Creating an AI policy toolkit with Arts Council England

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**James Akers:** Welcome to this episode of the Digital Culture Podcast. I'm James, one of the Tech Champions at the Digital Culture Network. I am a white man with brown hair. I'm in my blue room in Preston and I'm wearing a light pink t-shirt.

Today we're doing a slightly different episode. Instead of interviewing another Tech Champion, we're speaking to Arts Council England and the process they went through to develop an AI policy and a toolkit for others to use. My guests today are Owen Hopkin from Arts Council England and Dr. Oonagh Murphy from Goldsmiths.

**Owen Hopkin:** Thanks very much, James. my name's Owen Hopkin. I'm the Director of New Technologies, and innovation at Arts Council England. I do lots of things, for Arts Council England, one of which, is, working very closely with Oonagh, on the AI work, at ACE.

But I'm also, the responsible director and set up the Digital Culture Network, which I'm obviously very, very proud of. I'm a white man, with dark brown hair and I'm sat in my living room, with white walls and I'm wearing a black hooded top.

**Oonagh Murphy:** Hey, I'm Oonagh Murphy. I'm a white woman, with glasses wearing a black and white stripe top today. and I'm a senior lecturer in Digital Culture and Society at Goldsmith University in London. And I'm also a fellow at the Allen Touring Institute. And for the last 14 months or so, I've been, Embedded at Arts Council England as a bridging responsible AI divides fellow.

**James Akers:** Fantastic. It's brilliant to have you both on the podcast today, and we're gonna talk about the whole process of developing an AI policy and a toolkit. So, can we start with what that journey began as and why?

**Owen Hopkin:** I think there was a point around there, 2018, 2019 where we became aware that some organisations were either thinking about it or beginning to use some form of AI. So, we commissioned a bit of research to try and understand who was using it and why were they using it. And at that time, it wasn't as widespread as it is now.

But then COVID happened, we paused that work and then in 2022, at the same time as everyone else started thinking and talking about AI, when Chat GPT 3 launched, we became far more aware of the challenges and opportunities around generative AI and thought that there were three areas that Arts Council needs to make some progress on.

The first was that internal use, so opportunities and challenges of how we might use it as an organisation. Then how arts Council England as a development agency for arts and culture might help the sector use it. and then thirdly, how we influence AI policy, by the government and other sector bodies, and local and national government.

And it was around that time that Oonagh joined us at Arts Council England and that kind of turbo charged everything.

**James Akers:** And Oonagh, was that a special role that you had at Arts Council England?

**Oonagh Murphy:** Yeah, so it's quite a unique role. it's funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council through their program called BRAID, which stands for Bridging Responsible AI Divides. The investment that Arts and Humanities Research Council made in this area sought to embed arts and humanities approaches to systems thinking at this nascent stage of development, for general purpose technology. So essentially their thinking was, what happens if we put arts and humanities perspectives into organisations at this critical juncture of technology adoption? And so, the role is quite unique in that it's, funded externally and Arts Council are essentially a host organisation and so it gave me a semi-independent position where I was embedded, but I was also able to be an external critical friend when needed.

**James Akers:** And can you talk us through the initial steps you took and who was involved in that?

**Oonagh Murphy:** I think when I joined Arts Council, they were at a similar stage to many organisations where they'd read the headlines, they knew that AI was a thing, and they should probably be doing something about it.

So, one of the first things I did was carry out an all staff survey because my sense from informal conversations was actually, it wasn't a near future conversation. It was technology that staff were already using and they were doing so in informal ways, quite often called shadow IT, because there was no established policy or practice in place. And so that staff survey, showed us that, more than a hundred staff members, were already using generative AI technologies in their workflows. And I think that number probably surprised quite a few people in the organisation, but it really focused the mind of exec board to say, okay, this is a current issue this is something that we need to develop policy around.

Both from a values perspective, what is Arts Council comfortable with, why and how might it use these technologies? But also from a legal risk, perspective, particularly thinking around, data protection legislation.

**James Akers:** And it seems there's a lot that you have to consider when approaching a project like this. Were there any particular challenges along the way?

**Oonagh Murphy:** So, I think in terms of, challenges. I would frame it more as a scoping challenge in that I think I was brought into Arts Council, into the New Technologies, and Innovation team for a focused piece of work that was quite limited in remit. As soon as we did the staff survey, it became very apparent that this was an existing organisational challenge that impacted every area of the business. And that really redefined the project to become a bigger piece around digital transformation as opposed to a horizon scanning exercise about what this might mean for the organisation going forward.

**Owen Hopkin:** And I think for me, what was surprising? Well, there were a couple of things actually. One was, one wasn't surprising at all, and the other was, and I think the surprising bit was, we did a 250 or around about that, answered Oonaghs survey, so a hundred came back saying that they used AI. Now you scale that across the organisation, you're talking about 40% of the people potentially using AI tools already. So, I think that was surprising, but what wasn't surprising was. The different opinions and depth of feeling about AI. On the one hand you had people who were really enthusiastic about it and wanted to use it and could see the opportunities, and then others that really just didn't like it, didn't think Art Council England should be using it at all.

And then, on the other sort of axis, some people who didn't care at all and some people who really cared about it, whether that was one way or the other. So that wasn't surprising at all. But as I said, the kind of the proliferation or the use of those tools was, and then also the issues.

One of the things that came back, people were very, conscious of the threat and challenge around intellectual property. But the environmental impacts or footprint of the tools was massive for Arts Council England staff, and that came across really, clearly as well.

**James Akers:** And you talked about interviewing internal staff. Did you also engage with the cultural sector itself?

**Owen Hopkin:** We did, yeah, so that happened over the last six to nine months, driven by various teams across the Arts Council that gave us a steer around what the sector was thinking and what they thought the big challenges and opportunities were.

So that's how the sector fed in. And there was a particularly useful round table run by the visual arts team in London that was useful as well. Plus, I think one of the other really important bits of research that Oonagh did, or one of the important facts that she found was that

since 2018, Arts Council England have funded projects by artists who were interested in experimenting with AI, and the total value of those projects were £3.9 million. We've already funded artists to experiment with it, we could understand, and reach out to these people.

And Onnagh's done that to get some case studies to understand how they were using it in a more constructive way too. So the sector feedback came in through a couple of different routes.

**James Akers:** And that consultation with external people, did that shape the outcome of the project?

**Oonagh Murphy:** So, alongside sector consultation, we also engaged in quite extensive consultation with peer organisations. And my starting point for all of this work was that we should be open and generous and collaborative in our approach because many of the people that interface with Arts Council England also interface with peer organisations.

For me there was no real benefit in the public sector to take a first mover position, or to take a radically different position. So we engaged with, BFI, National Lottery Community Fund, BBC, Heritage Lottery Fund, National Literary Trust, Paul Hamlyn Foundation to really name just a few, to ensure that we were taking a parallel approach. In some ways we were leading in the sector and in other ways we were learning from peer organisations. And I think that approach to being open and collaborative has been really central to the way that we have, developed the policy.

**Owen Hopkin:** And James, I think the amazing thing about it is how open and generous all of these organisations were with their time. There was a real culture of sharing a real collegiate atmosphere, and I actually thought that some of those, meetings that we had and discussions that we had were among the most enjoyable and exciting, and inspiring parts of the process because everyone was just up for sharing and letting people know where they were. and I hope that's what Arts Council England have done in a small way by publishing all of these things that we've done over the last couple of weeks and months.

**Oonagh Murphy:** Yeah, and a thing that came out of those conversations, and I think also in what we have shared, is nobody has the right answer. There is no right answer. And really everyone's sharing their homework. They're sharing their workings out. And the position that we arrived at with Arts Council England today might be different tomorrow.

And this type of horizon scanning futures based policy work requires the ability to sit with the unknown and to sit with the uncomfortable. Doing that in a community is a lot easier than sticking your head above the parapet. And so, I think all of these conversations, people shared what they were working on and they said, this is what we have at the minute.

We know there's this gap, or we'd like to do more work on this. I think what we learned from peer organisations and what we have tried to do is not to say This is how you do AI policy. Instead what we've said is this is our workings out. This is how we've arrived in AI policy. It's our best guess in an unknown world, and we will listen and it will evolve.

**Owen Hopkin:** James, I think as Oonagh said, no one has the answers, the best possible position you can reach with any kind of AI policy or AI strategy is one based on the organisation's values, because then you can defend it and then you can talk about how you got to the point that you've got to really confidently because you've taken what the organisation stands for and used that to inform what has become and will become a really important part of what we do and a really important policy.

**James Akers:** So, you've been through that whole process, you've interviewed everybody, you've spoken to externals. So, what is it you have now? What is an AI policy?

**Oonagh Murphy:** An AI policy is only ever gonna be as good as it is adopted. And in developing the policy, we tried to take almost a service design approach to it. So, we wanted to think about what are the points at which people engage with this policy, how does it influence their actions and their approach to work.

So, we originally wanted to create a series of guidance notes and we were given the steer from exec board and senior leadership team that actually given the level of adoption that was already present in the organisation. It was very important that we developed a policy because this wasn't guidance, but it was a policy.

And the policy established some red lines around areas of work that Arts Council England employees were not permitted to use these technologies in. It also provided, instruction around areas of work where Arts Council employees could use these technologies. And so in terms of the policy guidance, the primary red line was around grant making processes.

So the decision was made that Arts Council in England, employees couldn't use generative AI technologies or any form of AI technologies in the assessment decision making or outcome reporting of, investments. That was a values led decision. It's not a technical decision. The technology does exist that Arts Council could use AI to assess grants.

But the values based decision was Relationship Managers are discipline experts. That's what they do, and their knowledge is central to the way the organisation works, but also central to the relationship that the organisation has with the sector itself. So that was a clear, definitive line. You cannot use it around these areas.

Then the policy also had some direction around ways that you might be able to use it. For example, drawing up minutes from a meeting or helping create social media posts. But we also realized that the policy might be difficult for some staff to engage with. So we developed a AI risk list, and this is essentially a list of platforms that staff told us they were already using and we reviewed those and colour coded them from green, amber, red. Green, permitted red, not permitted, amber, somewhere in the middle. And so this was a really simple way of showing staff what platforms they could use and what data they could use in those platforms. And that didn't require any technical knowledge.

It simply took a data protection approach. And data protection policy is something that staff were already aware of and comfortable with understanding. Alongside that, we established an AI triage system, and so the approach we've taken in sharing this with staff is here is the policy. Here is what you're permitted to do.

Here are the risk list here are the platforms that you're allowed to use and the context in which you're allowed to use them. The AI triage system is your go-to if you don't know the answer, but you are personally liable for your work. And so if you don't understand the policy or the platform you want to use isn't on the risk list, then if you're an AI expert, great.

As long as you follow the policy, fine. For most of the organisation, you're not gonna be an AI expert. So it's your responsibility to reach out and seek support before you input any information into a platform. And essentially that is because you should not put sensitive data GDPR compliant data into any generative AI platform as your go-to.

This is not Google, this is not search. The information will be retained. There are ways around that, and there's licensing models, but your 1 0 1 on generative AI is if you would not put it on a website, do not put it into generative AI. And so that is the level that we've been working at. we need a really basic explainer for staff that might be inadvertently using these tools, but we also need a policy that will support more ambitious staff that are seeking to engage these tools, in ways that are values led, but also legally compliant.

**Owen Hopkin:** And I think what the policy does or what I sincerely hope the policy does is raise the AI literacy of the organisation too. So in the policy, it explains what generative AI is, it explains the impact that it has, on the environment. It explains the intellectual property issues around it.

And all of this is to just allow staff to understand what they're dealing with, to begin with, and to be able to make a really good judgment right at the start, whether they should be using it or not. And for me, the AI policy, if AI policy, by doing all of that, puts staff off using AI because of the impact or because of how data is being used, or because of any concerns around GDPR.

That's a really positive thing. But I think that's one of the things that the policy needs to do, and I hope is doing at Arts Counsil England as well.

**Oonagh Murphy:** And I think just picking up on that point as well, because my position is externally funded, and I'm not a consultant with something to sell. I've been able to take a really neutral position. So I didn't come to the Arts council and say, Hey, AI is brilliant. I'm probably neutral, critical on a lot of these technologies. And so the policy that we developed was not about driving AI adoption in the organisation.

The policy was about supporting those colleagues who were already engaging in these technologies to do so in a values led and legally compliant way. But it was also about mapping out future approaches to how these technologies might be used in a proactive rather than reactive way. Really creating a foundation of understanding so that when future opportunities, and we know, for example, government is really keen for public sector bodies to use AI technologies more widely. This proactive work means that Arts Council England is now in a really strong position to engage with future opportunities in a way that is not led by hype, but is really embedded into the values approach that the organisation takes to wider work.

**James Akers:** And if someone wanted to follow in your footsteps and develop their own AI policy, what guidance is available for them?

**Oonagh Murphy:** Useful you should ask that question. We've produced a toolkit. So one of the decisions that we made, and we've debated it quite a lot, and I think we stand by it. We might change our mind, but we haven't published the Arts Council policy publicly. And the reason we've done is we don't think it is perfect, and we don't think it is a definitive AI policy. Instead, it reflects a process for an individual organisation, and we don't think you can copy and paste the policy. For us, it is a strategic exercise, so rather than publishing a definitive policy that anyone can copy, instead, what we wanted to do was to share the approach that we took to develop the policy. So instead we created a toolkit which really outlines the questioning process that we went through as an organisation. And we created a publication, which documents the journey in detail. It's a report that really is designed for senior leadership teams, exec board members at public sector organisations, civil service, but also we think is useful for, cultural organisations. Alongside that detailed report, we've created a series of worksheets and they are your step-by-step guide of how to start this work in your organisation.

We don't think you should have an AI policy that you've downloaded from the internet. Instead, we think you should start by asking the question of your staff, what AI tools are you using? What are you interested in using? Develop policy that responds to the need in your organisation. The next worksheet focuses on internal stakeholder mapping, and that's really about understanding who's invested in this work? Who takes issues with this work? For us, one of the most useful conversations we had in developing the policy was with the union at Arts Council England, who really wanted us to push the environmental responsibility aspects of the policy, more highly. The next worksheet focuses on developing an AI policy, and that's really the mechanics of what do you want this policy to do?

Who should it speak to? Where are the values lines, and where are the legally compliant issues that you need to address? The next worksheet is a process map on developing a risk list. So again, this idea of helping staff to use these technologies, understanding what tools they're using and analysing them from a risk perspective.

The toolkit also features a series of worksheets that really are focused around developing AI pilot projects. So really taking an R and D approach to the use of these technologies in your organisation as well.

**James Akers:** And where can people use this? Is it available online?

**Owen Hopkin:** It is available online, it's on the Arts Council website, it's all there the report that Oonagh mentioned, as well as the worksheets and resources too.

**James Akers:** Fantastic. And how do you imagine this being used by cultural organisations?

**Owen Hopkin:** Hopefully in the way that Oonagh's described. I think what's great about some of the resources that are there is that, it's shown Arts Council England's journey and obviously we've been on a slightly different journey because the organisation is kinda different to lots of organisations in the cultural sector.

It has different, data processing, obligations. It's a different type of organisation. So the values that we have and the needs that we have and the support that our staff need will probably be different to lots of other organisations and individuals. But I would hope that the principles and the journey that we followed are pretty transferable.

So I would very much hope that people looked at the report and the documents and the resources, and we're able to follow it and get to a point that worked for them, and their organisations, and reflected their values too. And I think what's been amazing is since the publication of all of these documents, the response that it's got from the sector, it's been enormously positive.

And I think for me, what's particularly pleasing is that people have understood it and I think, James, when we talk about the Digital Culture Network, one of the most important things that we try and get away is that, there aren't any daft questions. And when people come to you for cases, it's a space for people to ask questions, find out information, and that's all done in a really collegiate friendly way.

And it's easily understood in skill areas that are sometimes quite difficult to comprehend. And what I'm getting from the feedback is that lots of organisations and individuals feel the same way about the resources that have been published. It isn't intimidating in any way, it's a very straightforward common sense approach. Values led that enable organisations and individuals to get to a point on a subject that's really important and, crucial for how they think about this technology both now and in the future.

**James Akers:** Does the toolkit address any ethical concerns around AI, such as bias, transparency, or data privacy?

**Oonagh Murphy:** Yeah, so the ethical concerns around AI are vast. And the toolkit seeks to start the conversation, but it doesn't provide all the answers. And I think one of the things that I quite often say on repeat is, I'm not an expert, and anyone that tells you they're an expert in AI is trying to sell you something. So the toolkit does not do everything. It will help you to start the conversation. We also know that the values based decisions are very organisation specific, so environmental impact will be of great significance for some organisations and less so for others. But also if we think about ethics, those organisations working with children and young people, their concerns will be very different to organisations that are primarily working with adults when it comes to thinking about AI technologies.

So the toolkit seeks to start the conversation, but really there is real strategic depth required, but also one of the things that we've tried to do in the toolkit. Is they empower people to recognize their own expertise in the demands in which they work. If it's an art form, for example, if you're a curator, your understanding of the work that you commission or a show will be much greater than mine. If you are working with children and young people, your understanding of safeguarding will be much greater. And so recognizing your own domain knowledge and expertise and thinking about how that can be used to understand AI is a much better starting point than the starting point being, oh, AI, we should do something on that.

So actually doing those horizon scanning exercises to think about how AI technologies may impact your own distinct areas of work is really important. I think if we had tried to come out with some type of definitive guide, rather than the positive feedback we've received with our questioning framework, we would've received a lot of feedback about the things that we missed.

Because as we know, the creative and cultural sector is really diverse in the work it does. And what's interesting about the toolkit, I think, is we've designed it so that a small organisation with one or two people will be able to complete every single page of this worksheet. They will probably be able to do it in an hour for a larger national organisation, it may be a six month process because every single worksheet is a consultative exercise. So really, I think in terms of ethics and bias and all of those issues, we haven't sought to address those in this. But very much see that as follow on work, but also work that we really need to engage the sector in because that domain expertise is just so important in this work.

**Owen Hopkin:** And James, I think the first step for us the first version of the policy that we've created, one of the most important things that it does is raise all of these issues so that staff are very aware of them. And I think, when I mentioned or spoke about the need for an AI policy to raise the literacy of the organisation and staff. That's what I'm talking about. In a way, they need to know about all of these issues first, and then once there's a foundation and an awareness of the challenges and opportunities around AI, then you can move on in a far more coherent and logical way to try and fix any or address any if you need to. And as we've said already, we haven't published Arts Council's policy because our take on all of these things because of what we do and how we do it, will be very different to other organisations in the sector.

And again, that's when it all comes down to that values based approach and what the values are for each organisation and how they should be reflected in an approach to AI.

**Oonagh Murphy:** And I think one of the questions that we've had is, how does AI use water? How does my computer use water? And that is, a really important question. And the answer to that is water is used in, in cooling compute systems. and AI technologies use a lot of compute.

And there's big moral concerns around the use of water and natural resources. And these have already been happening quite a lot in the United States, but we're seeing them emerging in the UK.

So one of the things that I've said in many meetings is, if I can teach you why not to use AI then my role is done just as much if I can teach you how to use AI. And so if somebody walks away from this work and says, actually, I'm not gonna generate an image because I don't think that the image I generate is worth the impact on the planet, that's a successful AI policy. So AI policy, I think, in a proactive way should not be about driving AI adoption, but instead it should be about driving responsible engagement with the technologies in a way that's appropriate for you as an individual, but also you as an organisation.

**Owen Hopkin:** And is it a one-off resource or is it gonna evolve over time? I think as Oonagh said, it has to evolve. I think what we found is that we published the resources and the guidance, and everything else that went with it and some of these documents that we've been working on for, nine months, 12 months, now, and by the time you publish them because of the pace of change and how quickly people are adopting technologies and how quickly attitudes are changing that this stuff can quickly go outta date.

So it's got to evolve. But I think the other thing for us at Arts Council England is how we put other resources or other types of help in place, or how we use some of these documents as a foundation to develop programs to help the sector in different ways, better ways, more innovative ways as well.

**James Akers:** So, the toolkit hasn't been out for very long. Have you had any early feedback or impact from National Portfolio Organisations, NPOs, or other organisations using it?

**Owen Hopkin:** Yeah, so Nicola, one of our Social Media Tech Champions forwarded Oonagh and I, an email from a chap called Dan Slee who runs a marketing mailing list. And on it, he describes the documentation and the resources that we've published as being a couch to 5K in terms of AI policies or how to create one.

That was really nice to see, but also the comments that followed Dan's posting on various platforms, seeing the people who picked it up, and were finding it useful. And I think I've seen that in a few different places and getting it as feedback from Relationship Managers too. So it's out there, it's being used and the positive way in which it's been received has been, incredible really.

From an arts council perspective, we're absolutely thrilled with it.

**Oonagh Murphy:** I know two big national museums that have already used the toolkit, for strategic planning, days.

But I've also spoke to a small NPO with five staff that has an AI policy that was very much something they downloaded off the internet and told staff it existed and they said, oh, this makes so much more sense. We already knew we needed to rewrite the policy, but actually we're gonna use the toolkit and we're gonna start with starting the AI conversation and we're gonna build our next policy up from the ground based on what staff are using rather than here's a list of rules that we downloaded from the internet.

So I think that for me, the scalability of the smaller NPO through to these big national organisations, It's really heartening to see, because that's really what we wanted. We wanted this to be a scalable questioning framework.

**Owen Hopkin:** And, we're also hearing the same from other arms length bodies of the government and other public sector bodies that have picked it up. and they're interested in talking to us about it too. So yeah, from the smallest NPO and individuals right through, it's been great.

**James Akers:** I thought I'd ask some questions about the lessons learned as you went through this whole process. Was there anything that you think others should know?

**Owen Hopkin:** The one thing James, that I keep coming back to and keep checking myself just to see if, I actually still believe it. And as of the 22nd of July I do, and that is the an AI policy, or any type of AI guidance is not an IT document, it's an organisational document and it's a document that needs to be informed by what the organisation is doing, how it's doing it, what its values are, and that requires all of the organisation, ideally, to feed in.

And to have the range opinions and emotions about this technology fed into those documents. So I think that's the main thing. It isn't a technical document, it isn't an IT document. It's one that needs to come, from the organisation itself that reflects the organisation and its values.

I think that's one of the biggest things.

**Oonagh Murphy:** Yeah, and I think, for me, I think this is true in Arts Council, but I think it's true for other organisations more widely, artists are really good at helping us to understand what questions we should be asking. Artists are really good at helping us imagine new futures that might be utopian or dystopian.

They're really good at helping us to think about what equitable futures might look like. And in terms of thinking about explainable AI or understanding these technologies, many of the artists working in this space are really challenging some of the big tech paradigms or challenging some of the issues around land and resource.

And so I think I would encourage anyone that's interested in understanding more about AI technologies, don't go and read the newspaper article by a tech bro that is selling a service. Go and look at how artists are engaging with these technologies. And when I say engaging with these technologies, yes, artists that are using these technologies in interesting, critical ways, but also the artists that are engaging with the narratives of these technologies and the impact on society.

Because I think that's a really good place to learn and understand what these technologies are, whether that's their use of water, whether that's use, of questionable employment tactics in data, canters in the global south. for me that wider understanding about the impact of AI technologies on people and planet are better addressed through creative practitioners than the headlines that you're gonna read in newspapers. So yeah, I think as a rule for every dystopian headline you read about AI, Google an artist that's working in this space and you'll find a really good critical balance.

**James Akers:** At the Digital Culture Network, we don't have a Tech Champion specifically for AI. We are seeing it come up in all our different specialist areas. Is that what you're seeing across the sector?

**Oonagh Murphy:** Yeah. It's an entirely pervasive technology and whether the sector or organisations know it or not, they're using AI already because lots of the things in an organisation's tech stack or the platforms we use on a day-to-day basis, whether that's enterprise software or whether it's social media, software or platforms,

**Owen Hopkin:** it all has AI built in. So it's happening whether people know it or not. And I think, again, one of the most important things about a policy or this work, hopefully, is that it raises the literacy of the people who are reading the documents to understand what's happening and what the issues are around this technology and how they might consider that and navigate it.

**James Akers:** It's been fantastic to speak to you both today.

So, thank you to Owen. Thank you very much, James. Lovely to speak to you.

**Owen Hopkin:** And thank you to Oonagh.

**Oonagh Murphy:** Cheers. Thanks for asking us to do this.

**James Akers:** If you do want to find out more about the toolkit, please search online for Arts Council England AI Toolkit, and you can direct any questions to the team there.

The Digital Culture Network is also here to help if you're looking to use AI in any of our specialist areas.