
A NEW APPROACH

Insight research series
Report Three

A VIEW FROM MIDDLE AUSTRALIA: PERCEPTIONS OF ARTS, CULTURE AND CREATIVITY

Acknowledgements

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Previous reports in the Insight Research Series:

1. *The Big Picture: Public expenditure on artistic, cultural and creative activity in Australia*
2. *Transformative: Impacts of Culture and Creativity*

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About A New Approach

A New Approach (ANA) is an independent think tank championing effective investment and return in Australian arts and culture. We aim to foster a more robust discussion about cultural policies, underpinned by good data, informed by shared understandings, and through a non-partisan and independent approach. ANA was established in 2018 with a \$1.65 million commitment by The Myer Foundation, the Tim Fairfax Family Foundation and the Keir Foundation. The Australian Academy of the Humanities is the lead delivery partner for this initiative.

For further information visit www.humanities.org.au/new-approach or contact us via newapproach@humanities.org.au

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Executive Summary

This report, *A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity*, comes at a strange time in Australia's history, when COVID-19 has meant that coming together to experience public culture has become a physical impossibility.

There is an irony to this timing. Just weeks before COVID-19 was declared a pandemic, A New Approach (ANA) commissioned qualitative research to talk about arts and culture with 'middle Australians'—that is, middle-aged, middle income swing voters from suburban and regional Australia. We wanted to know whether they valued arts and culture, made space for it in their lives, thought it was important to their kids and to society, and what they would and would not be willing to lose from the Australian cultural terrain.

They were asked: what would Australia be like *without* arts and cultural activities?

Arts and culture really brings people and whole communities together. Without it, we'd be much more isolated as individuals. That's never a good outcome.
[Male, Townsville]

Without imagination or creativity, life would be horrible, no freedom of expression—it would be a black world, or a white world. No colors or grey.
[Male, Melbourne]

I don't know if this is relevant, but without [arts and culture], it affects our health department and all the things. I think if you don't have cultural—all those sorts of things—people get mental health issues. All of these things make us happier, which is better for our mental health. Without those things, there is a lot more strain on services like that.

[Female, Brisbane]

There would definitely be an increase in drugs here. People would be bored, so that's what they'd turn to...It's a way to immerse yourself in something. I don't know what I'd replace that with.

[Male, Townsville]

You may as well live on Mars.
[Female, Sydney]

Within a few weeks these people, and the rest of us, were living in a version of that Australia; an Australia where the public space for sharing and experiencing arts and cultural activities has shrunk, usually to the size of the screens on our phones, computers or televisions.

The purpose of this report is to explore current attitudes to arts and culture amongst middle Australians, with a particular focus on swinging voters and marginal electorates in suburban and regional areas. The data already shows that Australians are keen consumers of arts and culture; Australian Bureau of Statistics figures show that almost all of us (82.4%) are attending cultural venues and events, and households are spending more than \$25 billion a year on cultural goods and services. In researching the attitudes of middle Australians, our aim is to better inform contemporary discussions about ensuring that Australia's policy settings and public investment are relevant, targeted and effective in the 21st century.

The findings highlight that middle Australians are passionate about the role of arts and culture in their lives. They're selective about what forms of arts and culture they engage with, or even what forms they count in the category of arts and culture, but perhaps not in the ways you might imagine. And they're loath to lose the opportunities that arts and culture create for them, for their families, and for society more broadly.

ANA is releasing a series of reports focused on:

- * investment
- * impacts
- * changes in production, consumption and distribution
- * attitudes
- * ensuring Australia's creative and cultural future.

These are part of our work to champion effective investment and return in arts and culture by governments, individuals, philanthropists and businesses. This, ANA's third Insight Report, is structured as follows:

Part 1 provides the context in which the findings of this report should be read.

Part 2 presents the findings, using the words of middle Australians to describe what arts and culture means in their lives.

Part 3 highlights the implications of these findings and identifies opportunities for change to help build a more inclusive and relevant arts and cultural landscape.

This report provides a window into the living rooms, workplaces and hearts of a group of Australians whose interests feature strongly in much of our political discussion and debate. We hope it provides nuanced insights that can help guide strategic decisions about effective and relevant investment in arts and culture in 21st century Australia.

Summary of findings

Finding 1 Middle Australians consider arts and culture to be essential to the Australian way of life; without them, Australia would be like authoritarian or war-torn nations. The value of arts and culture was expressed through two key themes: 1) creativity, imagination and inspiration; and 2) participation, belonging and community.

Finding 2 Using 'arts and culture' together, rather than 'arts' or 'culture' separately, broadens middle Australians' emotional response and evokes a wider range of imagery. The word 'arts' alone prompts imagery of the high arts, which are seen as elitist and as being more for others [wealthier] people, not them.

Finding 3 Middle Australians directly connect participating in arts and cultural activities with experiencing better mental health, as well as with improved creativity and lateral thinking in the workplace.

Finding 4 Middle Australians believe arts and culture help bring communities together, break down barriers between different groups within society and encourage greater communication. Participating often means opportunities to socialise with friends and family. Consequently, the most valued activities involved attending and participating in local activities, such as festivals, live performances and local libraries.

Finding 5 Middle Australians believe that children develop better when broadly exposed to arts and culture both in and out of school time. Arts and culture help children to: enhance their self-esteem; find new ways to express themselves; build social and intellectual skills; and prepare for the future—both socially and in terms of their career opportunities.

<p>Finding 6</p>	<p>Middle Australians are not consistent in what boundaries they place around activities that can be categorised as arts and culture. They recognise that different people have different definitions and values in this area, and are generally comfortable with this. This extends across generations, with parents acknowledging that their definitions of arts and culture are narrower than their children's definitions, and that what they value does not always align with what their children value.</p>	<p>Finding 8</p>	<p>Middle Australians are largely unaware of the contributions that arts, cultural and creative activities make to the economy, including to employment.</p>
<p>Finding 7</p>	<p>Middle Australians believe that Australian content and cultural heritage icons should reflect Australians' [all Australians, in all their diversity] stories back to them, while also being an important tool for representing Australia on the world stage.</p>	<p>Finding 9</p>	<p>When activities are seen as purely profit-driven, they are considered superficial, and this erases them from most middle Australians' definition of arts and culture. This, along with the belief that access to arts and culture is essential to the Australian way of life, indicates that middle Australians believe arts and culture are what economists call 'a public good'.</p>

Summary of opportunities

To communicate more effectively with middle Australians about arts and culture:

Opportunity 1 Use both words—'arts and culture'—together to demonstrate relevance, make middle Australians feel welcome and evoke a positive emotional response.

Opportunity 2 Discuss the value of arts and culture in terms of the themes of a) imagination, inspiration and creativity; and b) community, connection, diversity and acceptance of all Australians.

Opportunity 3 Note that discussions about the value of arts and culture to a) children's development, and b) maintenance of the Australian identity, can evoke emotional and passionate positive responses.

To ensure relevant and effective investment and policy settings:

Opportunity 4 Continually review investment in, and diversity of, arts and cultural activities so as to increase opportunities that will bring individuals together and build community. Eg. festivals, community arts and cultural development initiatives, and local and regional events and experiences.

Opportunity 5 Increase opportunities for Australian children to experience arts and culture at school so as to encourage children's development and overall well-being, through actions such as: reviewing the time allocation to The Arts learning area (and reframing it as Arts and Culture) at the primary level; improving preservice teacher training in how to teach arts and cultural activities; and investing in artist-in-school programs.

Opportunity 6

Prioritise incentives, requirements and schemes that support production and distribution of diverse Australian content and iconography that will help to build a unified national identity and represent Australia to the world.

Opportunity 7

Review pathways and mechanisms that connect and embed arts and cultural activities in mental health and social inclusion strategies, particularly those related to recovery from natural disasters and significant social and economic disruptions.

Opportunity 8

Establish a strategic mechanism to make policy and investment recommendations about Australia's employment and other opportunities emerging from the Creative Economy in the 21st century, leveraging the dependencies between the media, creative and tourism industries.

Opportunity 9

Address the drop in per capita public expenditure on arts and culture, with respect to the other opportunities presented here.

Opportunity 10

Create a National Arts and Culture Plan, in the same vein as the existing National Sport Plan *Sport 2030*, that identifies the enduring and non-partisan principles and responsibilities that could inform more coherent arts and cultural policy settings and investment at all three levels of government.

Opportunity 11

Celebrate the role of arts and culture more explicitly and consistently to reflect the value that middle Australians place on arts and culture.

