts marketing', combined with lack of clarity around the definition of the term 'audience development', that also contributed to its functional ambiguity. Hadley concludes the chapter with a recognition from the interviewees that there was a lack of official

policy direction from Arts Council England. He therefore concludes that audience development was, in the early days, created by a network of cultural management elites who nonetheless believed entirely in what they were doing, as such becoming policy by stealth. As Hadley argues, it is therefore the ambiguity within the policy direction of audience development combined with the influence exerted by these elites, that not only allowed for these ideological oppositions to continue to exist within audience development, but also to contribute to the ontological stasis in which the term still resides.

In Chapter Seven (Audience Development and Democracy: Third Dilemma) Hadley introduces the idea that we are currently within the third dilemma, or point of fundamental change, that of failure, and the ongoing claim that audience development is failing. He argues that the increase in data collection, through box offices and other means, simply serves to demonstrate that it is not working, the profile of subsidized arts attenders has not changed, and the majority of the public arts funding is being enjoyed by the top few percent of the population. This therefore raises questions, he states, for both traditions: for the arts lover, how long is long enough to continue with audience development as it stands? For the social justice tradition, how long is too long?

In his conclusion, Hadley brings all these elements together with a personal reflection on the book and thoughts around future policy directions, alongside an acknowledgement that he 'didn't presume to resolve the central cultural policy tension which exists within these two positions' but to provide insights and understandings for the debate going forwards (p.226).

My interest in this book came from my positions not only as a postgraduate researcher in audiences and specifically audience development, but also from almost three decades working in the cultural industries. My career began at the same time audience development emerged and I therefore personally experienced the continued contested and confused position that audience development has held within the industry. A policy / process that emerged in a pre-digital era where there was no clear means of collecting together the many documents, books and conferences that occurred in the industry meant some of that information was lost. This book attempts to pull together what remains of these scattered physical pieces of evidence and combines them with personal accounts from many of the practitioners who were involved, to create a narrative and analysis that has, to date, been missing. Hadley also effectively utilises Bevir and Rhodes (2002) dilemmas and traditions, and their principle that people act on their own beliefs and preferences (Hadley, 2021, p.14) to illuminate his argument as to how audience development developed as it did. He is successful in his aim of not seeking to explain what audience development is, but rather to gain an 'empathetic understanding of *why* the research participants believe audience development is as it is' (p.11, emphasis author's own).

This book successfully combines wide ranging and often conflicting data from a variety of sources and presents it in a carefully structured argument that fills an important gap in the understanding of the evolution of audience development. However, the breadth of themes he covers - product versus market led perspectives, arts marketing versus audience development, process versus practice versus policy means that none is fully developed. I would also have liked clarity on more specific timings of the interventions the interviewees cover; the events discussed took place over three decades, for example, and a clearer picture of what happened when would have aided this

analysis. In addition, Hadley successfully examines policy direction and ideological disagreements around audience development, and yet still leaves me wondering where the actual audience are placed within these conceptual differences- as one of his interviewees states: 'The audience has largely ignored audience development I would contend. And continued to do the things it likes' (p.162). However, the use of primary sources alongside the breadth of themes he brings together within the umbrella term audience development does open up new spaces for research.

On balance, while Hadley's book left me with more questions than it answers, it without doubt re-opens the policy and practice debate around the form and function of audience development, it also fills an important gap in its history. It is useful not only for research into the cultural industries but also for those currently working in arts management - whether policy makers, as a cautionary tale, or those in the cultural management elite, who are still wrestling with the function of audience development, whether they specialise in marketing, engagement or communications. With a clearer understanding of what happened and why, we can make better choices going forward which may ultimately move audience development out of its ontological stasis and functional ambiguity and start to address the ongoing discussion around its perceived failure.

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