



MONITORS OF CULTURE: TOWARDS RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE FUTURE ROLE OF CULTURAL OBSERVATORIES IN EUROPE

By putting forward this document, the *Monitors of Culture* (MOC) Policy Grouping wishes to **highlight the future needs and challenges faced by cultural observatories throughout Europe**. The importance of these institutions, in all their various shapes and sizes, should not be underestimated in light of their increasingly important role in influencing policy making on the European stage, particularly on the regional level.

This paper provides the **framework for recommendations**, which will be scrutinised and discussed at length over the two-day Think Tank in Bilbao, September 8th and 9th, 2010. The prominent scholars and experts who attend the Think Tank will provide final input to this document before being published within a book and disseminated internationally among the most representative experts in the field in order to gather their contribution as well. In addition, it will be presented at many relevant cultural policy events in Europe.¹ However, it should be noted that this document is the product of a much longer process which included an extensive research survey conducted by MOC (SaCO), the collective contributions of experts in the field and several deliberative working meetings (Brussels, Bologna) with the partners of the project.² The final publication, endorsed by the Think Tank delegates, will stimulate and push forward the debate about how best to monitor and observe culture in order to foster a knowledge based society, built on cultural diversity and intercultural dialogue integral to human development in each region.

"Tolerance, inter-dialogue and respect for diversity are more essential than ever in a world where peoples are becoming more and more closely interconnected."

- Kofi Annan

BACKGROUND

At the very beginning in Split, Croatia, in March 2008, the original members of the ENCATC working group agreed that their task lay in **promoting the role, essence and nature of cultural observatories**; to assist in training and education to capitalise cultural observatories; and to support the system of cultural policies in order to achieve the highest cultural development.

In 2009 the University of Deusto took the opportunity to enhance the ENCATC working group's remit by applying to the Policy Grouping call under the EU's Culture Programme

¹ The planned publication date is October 2010

² Partner institutions include: Institute of Leisure Studies, University of Deusto, (ES); Budapest Observatory (HU), ATER Fondazione (IT), and the Observatoire des Politiques Culturelles (BE).

(2007-2013). The fundamental nature of the ENCATC working group is continued under the MOC Policy Grouping, which consists of academics, researchers and cultural observatories with a vested interest in the future role of cultural observatories throughout Europe and beyond. They endeavour to offer a more precise framework for discussion and exchange of best practices in order to improve the design and the evaluation of culture policies in Europe, mainly at a regional level.

‘CULTURE’ AND ‘OBSERVATION’

Suffice to say that ‘culture’ as a concept is very good at eluding a narrow definition. “It can refer to the fine arts, including a variety of works of art, cultural goods and services. ‘Culture’ also has an anthropological meaning. It is the basis for a symbolic world of meanings, beliefs, values, traditions which are expressed in language, art, religion and myths. As such, it plays **a fundamental role in human development** and in the complex fabric of the identities and habits of individuals and communities.”³

The complexity of ‘observation’ or ‘observatory’ is relatively simple by comparison, mainly involving the recognition and reflection of a given situation. However, combine the two into ‘cultural observatory’, and the meaning compounds itself to create an institution “responsible for facilitating the transfer and access to information and knowledge in order to support the decision making process in the cultural field through information systems.”⁴

There are many institutions that offer a variation of this definition. The three main target groups of cultural observatories consist of public, private and non-profit sector. Although there are commonalities between these three sectors, each one implies different funding situations as well as accountability to the public. When assessing how observatories should be included in the survey, the main difficulty was in creating a border between those included and those excluded. In some cases, institutions and agencies such as universities or private consultancies could be said to ‘observe’ in terms of their support for the decision-making process and involvement in the cultural landscape. That said, they may not have fulfilled the set criteria of an ‘observatory’ because of their mode of dissemination.⁵ It is important to note that many institutions responsible for observing as such, are not labelled ‘observatories’ and vice versa.

It is also important to note that this document by no means aims to provide the final word on how a cultural observatory should look or act, as this depends on the national context and many other factors. It endeavours to illuminate a model or ideal that can be aspired to and reflected upon. The MOC Policy Grouping is open to discussion about other rubrics, typologies, or models and looks forward to the ensuing debate.

³ EU Commission Report “On a European agenda for culture in a globalizing world” 10 May 2007; <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/LexUriServ/LexUriServ.do?uri=COM:2007:0242:FIN:EN:HTML>

⁴ As published in Cristina Ortega’s book, ‘Observatorios Culturales’, and agreed by MOC Policy Grouping

⁵ The inclusion criteria is available at www.monitorsofculture.deusto.es/

CULTURAL OBSERVATORIES ACROSS EUROPE

The recent survey conducted by MOC, *State of the Art of Cultural Observatories (SaCO)*, identified 103 cultural observatories, of which 73 were included as currently functional cultural observatories across Europe. The survey gathered specific information about each one regarding their legal status, services offered, dissemination practices, priority fields of work, amongst other variables that could lead to an improved framework for discussion and possibly the creation of a common approach methodology.⁶

Three main conclusions can be drawn from the SaCO results:

1. The capacity for cultural observatories to form strong networks and collaborative research projects should be enlarged. Many observatories cited this desire in the section detailing their aims and functions. With the limited resources available to many observatories, creating synergies to address common problems would significantly increase efficiency and communication.
2. Cultural observatories form a varied, but powerful resource of information and knowledge for society and human development. The SaCO survey shows that 88% of them disseminated their work in the form of books, journals or stable reports and 73% had their own website or blog. However, the use of tools like Facebook and Twitter isn't properly harnessed, with only 11% and 4% usage, respectively.
3. Although something to look forward to in the future, the survey reiterated the difficulty in creating a common approach for cultural observatories in Europe. Many observatories share similar objectives, but because of the local circumstances and peculiarities across Europe, parallel approaches are difficult to categorize.

The SaCO survey has provided a strong starting point from which more questions can be posed and future studies launched. The following frames of recommendations were inspired by the results of the survey combined with expert opinions gathered at the working meeting in Bologna.

AS REGARDS THE FUTURE ROLE OF CULTURAL OBSERVATORIES IN EUROPE, THE ISSUES AT THE HEART OF THE DISCUSSION ARE:

» ACCESS

Cultural is as much about creating as it is about distributing. Knowing how the public gain access to culture is parallel to understanding the making of the cultural landscape. How an event is marketed will decide whether a given public feels like they are accessing knowledge or are being inundated with information. Further studies into the 'missing audience' should be undertaken to understand public conceptions of culture.

⁶ For full details of the SaCO Report visit, www.monitorsofculture.deusto.es/

» SCOPE

The variance in scope amongst cultural observatories is vast. 42% of observatories surveyed in SaCO claimed an international scope, but how much does their final product reflect that statement? In many ways this issue is related to the funding bodies involved and what they ask for, regardless of where they are from. However, the 'range' in which they act as a cultural observatory should be related or contrasted to their final products and their own discourse of scope.

» APPROACH

For the most part, cultural observatories can be said to embrace a quantitative approach in their research and reporting methods. Although undeniably valuable, quantitative data fails to address the subjective experience of culture. How can we assess the intangible feelings which make a person choose to go or not to a given cultural event? What happens at a three-day festival? Despite the difficulty in measuring such variables, the assessment of these could very much increase the ability of cultural institutions to gain audiences.

» CONNECTION

The way in which a cultural observatory connects itself to the local or national landscape is of paramount importance. The SaCO showed that 54% of observatories are publicly funded which means they are linked to a government body in some way. In this situation, should they simply fulfil the task of a passive observer or should they inform and form opinion?

» VISIBILITY

The recently undertaken SaCO has a mild bias towards the observatories located in Italy and Spain. Eastern European countries are highly unrepresented, which isn't to say they aren't in existence. The possibility that other organisms are in charge of cultural observation is likely. In light of this fact, the goal is to reach a more balanced view of all observatories. Knowledge of cultural observatories not listed would be welcomed.

» INDICATORS

The so-called 'Holy Grail' of the cultural discipline is indicators.⁷ There are a wide variety harnessed by observatories and they are used with varying weight according to the type of observatory in question. Better collection of statistical indicators will allow better comparative studies to be done - ideas and debate about what these should be are very much welcomed. We are keen to make distinction between result (can be observed immediately) and impact (can be observed many years after).

» TYPOLOGIES

The cultural sector is primarily constituted of small institutions with project based or erratic funding. Many of them have interests, which reflect the funding bodies interest (regional or national) for that particular time. Therefore it is difficult to place observatories into typologies without conducting deeper

⁷ As referred by Peter Inkei in his report from the Buda Castle Retreat.

research into the relations between their area, funding source, chosen field and disseminated products.

» EVALUATION

There is a constant need in the cultural sector to have assessments done in order to evaluate the need for further funding or subsidies. It can sometimes seem a 'zero-sum game' because of how often one sector is funded at the loss of another. This also draws attention to how some sectors have more intangible value than others. The goal should not be to maximize subsidies, but to minimize the difference between previous year's subsidy and the following and to overcome the idea that the amount received symbolises the "approval from the Prince, or the King". This can lead to less innovation in certain sectors because of the perceived threat to foundational funding.

Moreover, it is difficult to talk about evaluation on a European level because national realities are so diverse and the same work is being done differently by different stakeholders. That said, qualitative tools should be developed which can handle this diversity and the intangible nature of some experiences.

» HARMONISATION

The ever-growing number of cultural networks circulating Europe is creating powerful transnational synergies. However, networks are only as strong as the information and knowledge that they share. While there will always be transnational difference in how cultural issues are approached, homogenous data collection would provide a better foundation from which information could be transferred into knowledge.

» ANOMALIES

Certain anomalies were discussed in Bologna that deserve to be addressed; there is no criteria for heritage, and therefore no evaluation possible, why? Some observatories have too many goals, some of which conflict; nearly 100% of subsidies are money – why not infrastructure such as pedestrian area? To address these issues would help alleviate some confusion surrounding cultural observatories' role in society.

» OBSTACLES

Obstacles to the access of culture can be material (parking places, kindergarten), economic (perceived value vs. actual cost) or cognitive (culture is heavy/boring). Both dimensions (objective, subjective) have to be analyzed at the same time in order to get an accurate picture.

» FRAMEWORK

Is it possible or desirable to analyse movies, opera and heritage with the same approach? There is currently no common methodology for many reasons. What should be endeavoured is an evaluation matrix, which would include different degrees of correlation between indicators.

CONCLUSIONS

Only by monitoring and comparing the variables at work and methods of implementation individual to each region (and those held in common across borders) is it possible to elaborate informed policy decisions. This is paramount to the public understanding of culture. TO BE CONTINUED...