
INFORMATION ON THE MEDIA ARTS

There is a growing body of literature on the media arts—especially since the proliferation of digital or computer art forms. This appendix outlines our search methods, gives an overview of the literature on the media arts, highlights the problems we found in the literature, and elaborates upon suggestions made in the body of the report for improvement.

SEARCH STRATEGY

Given the nature of this literature discussed previously, we used a complex search strategy that employed a wide variety of sources. These sources included literature compiled as part of RAND’s Comprehensive Assessment of the Arts, searches of a variety of computer databases on the arts (including books in and out of print, book reviews, items catalogued by the Library of Congress, conference proceedings, NEA materials, and articles in arts and humanities journals), relevant arts journals, references from other sources, weekly searches of newspapers and periodicals, web sites, and referrals given to us by individuals we interviewed during the course of our research. In reviewing each of these sources, we used a variety of search terms to identify items that were likely to be of interest.

This search process yielded 2,168 items—about 20 percent of which were duplications. We then looked more carefully at abstracts and descriptions of these items to determine which ones were likely to be most useful. This second stage yielded approximately 530 items, which we then reviewed individually. Of these items, approximately 200 were judged to be most useful for our analysis, about 75 of which are included in this report.

CHARACTERISTICS OF THE LITERATURE

As the report notes, the literature on the media arts can be divided into work that was written before the emergence of digital art (around 1990) and work

written since. Before the advent of digital art, the media arts were dominated by film, video, and installation art using film or video. The literature of this period is primarily historical and conceptual in nature. It contains profiles of individual artists and exhibits; histories of the development of these media and the artistic styles and techniques used by film, video, and installation artists; and a wide variety of volumes that provide practical guidance for individual media artists. The literature of the post-digital period is also heavily weighted with reviews of individual artists and their work, discussions of the evolution of digital art forms, and instructional manuals. However, it is more likely to be found on-line, in exhibition catalogues, and embedded in reviews than in books, journals, or scholarly papers.

Considered as a whole, the literature on the media arts has several distinctive features:

- It is much more likely to focus on the individual media arts disciplines than it is to treat the media arts as a distinctive arts genre. As a result, there is a general absence of work that compares and synthesizes what we know about each of the disciplines and what they imply about the media arts as a whole.
- The literature is much more likely to discuss the artistic and aesthetic aspects of the media arts disciplines than it is to examine their organizational features. Thus, much of this work emphasizes the development of particular artistic styles rather than the size and characteristics of the audiences; the employment and background characteristics of media artists; or the number and characteristic of organizations that produce, distribute, and fund the media arts.
- There is very little empirical information available about the media arts, especially in comparison with the data available about the performing, visual, and literary arts. For these art forms, we have such information as rates and frequency of public participation by discipline, the characteristics of participants, the number and earnings of artists, the size and revenues of arts organizations, and their earnings and other sources of funding. No such data exist for the media arts.
- We have described the literature on the media arts as “fugitive.” That is, it is scattered across many types of sources, including newspapers and magazines, academic journals, exhibition catalogues, and on-line sites. Many of these sources may never be recorded in standard bibliographic databases. Moreover, much of this work is classified according to the individual discipline to which it pertains rather than the media arts per se, making it relatively inaccessible to those seeking to compare patterns for the media arts as a whole.

PROBLEMS WITH EXISTING DATA

Indeed, even when data do exist that might otherwise be used to provide empirical information about the media arts, those data are not collected or reported in a form that allows such comparisons. For example, although the Survey of Public Participation in the Arts (SPPA), sponsored by the National Endowment for the Arts, collects a wide range of information about arts participation, including attendance at films and art museums, we cannot use these data to examine participation patterns in the media arts because they employ categories to describe art forms that do not conform to those used in the media arts. The SPPA data on film attendance, for example, do not distinguish among narrative, documentary, and experimental films, nor do they distinguish between independent and commercial films. Thus, the fact that two-thirds of American adults attended a film in the past year does not tell us how many of them attended, for example, independent narrative films, documentaries, or experimental films.

Similarly, although the SPPA contains information on museum attendance, where many media arts pieces are displayed, it contains no information on the objects (e.g., video art, installation art using media) that attendees view. Finally, although the latest version of the SPPA specifically asks respondents about their use of personal computers for the arts, these data cannot relate personal computer usage to involvement in the media arts. For example, the lead question about personal computer usage asks whether respondents used their personal computers to participate in any art form. Although the reported usage (8 percent) is relatively low when compared with attendance at live performances (42 percent), it compares favorably with rates of personal (e.g., “hands-on”) participation in the arts. In addition, about 9 percent of the respondents used their computers to obtain information about events or tickets. Forty percent of all respondents indicated that they used their computers for hobbies (e.g., games, surfing the web), suggesting that personal computers are becoming an increasingly important tool in individuals’ leisure activities (NEA, 1998a).

Similar problems exist in the Population and Economic Census with regard to information collected on artists and arts organizations. The Population Census collects a considerable variety of data on artists, including their education, training, employment, and earnings. However, the categories it uses to sort artists (performing artists, actors, directors, dancers and musicians, visual artists, graphic artists, etc.) fail to identify media artists and thus cannot be used to compare how these characteristics vary either across the media arts or between media artists and other artists. The classification of arts organizations in the Economic Census is somewhat more useful but still too selective to provide a comprehensive description of the arts organizations involved in the production and distribution of the media arts.

As a consequence, we have little empirical information with which to describe the various structural components of the media arts. There is almost no empirical data, for example, on the audiences for the media arts in general—much less how on these audiences might differ across the different forms of the media arts. Similarly, despite the abundance of articles on individual artists in the literature, we know little about how the employment circumstances and backgrounds of these artists vary across the media arts or compare with those of artists in other fields. The same situation exists with regard to information on media arts organizations. For example, although the literature contains information about individual media arts organizations, these studies typically emphasize the particular challenges and histories of specific organizations and cannot be used to draw a profile of the organizational structure of the media arts and how it might differ from other arts genres. Finally, although one finds many references to the need for more funding of the media arts and suggestions for finding existing funding (e.g., Jennings, 2000; NAMAC, 2000), we lack systematic historical information on the amount of funding for the media arts, its sources, or how it may have changed over time.

This situation is understandable given the relative youth and diversity of the media arts. However, it poses a real challenge to a comprehensive assessment of their current state and how the media arts compare with the more established performing and visual arts. Clearly, more attention needs to be devoted to developing common standards for collecting systematic data about the media arts. At a minimum, this effort will require a common definition of the media arts and the ways to classify them. Currently, as noted, the media arts are sometimes defined in terms of the various subdisciplines or artistic approaches used by media artists, other times by the technology used to produce them, and still other times by the different functions they serve. A typical example of this situation is the categories used by the National Endowment for the Arts to report its funding of the media arts. Prior to 1997, the NEA grouped its grants under a media arts category. After 1997, it eliminated the media arts category altogether when it reorganized grantmaking along functional lines (education, preservation, partnerships, etc.). Similar problems exist among media artists themselves, who often fail to agree on the terminology they use to describe their work (Rockefeller Foundation, 2001). This situation makes it almost impossible to develop common standards for collecting and organizing data about them, much less for media artists to view themselves not simply as artists working with film, video, or computers, but also as part of a larger group of media artists.

WHAT CAN BE DONE TO IMPROVE THIS SITUATION?

In the absence of such agreement, however, there are steps that can be taken to improve existing data collection. As we have already noted, current survey data

such as that collected by the NEA in its Survey of Public Participation in the Arts, by the Census Bureau's Population and Economic Census, and in the reporting of organizational data by the IRS, could be made much more useful by changing the categories used to organize and report the data. Funders of the media arts could play a particularly useful role in this process by explicitly recognizing the media arts as a separate category for their grantmaking. This practice would encourage the various categories of media artists to recognize that their work falls within the larger media arts genre. In addition, a host of institutions, such as museums, film festivals, and funders, regularly collect information on such aspects of the media arts as attendance, number of films reviewed or exhibited, or dollars spent. By using a common set of standards to define the information they collect and report, these organizations could provide a useful source of information on the media arts.

