

Creating Data Publics

Civic Organisations and Creative and Cultural Methods

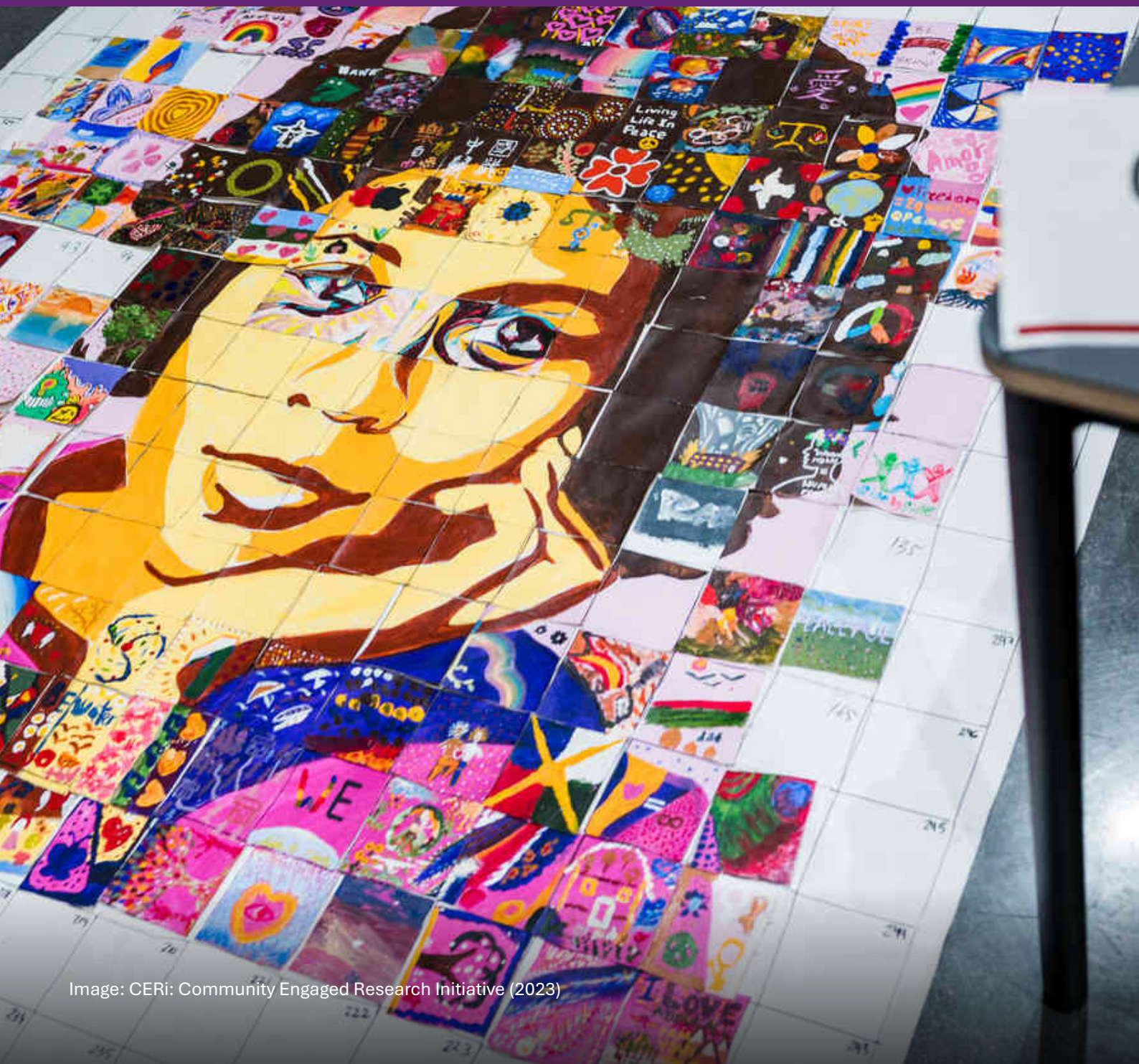


Image: CERi: Community Engaged Research Initiative (2023)



Image: CERi: Community Engaged Research Initiative (2022)

Introduction

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 creative and cultural methods and is directed towards civic and arts and cultural organisations. It sits alongside the complementary Creating Data Publics brief on decision-making.



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

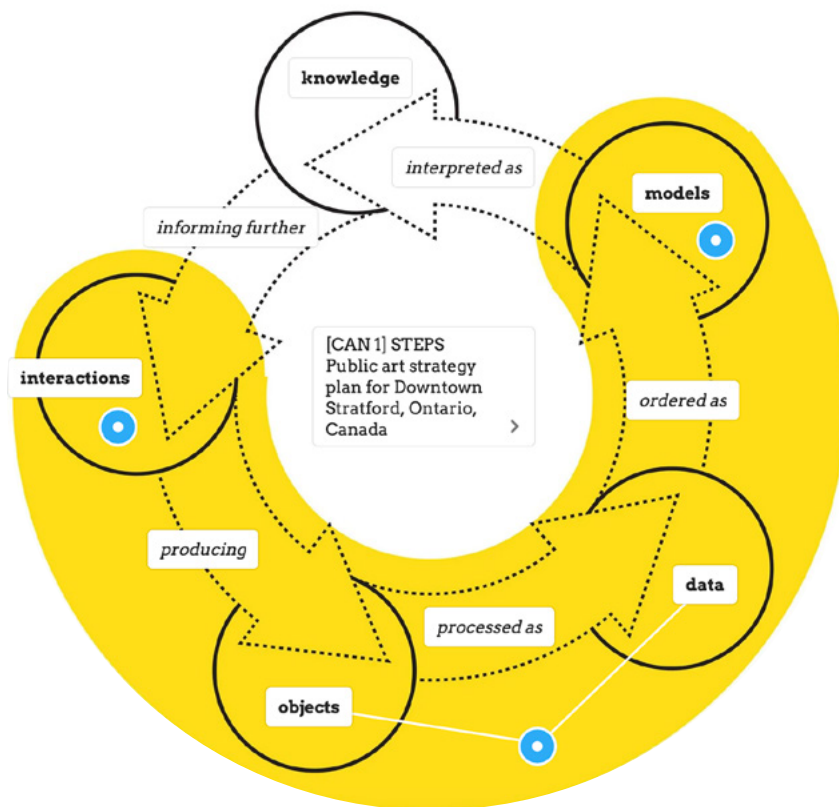
Background *and Context*

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 if 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 who are presented as data publics (publics being the phenomenon constituted through data) 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 meaning-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.”



Image: Michael Howcroft

Creative and cultural methods:

Cases and Keywords

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 page 6 below). 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.

In our analysis of the cases, we captured the keywords of creative and cultural methods and creative pieces used in the processes of data cycle - interactions, objects, data, models, and knowledge. These keywords not only include the creative and cultural methods and approaches used, such as activity station, but also the creative pieces (objects or data), such as mural and installation.

By doing so, we aim to pinpoint the specificity of how these projects apply creative and cultural methods in their engagement with citizens or residents, and what creative pieces are produced throughout the processes.

The keywords that we identified are listed here:

Activity Station	Mapping
Artist-in-residence	Mural
Audio Narrative /	Origami
Soundscape	Painting
Beadwork	Performance-art
Blog	Photography
Book-sharing	Play
Citizen Jury	Poetry
Collage	Pop-up Event
Community Walk/Tour	Probe
Craft	Public Art
Dance	Sculpture
Drawing	Story
Exhibition	Survey
Film / Video	Toolkit / Handbook
Fingerprint	Visualization
Installation	Zine
Interview	

The following example (UK10) illustrates how The Feeling Towns project sought to collaboratively investigate the complex roles that pride, belonging and place attachment play as a matter of concern in local government regeneration strategies. The project included different creative and cultural methods that engaged community members at each stage of the cyclical data journey to provide opportunities for the constitution of a participatory data public (see Creating Data Publics: Decision-making with Data Publics).

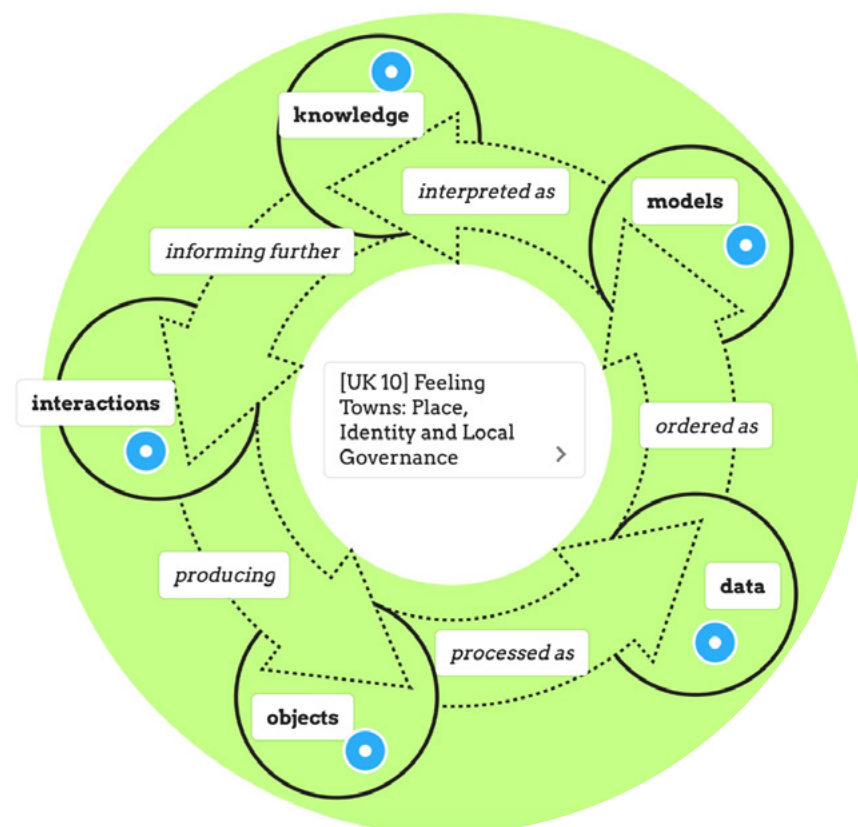


Figure 2. Data Journey for UK 10 (Feeling Towns: Place, Identity and Local Governance)



Image: CERi: Community Engaged Research Initiative (2023)

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)



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.

- Researchers often face the challenge of how citizens can interact with data through creative and cultural methods to understand and build relationships with place. The need to protect the local contexts in the processes of placemaking was greatly emphasized in the discussion. Public sector organisations such as universities and community-led foundations play a pivotal role in strengthening the capacities to mobilise creative and rigorous forms of community-engaged research. It is important to utilize resources and recognize the local conditions to support communities.
- To foster understanding and trust within traumatized communities, researchers must focus on generating publicly recognizable data and creating a place where people think they are listened to.

This means going into the communities and encouraging them to speak about their experiences, engaging with community ambassadors, applying research methods outside of the traditional planning strategies, and generating data that represents the well-being of the people.

- Conduct a holistic and person-centred methodology to engage with communities under crises and connect them with community-based resources. Data collection processes informed by social prescribing methodologies are developed from a humane perspective that embodies the value of a person-centred approach, which focuses on the microclimate, the local places where changes can be seen and the impact of serving the basic needs (food security, mobility, etc.) of the communities.

- Public art features at multiple points across data journeys – as interactions, objects, data, models, and knowledge. We noticed that many projects not only use public art as a way of engaging with the people at the initial stage of the data journey, but also produce and create public art pieces as objects and/or data. Such creative data is often mobilized and ordered into public art models and then interpreted as creative tactics in placemaking.

Findings and *Insights*

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

Place as a focal point for examining data and creative and cultural methods

The development stage for our international partnership was supported by two research institutes - the Community Engaged Research Initiative at Simon Fraser University (Canada) and Southampton Institute for Arts and Humanities at University of Southampton (UK). Their work and insights enabled the focus on “place” to emerge in ways that helped us frame and ensure feasibility for the knowledge synthesis.

Creative and cultural methods across data journeys

Through an academic literature review of data publics and datafication, we identified using Leonelli’s (2019) knowledge cycle to understand that cultural and creative and cultural methods feature at multiple points across place-based projects.

This includes how data are ordered into models representing the world (e.g., visualizations; frameworks), how these models take shape in outputs (e.g., reports; events) and how data are disseminated.

Connecting contexts

Creative and cultural methods can enable communities to maintain and explore their voices and ways of sensemaking in relation to regional, national and international scales and types of decision-making. This ensures that local contexts and concerns remain recognizable as regional, national and international organisations and contexts frame decision-making.

Implications

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

The relationality of data for place-based research

Creative and cultural methods can be used to foster mutual understanding between communities, policy makers, and other stakeholders around place. However, their deployment is not “one size fits all” and requires care and consideration regarding: (1) the extent to which communities shape research design and research implementation; (2) at what stage(s) of the research process these methods are used; (3) who is involved in the analysis and stewardship of the data.

Incorporating creative and cultural methods across the data cycle

Creative and cultural methods can contribute more to the research process than merely inviting engagement for data collection or for creatively disseminating findings. Incorporating them thoughtfully throughout data’s cyclical journey provides more opportunities for community-led input and engagement.

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:

Lesage, F., Ashton, D., Li, X., & Vidyamaharani, S. (2026). *Creating Data Publics: Civic Organisations and Creative and Cultural Methods* [Policy Brief]. Simon Fraser University & University of Southampton.
<https://doi.org/10.48410/rhm6-0c08>

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

