

Creating Data Publics

Decision-making with Data Publics



Image: Creative Publics: Tara Mahoney (2015)



Introduction

Image: CERi: Community Engaged
Research Initiative (2023)

Creating Data Publics explores projects from Canada and the United Kingdom (UK) where citizens interact with data through creative and cultural methods to understand and build relationships with place.

As decision-making structures for local, regional and national governments increasingly prioritise data and evidence as resources for governance, a critical challenge facing democracies becomes the creation of public spaces in which these data can be considered and debated to enable equitable and effective governance systems. We frame this challenge as a question of creating data publics – publics that are not only constituted by self-interest or shared identities but forged through citizens' creative participatory engagement with data.

The Creating Data Publics for Governance project was funded as a Knowledge Mobilisation Grant by the UK Research Innovation (UKRI) Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) and Economic and Social Research Council (UKRI1806) and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC 872-2024-1004) under the 'Synthesising research on envisioning governance systems that work' scheme.

This brief focuses on decision-making and is directed towards national, regional and local government. It sits alongside the complementary Creating Data Publics brief on creative and cultural methods.



This brief includes and references materials from the *Creating Data Publics* online resource available from: creatingdatapublics.soton.ac.uk

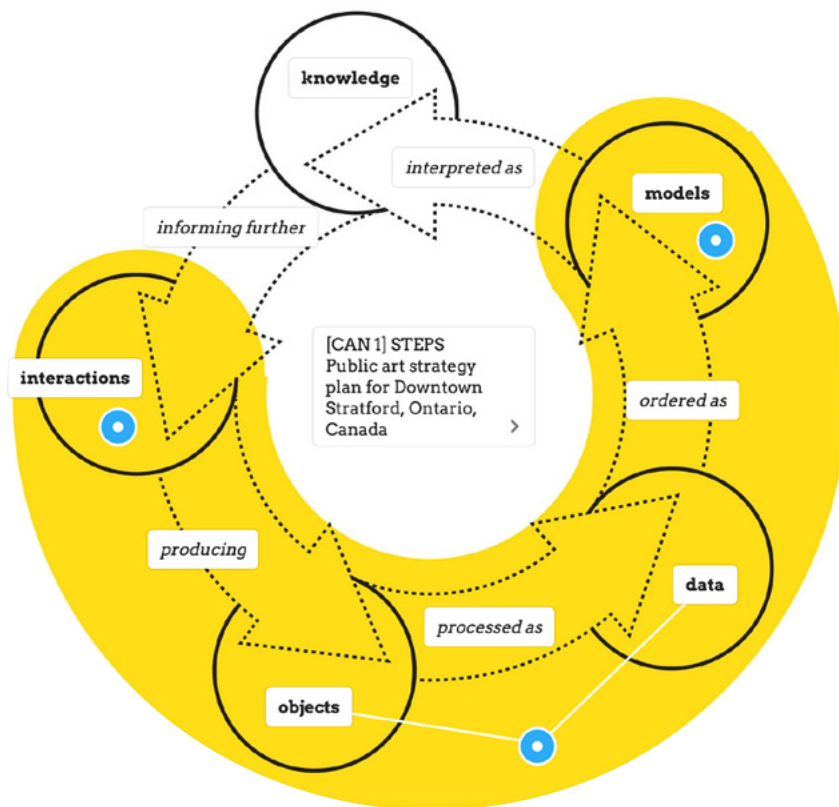
Background *and Context*

How data are created, by whom, and to what end are key points of struggle over how publics are created, by whom, and to what end. To help us examine how different groups of people come together to create data publics through creative practices we explore different frameworks.

Philosopher of Science Sabina Leonelli (2015: 817) defines data as a “relational category” in that any set of objects can be called data as long as they meet two requirements:

- (1) it is treated as potential evidence for one or more claims about phenomena and
- (2) it is possible to circulate it among individuals

Drawing on this definition, she demonstrates that if/how certain objects are treated as data depends on the various stages of any process of inquiry which can broadly be characterised as a cyclical journey:



This cyclical journey can be summarised as interactions with the world that produce objects, which are then processed as data, which can in turn be ordered as models representing the world, that are in turn interpreted as knowledge, which then informs how other interactions with the world take place (Leonelli 2019: 24).

According to Leonelli (2019), the strength of this approach is that:

- (a) it does not rely on purely quantitative data and statistical methods as the only legitimate means of creating and sharing data
- (b) it avoids falling into problematic notions of “raw data”
- (c) data become unfixed in that their status may change depending on how they are processed and for what purposes they are used
- (d) it highlights the complex intersections between how people think about data and how their data are created

Figure 1. Data Journey for Canada 1 (Public art strategy for Downtown Stratford, Ontario, Canada) Adapted version of Leonelli’s ‘knowledge cycle’ based on ‘Fig. 9 A cyclical representation of the process of empirical inquiry grounded on the relational approach to data and models (Leonelli, 2019)’

Engaging with Leonelli's relational definition of data, we are interested in exploring how various communities turn to creative and cultural methods — research drawing from methodological traditions of action research (Bradbury-Huang 2015), arts-based research (Ward & Shortt 2020; Mahoney 2022; Mahoney et al. 2021) arts-based pedagogy (Adams & Owens 2021), design thinking (Sanders & Stappers 2019), and critical data studies (Iliadis & Russo 2016; Gray 2025) — to develop creative data publics.

While Leonelli's original definition was applied to scientific disciplines like Biology, we believe this relational definition helps us trace when and how creative and cultural methods are involved in the various stages of data journeys. Just as importantly, it allows us to examine whether, and in what ways, people and matters of concern that are represented as data publics are involved in the various stages of data journeys.

Despite a growing body of literature emphasizing the social value of creative and cultural methods to collectively and critically engage data (for examples, see Klein & D'Ignazio 2020; Gray 2025), much work remains in synthesizing overarching trends to evaluate their value for constituting data publics for governance. We set out to identify how projects built on creative and cultural methods develop interventions.

We developed the Creating Data Publics online resource to help creative practitioners, decision-makers, and researchers understand how creative and cultural methods are used in mean-making.

This includes steps to:

Identify

Identify and share projects ('cases') employing and exploring creative and cultural methods.

Visualise

Visualise each case using the stages and arrows of Leonelli's (2019) knowledge cycle.

Summarise

Summarise the different UK and Canadian projects ('cases') and bring them together so that they can be searched and thematically grouped. Cases can be searched using keywords for the creative and cultural methods. Collections are thematic groupings which bring together the cases (e.g., similarities in who originates and steers the project).

“We set out to identify how projects built on creative and cultural methods develop interventions.”

Decision-making: *Cases and Collections*

31 projects

We identified and analysed 31 projects ('cases') from the UK and Canada.

These projects were selected at the meeting point of creative and cultural methods and citizen participation in place-based decision-making. We used national umbrella organisations, initiatives and networks to find specific projects in which we could examine the role that data publics play in place-based decision-making:

- **UK: AHRC Place Programme; Plus Tate Network; Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities**
- **Canada: A Vision for Cultural Hubs and Districts in Canada; Creative City Network of Canada; Evaluation of the Building Communities Through Arts and Heritage Program 2015-2016 to 2020-2021**

The Creating Data Publics online resource shares our analysis, identifying which creative and cultural methods feature in the cases and at which points in the knowledge cycle. To explore the diversity of methods and enable comparison between cases, these methods were listed as **keywords** (see Creating Data Publics: Civic Organisations and Creative and Cultural Methods). We then developed the ideas of collections to thematically explore and connect aspects of the cases. The goal for the online resource going forward is that anyone can (1) add more cases and/or (2) undertake their own thematic analysis and share these as a collection.

To start, we identified one thematic collection titled 'Beginnings: Motives and Approaches', which is about the motives and approaches involved in the initiation of the project. Our thematic analysis of the current 31 cases resulted in the following typology:

Prescriptive data publics

This formation of data publics is achieved through datafication processes often prescribed by governmental agencies and/or third sectors that construct publics in and out of digital data flows. Limited active civic engagements of individuals are involved in the data collection, production, and representation.

Local data publics

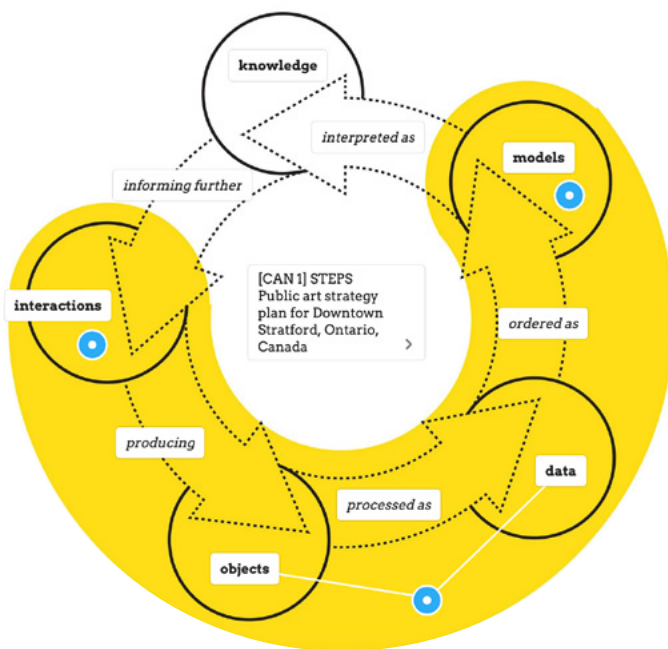
This formation of data publics is grounded in the local and is often initiated by local residents, community groups, property and business owners, Business Improvement Areas (BIA)/Business Improvement Districts, etc., for the purpose of improving their shared place. This community-led approach welcomes and invites local individuals to see themselves as civic public actors engaged in shaping local place-making.

Participatory data publics

This formation of data publics is often led by third-sector/publicly-funded organizations and it welcomes individuals and/or community groups to participate in their data publics programs. Participants are involved in some degree of the data collection, production, and representation processes of data publics configuration.

Counter-data publics

This formation of data publics entails a response to correct misrepresentative data and enables disadvantaged and underrepresented communities to reclaim political power in configuring their own data publics. It emphasizes the strategic use of data to benefit the political and social emancipation of communities in counter to data misrepresentation and prescriptive data publics.



Data Journey for Canada case 1
(STEPS Public art strategy plan for
Downtown Stratford, Ontario, Canada)

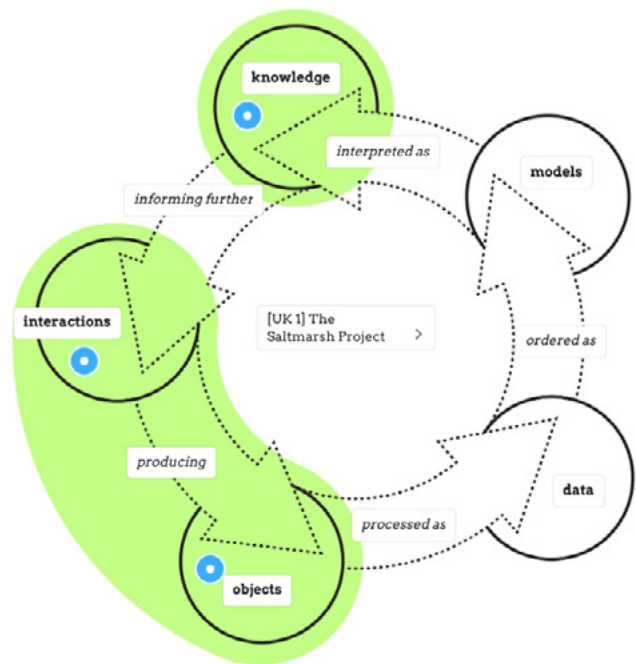
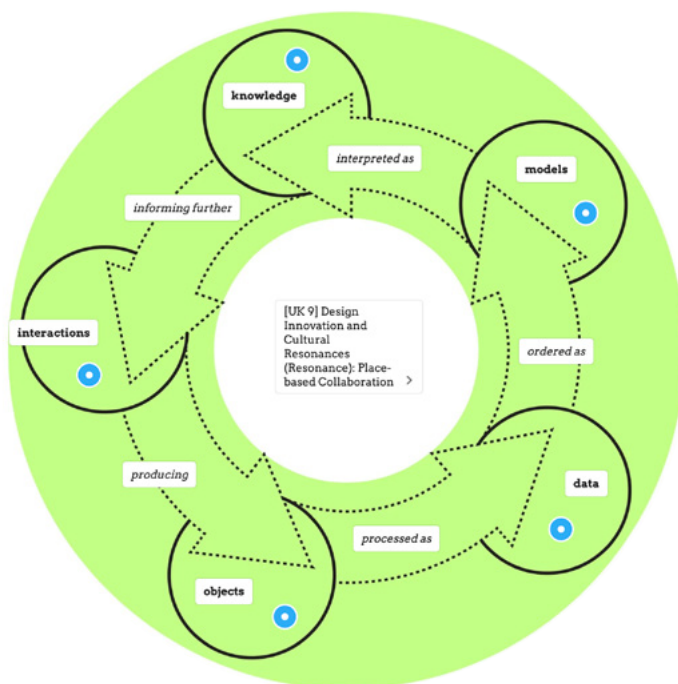


Figure 3. Data Journey for UK case 1
(Saltmarsh Project)



**Figure 4. Data Journey for UK case 9 (Design
Innovation and Cultural Resonances (Resonance):
Place-based Collaboration)**



Futures *Forum*

In our Futures Forum knowledge mobilization event, we brought together researchers, policymakers, and civic organizations from the UK and Canada to discuss whether data generated through cultural and creative and cultural methods can inform decision-making. Our approach was shaped by the **Futures Forum Toolkit** developed by the Policy Impact Unit at University College London.

As governmental decision-making structures increasingly prioritise data as a key resource for governance, how to foster trust, understanding, and engagement in the processes of data generation becomes a key question. Our participants shared their experiences and takes on working with the people and communities in placemaking through creative and cultural methods.

From Canada:

- Prof. Stuart Poyntz (Scientific Director - Community Engaged Research Initiative; School of Communication, Simon Fraser University)
- Vincent Tom (Manager, Community Learning & Engagement; Vancouver Foundation)
- Sara Diamond (President Emeritus; OCAD University)
- Rainbow Roberts (Executive Director; BC Alliance for Arts + Culture)

From United Kingdom:

- Professor Nicky Marsh (Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities, University of Southampton)
- Millie Behrens (Strategy & Policy Lead - Place & Local Growth; Corporate Strategy, Department of Culture, Media and Sport)
- Julia Costa Carneiro (Research Lead; Knowle West Media Centre)



Image: CERi: Community Engaged Research Initiative (2023)



Images: Creative Publics: Tara Mahoney (2015)

The full summary is available from the Creating Data Publics online resource. The following summarizes some of the discussion from the Futures Forum in relation to creative and cultural methods.

- Policy-based planning processes should focus on working with the people and collaborating with residents and potential residents. This includes examining how the concept of placemaking and associated resources can be (re) considered for indigenous peoples. For example, planning processes and reflecting on the responsibility of placemaking/shaping/keeping in the longer trajectories.
- Despite their significance for civic life, methods for data collection and analysis can be opaque. Prescriptive data collection is problematic in placemaking because the vision and placemaking plans designed by authorities based on such data do not reflect the needs and experiences of local groups. Closely linked to this is the challenge that minoritised groups are not enabled to engage in decision-making.
- Cultural and creative interventions in the processes that generate data can be a powerful methodology to enrich human connections and engagements in placemaking. Creative and cultural methods such as community walks, storytelling, sound listening and deep listening can be used to build mutual understanding and grounding with the communities.
- At times of intersecting global crises affecting communities and places, the language of polycrisis is significant for understanding crises not as isolated and linear events, but as intertwined and tangled situations. It allows researchers and communities to move around different polarized views and develop shared understandings.

Findings and *Insights*

The following reflects on the process of knowledge synthesis and shares the findings and insights that emerged.

Cross-country variations in organisations and policy

We used national umbrella organisations, initiatives and networks to find specific projects in which we could examine the role that data publics play in place-based decision making. These reference points enabled us to find highly relevant projects. In turn, we identified in the UK and Canadian national settings considerable variety in national and regional policy drivers and in networking structures for place-based projects and organisations.

Cases and collections approach

Through our knowledge synthesis we identified the need to, firstly, introduce and outline place-based projects via the Leonelli knowledge cycle and creative and cultural methods employed

and, secondly, make links and draw comparisons. We developed the cases and collections approach to knowledge synthesis and mobilisation and then used the Futures Forum to reflect on this with researchers, policymakers and civic organisations. Each case is an interactive visualisation searchable for creative and cultural methods. The collections are thematic groupings which bring together the cases.

The ‘beginnings: motives and approaches’ collection

The collections approach enabled us to draw comparisons across the 31 UK and Canadian place-based projects (‘cases’) employing creative and cultural methods. We identified a typology of data publics which critically examines who originates and steers projects: prescriptive; local; participatory; counter.

Implications

The following suggestions and implications from the project are relevant for researchers, policymakers, and civic organizations.

National networks and connecting projects and cases (UK)

The value of national umbrella organisations, initiatives and networks to sharing practices and reflections. The Creative Data Publics online resource advances this by: (1) synthesizing insights from multiple umbrella organisations, initiatives and networks; (2) drawing connections across umbrella organisations, initiatives and networks in different countries; (3) creating opportunities for “crowd” collaboration with users able to suggest cases and create collections.

Indigenous knowledges (Canada) and local/community and devolution contexts (UK & Canada)

What constitutes “place” relies heavily on the lived experiences and culture of communities/nations that inhabit it. The temporal and spatial scales that define place can vary wildly. For example, First Nations might consider impact on place at a temporal scale of generations rather than years. The role that data can play in constituting publics should be contingent on how data are meaningfully connected with lived experiences.

References

Adams, J., & Owens, A. (Eds.). (2021). *Beyond Text: Learning Through Arts-Based Research*. Intellect Limited.

Bradbury, H., & Bradbury-Huang, H. (2015). *The SAGE Handbook of Action Research* (3rd edition). Sage Publications.

Gray, J. W. Y. (2025). *Public Data Cultures*. Polity.

Iliadis, A., & Russo, F. (2016). Critical data studies: An introduction. *Big Data & Society*, 3(2), 2053951716674238. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/2053951716674238>

Klein, L. F., & D'Ignazio, C. (2020). *Data Feminism*. MIT Press.

Leonelli, S. (2019). What distinguishes data from models? *European Journal for Philosophy of Science*, 9(2), 22. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s13194-018-0246-0>

Mahoney, T., Lesage, F., & Zuurbier, P. (2021). Investigating politics through artistic practices: Affect resonance of creative publics. *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 24(2), 567–588. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367549419839877>

Mahoney, T. (2022). *Public Policy Collage*. [Zine] Vancouver: Community-Engaged Research Initiative, Simon Fraser University.

Policy Impact Unit (2024) *Futures Forum Toolkit*. Available from: https://www.ucl.ac.uk/engineering/sites/engineering/files/futures_forum_toolkit_07.2024_0.pdf

Sanders, E. B.-N., & Stappers, P. J. (2019). *Convivial Toolbox: Generative research for the front end of design*. BIS; Publishers Group UK distributor.

Ward, J., & Shortt, H. (Eds.). (2020). *Using Arts-based Research Methods: Creative Approaches for Researching Business, Organisation and Humanities*. Springer International Publishing. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-33069-9>

Project Team

Professor Daniel Ashton

University of Southampton
d.k.ashton@soton.ac.uk

Dr. Frédéric Lesage

Simon Fraser University
Flesage@sfu.ca

Xiaosu Li

Simon Fraser University

Shafira Vidyamaharani

Simon Fraser University

Please cite as:

Ashton, D., Lesage, F., Li, X., & Vidyamaharani, S. (2026). *Creating Data Publics: Decision-making with Data Publics* [Policy Brief]. University of Southampton & Simon Fraser University. <https://doi.org/10.48410/58ng-2371>

Universities

United Kingdom



Canada



Research Institutes & Labs

United Kingdom



Canada



Funders

United Kingdom



Canada



Social Sciences and Humanities
Research Council of Canada

Conseil de recherches en
sciences humaines du Canada

