PROMOTING APPRECIATION FOR

THE ROLE OF ARTS

IN HEALTH AND WELLNESS IN THE TWIN CITIES

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BY THE TOPOS PARTNERSHIP FOR AMERICANS for the ARTS

INTRODUCTION

THE KRESGE FOUNDATION

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Arts advocates around the country work hard to make the case that creative venues, activities and professionals should receive strong support—that we should appreciate, encourage and fund our theaters, galleries and concert halls; dance festivals and poetry readings; painters and storytellers.

In the course of this advocacy, one of the most important yet underutilized arguments is the social impact of the arts—the benefits that go beyond enjoyment and enrichment of individual participants. Among these social impacts are benefits to individual and community health, which are increasingly a focus of social science research and evaluation. A hypothesis going into the research reported on here is that these health benefits may have the potential to convincingly persuade more Americans that time and money devoted to arts-related activity are well spent. This pilot communications research initiative begins to qualitatively explore Americans' current thinking about the connection between arts and health, and their responses to communications about this topic. Conversations with a diverse cross-section of individuals in the Twin Cities give us important insights into how a conversation about the arts-health connection may play out at broader scales, and the potential of this focus to attract new engagement with and support (financial and otherwise) for the arts.

The pilot study was conducted as a strategic partnership between Topos, Metris Arts Consulting, and Americans for the Arts. Metris worked with a public health researcher to produce a document summarizing existing research and example projects at the intersection of arts and health. Topos, Metris, and Americans for the Arts invited a diverse group of advisors from across the nation to join the initiative and provide direction and perspective throughout the process. (See Appendix for a list of Advisors.)

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Cover: "Miss Neighbor Lady" Kathy Mouacheupao hosts "Gatherings" in her St. Paul neighborhood. Photo courtesy of Springboard for the Arts.

Courtesy of Walker Art Center and Meet Minneapolis, Photo by Courtney Perry

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

As communicators work to promote the importance of supporting artists and arts venues, one of the areas where there may be most room for creating new understanding and engagement is in the social impacts of the arts—benefits that go beyond the personal enjoyment of individuals. The pilot study reported on here[1] was aimed at exploring how individuals in the Twin Cities respond to communications about arts activities' beneficial impacts on *health and wellness* specifically, an area where there is a growing body of compelling scientific research and case studies. The fundamental questions posed in the research focused on how lay people currently think about topics related to the arts-health connection (the "cultural common sense"), and how they respond to various communications approaches that approach the topic from different angles and with different emphases.

1. The research for this qualitative effort consisted a combination of in-depth telephone interviews and in-person, ethnographic conversations, conducted in Fall 2018 with a diverse pool of 112 residents of the Twin Cities. See full report for additional detail on methods and demographics.

Positive default perspectives

The conversations for this effort revealed a constructive and receptive starting point for conversations about the arts-health connection in the Twin Cities. Randomly selected research participants tended to have positive views of the arts, and a sense that they produce a variety of benefits beyond mere enjoyment.

- People are happy to discuss the topic, and to extemporaneously reason about it (unlike many other topics).
- Arts are often seen as an essential aspect of human nature and human experience.
- Arts are seen as creating mental, emotional and spiritual benefits, e.g. because they reduce stress and take our mind off mundane concerns. Conversations often included references to personal stories of how arts have increased respondents' own well-being.
- Arts activities are understood to promote social interaction and more connected communities. They bring people together for meaningful experiences that foster connection and understanding.
- More specifically, they have the effect of promoting open-mindedness: appreciation of different perspectives.
- They can help with community challenges from crime to cross-cultural misunderstanding.

Given all these default perceptions, one of the challenges facing researchers was how to move beyond people's generally positive attitudes, in order to create new engagement, interest and urgency. (Conversations on the topic were almost "too easy" in this sense.)

HOW TO MOVE BEYOND PEOPLE'S GENERALLY POSITIVE ATTITUDES, IN ORDER TO CREATE NEW ENGAGEMENT, INTEREST AND URGENCY

Problematic default thinking

While the overall starting point is undeniably positive for conversations about arts and health in the Twin Cities, the research also identified patterns of thinking that present challenges for communicators, and that communications should work to overcome.

- Lack of a clear category: Lay people may think of plays, music, dance, etc. as separate topics, and are unlikely to have a unified concept of "the arts" as insiders use the term. This lack of a common conceptual starting point can be a barrier to communications.
- Arts as "fine arts": Not surprisingly, many people associate the term "the arts" with large, downtown venues and so forth. This association can create a limiting and often off-putting impression of the topic. It can also imply that arts are only for those with means.
- Entertainment: The research confirmed that many view the arts, by default, as a form of relaxing diversion or fun without deeper significance—which therefore has a lot in common with sports, or leisure activities like picnics and hiking. From this perspective it is difficult to single out the arts as deserving special attention or support.

— No need to promote arts: The problematic flip side of the perception that arts are a universal aspect of human experience is that it can be easy to assume that *they don't need to be promoted, since creative activity will always happen no matter what.*

— Personal preference: Even positive discussions of the arts often frame the topic in terms of individual choices, tastes and priorities. People get personal benefits from the arts because they happen to appreciate one or another art form, choose to participate in it, and so forth. The result is that even appreciation of art and its benefits can fall short of justifying *collective* action.

Recommendations

The pilot research established several communications elements that can help arts advocates steer around the challenges just discussed to engage new interest and support, and can help lay people more clearly articulate why support for the arts is so important and worthwhile.

COMMUNICATIONS ELEMENTS THAT CAN HELP ARTS ADVOCATES STEER AROUND THE CHALLENGES

1. Establishing the category through effective shorthand and examples—It is critical to begin communications by helping audiences grasp the topic in a broad and relatable way, rather than trigger narrow or inaccurate associations. One tool for achieving this goal is selecting labels other than "the arts":

Sample Language
Arts experiences; Artistic activity; Artistic and creative activities; The local arts, music and culture scene

Another is brief mention of a handful of examples, which include both active and passive types of experiences, and suggest something about the breadth of the category.

Sample Language
Concerts, dance classes, or arts festivals; Going to a concert, attending a dance class, or looking at a painting; Galleries to visit or choruses to sing in; Storytelling, songs, poems and so forth

2. Arts and physical health—Even for those most supportive of the arts, the following core idea was often sticky and compelling, and led to a new sense of the arts' importance:

Arts experiences promote better physical health outcomes.

While people often talk without prompting about the *emotional and social* benefits of the arts, many are struck by the idea that arts experiences can benefit us in a more objective, *physical* sense. This core focus has the double advantage of being *novel*, and therefore engaging attention, while also being *intuitive*, and tapping into a default sense that arts are "good for us."

COROLLARY MESSAGES THAT SUPPORT THE CORE THEME

Important corollary messages that support this core theme are that:

— *Studies support and confirm the finding*. Note that people are excited about the evidence because they like the claim—not the other way around!

— *Doctors are prescribing arts experiences in order to achieve better health outcomes*. This idea taps into perceptions of doctors as trusted authorities focused on practical benefits.

There are many ways of expressing these core and support themes, but the following is one example similar to language that performed well in testing.

Sample Language

Doctors are finding out more about how arts experiences—like going to a concert, attending a dance class, or looking at a painting—improve people's physical health. In fact, doctors in Montreal are prescribing museum visits to their patients. And a Connecticut study showed that breast cancer survivors who participated in dance had better health, including better physical health outcomes.

An additional element that can be helpful when presenting this idea is that an important mechanism leading to benefits is the way arts *bring people together*, thereby producing social and emotional benefits, which in turn are good for our physical health. This idea is already a part of default thinking, but mentioning it is helpful as a way of working against the individualistic nature of much thinking in this topic area.

3. Investment vs. Neglect—Given the default positive views that can make the conversation about arts and health somewhat too easy, it is important to find ways of *raising the stakes*. One effective way, based on the pilot study, is to focus on the specific suggestion that investment in the arts, through public funding, is justified by health benefits. A key corollary, that likewise helps raise the stakes, is that not funding the arts in a given community amounts to *neglect*, which can lead to negative health outcomes.

Sample Language

One of the most important investments a community can make is in its local arts, music and culture scene. When a community spends some of its tax dollars making sure that activities like going to concerts or taking painting classes are available to people, it leads to better physical health outcomes. If we neglect communities and these arts experiences aren't available, health outcomes are worse. That's one important reason arts should be on the list of priorities for public investment. .

In addition to raising the stakes and making the discussion more concrete, the focus on community investment vs. neglect also reinforces the idea that arts activities are beneficial for everyone, and should be available to all. Unlike spiritual or aesthetic aspects of the arts, health benefits are easily thought of in the context of the community as a whole, and as something we should all have access to.

Fuller context

In addition to discussing the findings and recommendations above in greater detail, the full report addresses a number of other considerations that give communicators a richer picture of the strategic context:

Messages that miss the mark: To more fully appreciate how and why certain approaches do work well, it is helpful to consider why others do not. For instance, a central focus on an analogy between arts and nutrition or exercise (i.e. as factors important for our health) can feel like overselling; and a central emphasis on how arts create open-mindedness can simply reinforce default thinking, and can lead to discussions that stray away from health as a focus.

Outstanding questions: While this pilot effort yielded a number of important insights, it also leaves some important questions unresolved, such as the extent to which the Twin Cities are representative of or distinct from broader patterns in American thinking, and exactly how to deal with the kinds of debates that may arise as very specific tax proposals are put on the table.

Military veterans/performers in Diavolo Dance Company's The Long Journey Home. Photo by George Simian. Courtesy of Diavolo.

METHODS

Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver communications tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them.

Throughout our unique research process, the focus is on exploring—and ultimately findings ways of shifting—the current cultural common sense that shapes thinking on a given issue. In order to make progress, we need to understand the widely shared (mis)understandings, values and perceptions that are currently standing in the way of action and engagement; and we need to develop communications approaches that reach people at this same level. To change the cultural common sense, ideas must be clear, compelling and "sticky," and must offer a new perspective that leads to new conclusions and actions.

In this particular case, our qualitative methods for exploring these questions included a combination of "cognitive elicitations" and "ethnographic field testing."

The protocol for the elicitations and sample messages tested in the field were informed by a literature summary of project at the intersection of arts and health, prepared by Metris.

Cognitive Elicitations

The research began with a set of 16 in-depth telephone interviews (cognitive elicitations) with a diverse group of Twin Cities residents. In these semi-structured interviews, the conversation is allowed to progress naturally while simultaneously exploring a topic from various perspectives, some of which are deliberately surprising and challenging. One of the key goals of elicitations is to encourage participants to *think aloud* about the issue, rather than reproduce opinions they have stated or heard before. This approach allows us to note which perspectives and topics participants tend to default to, which topics they seem to ignore or avoid, which topics they are most engaged by, what metaphors they use, and more generally, *how* they think about the topic rather than merely *what* they think. The conversations last roughly 45 minutes and are recorded and transcribed for later analysis; analysis focuses on the key cognitive and cultural patterns that underlie explicit opinions about the topic, often in ways that would be difficult for participants to articulate directly.

Ethnographic field testing

Building on learning from the elicitations and conversations with project Advisors, Topos worked with Americans for the Arts and Metris to develop a starting set of candidate messages, which were then culled, refined and built upon through ethnographic field testing with Twin Cities residents.

Ethnographic field testing consists of conversations between a researcher (typically an anthropologist) and individuals encountered in natural settings such as public spaces, workplaces and homes. This type of research can yield a richer picture and more authentic rapport than more artificially structured conversations, and allows us to reach individuals who would not ordinarily participate in research at all, in communities that are targeted for the relevance for the topic. Testing focuses on identifying aspects of a narrative that are clear and compelling to a diverse cross-section of non-experts in natural, conversational settings, based on observation of which ideas and terms are picked up on, engage interest, shift perspectives, are understood or misunderstood, and so forth.

Research Participants

In all, the research included conversations with 112 Twin Cities residents, from Minneapolis, Saint Paul, Minnetonka, Hastings, Eagan, Elko New Market, Lakeville, Bloomington, Farmington and Woodbury. Participants were diverse in terms of age, gender, politics and socio-economic status, and included White, African-American, Hispanic, Hmong, Laotian, Somali, Vietnamese, Filipino and Native American individuals.

Youth dancers at the Cheyenne River Youth Project's Red Can Graffiti Jam. Photo by Clayton Lord.

POSITIVE DEFAULT PERSPECTIVES TO BUILD ON

Arts advocates, and particularly those in the local area, will be heartened to know that the most obvious characteristic of conversations for this project was how positive and interested research participants were.

In this section, we explore the positive default perspectives Twin Cities residents brought to conversations about the arts, and about the connection between arts and health.

Arts appreciated on individual and collective level

In the Twin Cities, people are generally happy to have conversations about the arts, and are appreciative of them, rather than dismissive. Compared to other Topos projects, researchers noted how comfortable people were when asked to extemporaneously speak and theorize about the arts. While we noted some differences based on demographics (discussed later in the report), overall attitudes are constructive and positive, and communicators can expect to reach receptive audiences in most cases.

Even before hearing messages, many mentioned benefits of the arts beyond entertainment: Art makes people happier, less stressed and more opened-minded, creates connections and sustains communities. In fact, conversations about benefits of the arts often felt like they were reminding people of something they intuitively know—but are happy to think and learn more about.

Engagement also felt relatively active, or at least potentially active. Following our conversations—*almost regardless of which messaging approach we tried*—people often reported that they felt inspired to engage with arts more and in the near future.

PEOPLE OFTEN REPORTED THAT THEY FELT INSPIRED TO ENGAGE WITH ARTS MORE AND IN THE NEAR FUTURE

> ***I feel that arts feed the city. It's part of well-being, and it also keeps the city interesting because it allows experimentation, and people are also happier and people get to experience different things about themselves. So I feel that arts basically are as important as health or anything else, because it really makes you better and grow as a person.*** (Apolitical Hispanic-Colombian Woman, 29, Minneapolis)

> ***I think art really can help a lot of people. Whatever form of creative outlet they need or a way of expressing any kind of emotion or anything that's going on, it's a creative outlet. And I think all the people, even the ones that say I'm not artistic, I think it is a creative outlet for them.*** (Moderate White/Middle Eastern Woman, 35, Lakeville)

> ***I think what makes me healthy is just the passion that I love about art, and the feeling that makes you feel happy, and happiness makes you healthy.*** (Apolitical Hmong-Asian Man, 20, St. Paul)

> *It's a forum for people expressing themselves that they wouldn't ordinarily be able to.* (White Woman, 58, Minneapolis)

Based on patterns like those discussed here, one of the challenges of the research, in fact, was that the conversations felt almost too easy. If it is practically a no-brainer that arts are positive and beneficial, is there still a need to build increased engagement and support?

The answer is certainly yes. But before turning to these more challenging questions, we continue to discuss particular ways that Twin Cities residents express the positive value of the arts.

An essential component of humanity

Many who are enthusiastic about art and its value frame it as a universally important aspect of human nature and experience, and a common thread across cultures and throughout our history.

> *Q: What's the value of this topic for communities?*
> *A: In my opinion that's sort of like saying, 'What's the value of oxygen?' Maybe you don't notice it while you're breathing it in, but take it away and you don't really have much of a world. That's too far because with no oxygen, you'd die. Humanity wouldn't be humanity without art—that's just a big part of what we are.* (Conservative White Man, 31, Eagan)

> *People have to be sheltered, people have to be clothed, people have to eat. Roads and transportation have to ... You know, we need jobs. People have to work. But people also need to experience the arts.* (Moderate White Man, 55, St. Paul)

> *I think that's what we live for. Art. It's, that's how we live. I don't think you live your life without art. So art is part of everyone's life.* (Liberal African-American Woman, 32, St. Paul)

> *I think it's a language that's universal, and everyone shares appreciation for music, arts and dance. If you see someone moving, you don't judge—you just enjoy it.* (Apolitical Hispanic-Colombian Woman, 29, Minneapolis)

"THE MENTAL HEALTH BENEFITS OF ART ARE PRACTICALLY PRICELESS"

Arts promote better mental health

The arts are commonly credited with creating emotional, mental and spiritual benefits. They are often seen as promoting relaxation, for instance, and quite a few research participants brought up outcomes like stress-reduction prior to hearing any messaging. Some research participants were explicit about mental health as an arena of widespread challenges in our country, and framed art as a potentially important factor in ensuring mental and emotional well-being.

> *I think the mental health benefits of art are practically priceless. The fact that you can go into a museum or go to a show or a concert and leave with a sense of peace—maybe not every concert, but I feel like the mental health and the emotional health benefits of being involved with the arts is huge. When I was in high school, I was on dance team, and I feel like that was one of the things that kept me even-keeled. If you're having a bad day, you go to dance practice, and you're going to practice so hard that you're going to be exhausted at the end of it, and you're going to be more Zen about everything.* (Liberal White Woman, 39, Minneapolis)

> *The health benefits are that in your mind, you have to be positive, and music can make you feel positive. It can make you happy. It can relieve a lot of stress and pressure. So if you're not taking advantage of that, and using that to the ability you have to be able to be happy by listening to music, or doing artwork and experiencing it, then you're limiting yourself and you're not being as fulfilled as you can be by experiencing those things.* (Mixed Race Woman, 60s, Minneapolis/Woodbury)

TESTAMENT TO THE BELIEF THAT ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ARTS HAS A DIRECT IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH AND WELL-BEING

The connection between the arts and mental health often evoked deeply personal examples that people were very willing to share. These personal examples, about respondents' own struggles or the struggles of loved ones, and the candor of the discussions, are a testament to the belief that engagement with the arts has a direct impact on mental health and well-being.

I suffer from PTSD and listening to music and creating music and stuff like that, it actually helps me to focus and not ... It helps, especially with those suffering from depression like I do too, and other mental illnesses or physical disabilities. It just helps the spirit. It helps uplift the spirit for people who have a disadvantage. I use music to help me calm down, so something like that could be good for people who suffer from severe mental illness as well, so I think it definitely helps. (Moderate African-American Woman, 35, Minneapolis)

I think what makes me healthy is just the passion that I love about art, and the feeling that makes you feel happy, and happiness makes you healthy. (Hmong-Asian, 20, St. Paul)

This is my wheelhouse. I suffer from a mental illness, I have severe depression. So, I use music and dance and yoga as a tool to help with my illness. And so for me it's personal, it's a part of my healthy routine. (Liberal White Woman, 61, Eagan)

I think mental health is a big issue, so even having just a small group session—bring people together through arts, have them tell their story. I know a few young girls—after going through suicide attempts—bring them together. Let them share their story. I think it's beautiful. I've seen what it can do for mental health. It's very emotional. I think it's something the community should work on together. (Liberal Hmong Woman, 38, St. Paul)

The connection between arts and mental health is especially salient for those who witness the effect firsthand through their jobs—not just those who work in the arts, but those who work in healthcare or any industry where they can see the impact.

I work with a lot of people who have dealt with trauma, and kind of the traditional forced therapy things aren't necessarily the best things for them. It's easier ... I don't wanna say something like play acting, but to use more of an art-based approach that gets you to be a little more creative and initially, I think, lets you work on some things outside of yourself, and then you kind of bring your own stuff to the table to work on. (Liberal White Woman, 41, St. Paul)

I work at United Hospital in the ED department, and when we have a lot of mental health patients come in we give them coloring books, and it calms them. It's very vital, it is. Very vital. (Apolitical Black Woman, mid-30s, Minneapolis)

Arts and community

Research participants readily agree—and some offered on their own—that the arts foster connection to other people. According to this view, arts experiences promote positive social interactions, which in turn build meaningful relationships and help build a sense of community.

I don't think you really have community without arts. (Liberal White Woman, 41, St. Paul)

Q:If someone asked you why arts are important for a community what would you say? A:I'd say because it does bring everybody together, and you learn from every walk of life. Open-mindedness is very important. We're all here together. (Liberal Black/Mixed Woman, 53, Minneapolis)

I just think creativity is very important in inviting people in and making it accessible and having a wide range of things so that people can pick and choose or try new things. I think art encourages empathy and connections, so I agree with all of that. It's a very important part of the kind of community I want to live in anyway. (Very Liberal White Woman, 24, Minneapolis)

F:It brings together a sense of community; it brings people together; it allows people to show their creative outlet; it allows them to get ideas and topics out that they may not normally just speak about, but they'll do it in an art form that then allows them to show who they are. So I think it's huge. (Liberal White Woman, 50, Minneapolis)

M:I agree with that too. I think it's a forum for people expressing themselves that they wouldn't ordinarily be able to. Perhaps I'm not going to go see a speech on a certain topic, but I might watch it in an art form. (Liberal White Man, 36, Minneapolis)

"I THINK ART ENCOURAGES EMPATHY AND CONNECTIONS"

As they thought about the social dimension of the arts, research participants offered a number of ways that arts help communities. For instance, arts help define people as a community, whether geographic or cultural.

Art …[is a] common ground that can bring people together. And it's not just bringing people together—it's the common ground that's the difference. (Moderate White Woman, 23, Eagan)

[T]o me art just means culture and tradition. (Apolitical Hmong-Asian Man, 19, St. Paul)

Arts bring people together in service of making the world around them a better place.

I'd also say I think for me a big part of the arts, there's a kind of activism to it sometimes, in communities that are… I'm not from here, but in the town I live in there are artists who form collectives and are trying to, through art, bring more awareness to social issues and inequities in communities and those sorts of things. (Moderate White Man, 57, Minneapolis)

Arts end up reducing community problems like crime.

> *I think the arts could be an all-encompassing umbrella—so like crime, schooling, politics—all of that happens within one society. And so if you can shift a community's view towards valuing art within a society where all of this is going on, I think that that expression can create more solutions or creative ideas in solving these things…I think having the critical thinking that art brings and also an empathy that art brings could really help in all aspects of whatever issue you're trying to solve within your community.* (Liberal Black/White Woman, 22, St. Paul)

> *When I think of art activities in a community, I think it brings together people. And when you have people together, the crime—at least my assumption is—it's reduced and you don't have as much crime. Because it's something that they can do.* (Moderate White/Middle Eastern Woman, 35, Lakeville)

Arts can promote stronger cross-cultural connections. (This is particularly salient for immigrants and people of color, who expressed that it was a way to connect with others unlike them in the city and learn about each other through art. See later discussion of demographic differences.)

> *I think we should keep going, and introduce each community to each other. As much as we want everybody to come together, we still have the Hispanics, the Somalians, the Korean and the Hmong organizations. Why not bring them together? Why not say, 'Here's an event for all of you guys to meet, to share your food, or your arts and crafts?' I think that would be fun. (Liberal Hmong Woman, 38, St. Paul)*

> *Every culture has the arts, so it's something that brings people together as a diverse culture and can bring out the different strata of diversity that exist within the culture so you can celebrate differences, but also celebrate what you can do together. I think the arts and community to me are one and the same. (Liberal White Woman, 33, St. Paul)*

> *[Art] can help explicate the world around you and inform us, help us think about things that maybe we're not thinking about. Maybe in communities that are disenfranchised that maybe through art can communicate what their experience is like in a way that maybe I can understand better. (Moderate White Man, 57, Minneapolis)*

Link between community and mental health

According to common default views, there is a link between the topics of community connectedness on one hand and mental health on the other. Art promotes the sense of togetherness, which improves mood by bolstering enjoyment and happiness.

While already familiar to some, this idea has potential as one to focus on and reinforce in messaging. (See Recommendations section.)

Like the statements said, I think it's good for mental health, I think it's good; it's a good way to bring people together, it's a good way to spread messages that otherwise go unheard. Everyone is attached to some form of art. (Liberal Black Woman, 29, Eagan)

People are doing things like the arts, that gives you something to connect to a community with, which can make you happier, which will reduce stress, which means less heart attacks and strokes, less alcohol and getting drunk, so less domestic violence or something potentially. That's kind of grandiose, it's very extrapolated, but you get the idea. (Apolitical White Man, 35, Minneapolis)

Arts promote open-mindedness

A specific benefit many research participants mentioned—and that links the individual with the social—is that arts experiences make people more open-minded. The arts are often viewed as extending our cognitive and affective capacities, and this open-mindedness allows us to learn from other perspectives.

"YOU NEED TO BE ABLE TO PUT YOURSELF IN OTHER PEOPLE'S SHOES TO UNDERSTAND WHAT THEY'RE WALKING THROUGH IN LIFE"

With our current political climate and cultural climate, looking at anything outside of yours could be bad or good. I bet the arts can show it. I recently went to a small play that [focused] on the local racial status. It was actually kind of eye-opening. It was from here, and I lived half my life in the south where race is a different story. So it changed a little bit of my viewpoint. (Conservative White Man, 33, Minnetonka/Lakeville)

It's very important because you need to be able to put yourself in other people's shoes to understand what they're walking through in life. And everybody has their own experiences. My experience is going to be different from you, and we're going to see the world differently. And I think when you try to do it through storytelling, if you can put yourself in other people's shoes you kind of have a little bit more understanding and empathy toward what they're going through. (Moderate Middle Eastern/White Woman, 35, Lakeville)

I think it opens up your awareness. I think it opens up your heart to see something beautiful… (Liberal African-American Man, 54, Minneapolis)

… beautify the communities, opening up people's minds, seeing what else is out there. (Black/Mixed Woman, 53, Minneapolis)

Art museums, drawings, anything artistic that's worth seeing that'll take my mind and open it up to the realism of how the world operates around here—there's a whole new world besides just Minneapolis. (Black/Native American/White Woman, 60s, Minneapolis/Woodbury)

Music warms my heart. Maybe it makes me think about when I was 20 years old and how much fun I had enjoying music and being part of music even more then. It allows you to remember fondly. It opens your mind to new experiences. (White Man, 42, Minneapolis)

The Washington Capitals visited Tracy's Kids at Medstar Georgetown University Hospital in December. Courtesy of Tracy's Kids.

TRAPS/PROBLEMS IN CURRENT THINKING

Despite overall positive attitudes about the arts, the conversations in the Twin Cities also identified a set of (often related) problematic perspectives that communications should seek to overcome.

Arts not a clear category

One of the most basic challenges for current communications about the arts is that the term may not mean the same thing to communicators and audiences.

An important aspect of this divide is that the arts represents a clear and coherent category for insiders, but may not for lay people, who often have plenty to say about music, painting, plays, dance etc., but as *separate topics*, not as a unified category. The consequence is that the whole discussion can seem to be on a topic that is unclear, too narrow, etc. If the category isn't clear, conversations can easily drift to take in topics like sports or YouTube.

Importantly this challenge isn't simply about the term "art(s)." The problem isn't that the public has the same category in mind but calls it something different, it's that the category may not exist clearly in their awareness at all.

The implication, of course, is that communicators should deliberately work to get audiences on the same page about what the category consists of.

Arts narrowly associated with fine arts institutions

Another, related challenge—noted by communicators and confirmed in other research (including Topos work in the Cincinnati area)—is a frequent association between the term "the arts" and a narrow category of fine arts forms and venues. This association unhelpfully frames the arts as an elite domain, with implications about affordability ("Do I have enough money to enjoy the arts?") and personal priorities.

The association of arts with fine arts and arts institutions also means that people can think of arts as something that happens over there or only downtown rather that something that is or could be integrated within their own communities or neighborhoods.

I know the Guthrie does programs with the schools that allow the kids to go up there and see shows, and then the art museum also allows the kids to go there. I think it's been pretty good as far as schools. I don't know about the outside community. But that's probably something—I know a lot of people can't afford certain things. Myself, I have two children, so if I want to go to the art museum, that's like $60-$70 for all three of us and it's a little expensive. I want to see the arts, but I don't want to have to pay $100—which is a cell phone or cable bill,—and lose out on the stuff we need, just to go and have some entertainment. I know in the summertime they do a lot of stuff in the parks like movies and stuff like that. If they did a small art show like that, I think more of the community would come to that, knowing it's free and they can enjoy themselves and see what they can possibly put their money into the community for. (Liberal African-American Woman, 30, Minneapolis)

Q:When I say 'the arts,' what comes to mind?
A: Theater, museums, paintings, sculpture—things like that. (Liberal White Man, 53, Minneapolis)

I think in Minnesota, arts sometimes are for the rich—and when I look at it, I'm thinking of theater, I'm thinking of actual art work. I don't think we do a good job here of promoting on an even field for people who are starting and for people who are established. (Moderate/Liberal Black Woman, 48, St. Paul)

I think there's an economic issue that needs to be rectified. I think that if you are the Ordway or the Orpheum and you're doing shows, you should be doing shows that also appeal to a wider audience, and not just white people with a lot of money. (Liberal White Woman, 41, St. Paul)

People have a lot of connotative meanings that say it's essentially a luxury. It's also associated with class, so people will think you're a snob, or you're one of the liberal elites, particularly from the east, and you're kind of snobbish about the arts. (Progressive White Woman, over 65, St. Paul)

I think sometimes we intellectualize art to the degree that it's seen as the garnish on our society instead of potentially a significant part of the meal. (Moderate/Conservative Taino Indian/ Puerto Rican Woman, 55, St. Paul)

It's not something I search out, just because of work, school, kids' school, kids' activities—where do I fit art into my life? (Apolitical White Woman, 44, Minneapolis)

This pattern reflects both a mismatch in the meanings of language (What does "arts" refer to?), and—importantly—a lived reality of certain very high-profile institutions that are expensive, removed from communities and possibly classist in tone.

At some level, it is as though art can be defined in terms of objects and experiences that are for hereditary aristocracies only. (The things "regular people" enjoy are not art, in this view.)

While the perceptions discussed here typically did not derail conversations, they are common enough that communications should work to steer thinking away from them.

Arts will happen without support

The idea that arts are essential to human experience is very positive in one sense, but can be a rationale for not supporting arts with public funds, for instance. Why should public support for the arts be necessary, if they are such a basic aspect of our existence? Because they are an essential part of our culture and an expression of our humanity, they don't need funding and will exist no matter what.

"HOW IS THAT AN EFFECTIVE USE OF GOVERNMENT MONEY?"

I think even communities that don't necessarily have something like the Met or some big art museum, I think they find their own way of developing arts and what art is to them. So whether it's street art, or back home in New Orleans street musicians are a big thing. I see a little bit of it here as well, but people will just set up impromptu on the street corner and play a saxophone or put on a puppet show. That kind of stuff is really big even in the areas that aren't as affluent. So I think the communities—people want and need to express themselves, so I think no matter what, even if they don't have funds in place, they're going to find a way to express themselves artistically. (Liberal White Woman, 39, Minneapolis)

How is that an effective use of government money? To fund Robert Mapplethorpe and prosecute Larry Flynt—how does that make sense? So no one's trying to take away your freedom of expression. Do whatever you want to do. Just don't ask me to pay for it… Every society has its form of art even if it's the Eskimos or the cave men drawings. So people will always find a way to express themselves, even if it's just a charcoal drawing on a cave wall. They'll find a way to do it. (Very Conservative Japanese/White Man, 50, Bloomington)

A: With all these budget cuts, I totally get it. I think if they [the arts] did get cut out of the public school, there are enough extra-curricular activities in the community. So I get that we have to save money and it's unfortunate that the arts are getting cut, but I hope they're making a decision based on the needs—there are still those opportunities for art outside of that.
Q: What about for folks whose communities don't have those [arts] centers or opportunities?
A: You can still do stuff at home. If there's a will, there's a way. You'll figure it out. (Apolitical White Woman, 44, Minneapolis)

Interest in arts is a matter of personal preference

Discussions with research participants, while typically very positive, tended toward a very individual perspective. We (individually) choose to participate in one way or another, depending on our tastes, priorities, moods and so forth. This is a strong default aspect of thinking about the arts, and problematic in several ways.

First, it implies that the arts can be personally prioritized (or not), and thus fall higher or lower within a hierarchy of other priorities. Sometimes even when people feel positively about the arts, they don't engage strongly with the topic, because "it's not their thing."

Also, as the notion of the arts become increasingly individualized, it loses the capacity to stand for anything beyond personal preference, and a number of beneficial frames—related to health, community, public good, universality, etc.—disappear.

> *I like to do stuff outdoors, so it would be a matter of priorities. It's [the arts] low on my priority list.* (Apolitical Hispanic-Puerto Rican Man, 39, Minneapolis)

> *I think the arts aren't a priority except if you want them to be.* (Conservative White Man, 33, Minnetonka/Lakeville)

> *It depends on the person. Some people are more into sports and some are more into being involved maybe in sports. They both equally are good. It just depends.* (Liberal White Woman, 64, Minnetonka)

Arts as entertainment/relaxation/escapism

Research participants frequently defaulted to the view that attending an arts event is essentially an outing like others—even if they spoke, at other times, as though arts offer unique benefits.

> *Me going to see Hamilton because it happens to be in town, it's an outing. Yeah, I might be seeing the world of Hamilton through Lin-Manuel Miranda, but that doesn't mean I'm gaining anything.* (Apolitical Hispanic-Puerto Rican Man, 39, Minneapolis)

From the entertainment point of view, there are natural parallels between arts and sporting events, for instance. (See later discussion related to sports and arts.)

> *Why would that be more important than a sporting event or any other type of get-together? A great block party and picnic, or a big church barbecue, or any other type of event? Nothing is specifically more enriching about the arts than any other type of event. People are going to choose to attend these events based on what they're interested in.* (Very Conservative Japanese/White Man, 50, Bloomington)

Such topic drift tends to affirm an individualist framing of the issue, in which everyone has their own thing, whether it is the arts, the outdoors, sports or whatever, and arts don't stand out as needing (or deserving) special attention.

Individual health benefits

On one hand, it is a positive finding that people are happy to draw connections between arts and individual well-being.

On the other, there is a potential trap here in that a focus on individual health can reinforce a focus on individual choices, priorities, etc. as causal factors.

In response to messages relating to *community health*, people often became enthusiastic but talked about themselves as individuals and in essence scaled down the frame from community to something narrower.

> ***[In response to a question about physical health and community health] I think your personal health is something that should probably be a little more important than other things. So I'm not saying cut those out of the budget, but just find ways to cut back and use that money to gear it towards this program—more funding for art.*** (Moderate White Woman, 19, Minneapolis)

Bob Dylan mural by Eduardo Kobra, courtesy of Meet Minneapolis. Photo by Bill Hickey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

While the starting point for arts-related conversations in the Twin Cities area tends to be positive, there remains a need for demonstrated communications approaches that draw a stronger and clearer connection between arts and community benefits like improved health. These communications approaches should also help people articulate their positions more clearly and confidently, and push back against opposing points of view, as well as steering clear of problematic default perspectives themselves.

Several communications elements stood out in the conversations, as having potential to create new engagement and understanding, and to become new elements of the cultural common sense about the benefits of the arts.

Establishing the category

The most basic strategic insight emerging from the research is the importance of quickly helping people understand the category in something more like the way insiders see it, by offering a clarifying, relatable and broadening picture.

There are two particular strategies for achieving this goal.

Shorthand for the topic

First, it is important to use effective shorthand to refer to the topic. Rather than use "the arts" as a main or consistent label—given narrow and elitist associations, for instance—researchers got better results by using a variety of other phrases.

Sample Language
Arts experiences
Artistic activity
Artistic and creative activities
The local arts, music and culture scene

Phrases like these do not have the same direct associations with fine arts institutions, for instance, and immediately open the conversation to a broader picture than the one conjured by "the arts."

Note also that this language tends to be compatible with *active AND/OR passive* types of arts experience (e.g. attending a concert vs. taking a sculpture class).

While the researchers at first assumed this distinction might be an important one for communications and for people's thinking, the research actually suggested that it can be helpful to take emphasis *off* of the distinction, allowing audiences to picture a wide range of activities and recognize the general types of benefits they may all promote.

Examples of the Arts

It is critical to offer a (very) short list of examples that help clarify and broaden the picture of what the topic comprises, and that make it more relatable than "the arts."

Researchers found, consistent with past research on other topics, that two or three examples is a good number—sufficient to establish a broad initial sense of the topic without immediately overloading the conversation with particulars.

These examples should ideally include both more expected and less expected ones, as well as both active and passive types of arts experience.

Sample Language
Concerts, dance classes, or arts festivals
Going to a concert, attending a dance class, or looking at a painting
Galleries to visit or choruses to sing in
Storytelling, songs, poems and so forth

The connection between arts and physical health

Even for people deeply engaged with the arts, one particular idea stood out as sticky, important and persuasive:

Arts experiences promote better physical health outcomes.

This idea has strong potential as an organizing theme for several reasons.

- It is a novel concept that is striking and engages new attention—it often provokes an aha! effect.
- It encourages people to rethink and reframe their understanding of how the arts affect us—i.e. more concretely than we may have imagined.
- Though it is generally not something lay people have considered before, the idea makes intuitive sense, and fits well with default intuitive thinking (i.e. about how arts are "good for us"). Researchers noted respondents thinking and mulling over this idea once they heard it, and responding with vigorous head nods or widened eyes.

> ***F1: It's surprising that there are ways to really study that. I'm always amazed at what people can quantify. That's cool. I love to hear about stuff like that.***
>
> ***F2: I've felt that in my own life, but I'm very glad that there's scientific proof of it, because it's very funny to have the two things that are most helpful in my experiences with mental illness be like pills from the doctor and painting. Painting can help me completely turn around a week from feeling very despairing and scattered, to the point where I don't have the ability anymore to focus on an individual task and can't really speak correctly or hold things correctly. It's very helpful to me to be able to do an easy painting project, which relative to all things is cheap and easy, and have that really improve how I perform at work the next day or in social situations.*** (Very Liberal White Woman, 24, Minneapolis; Moderate/Liberal White Woman, 32, Minneapolis)

> ***And I think it does, because I've seen some things on Facebook—there was an ad about a doctor who dances with his patients and sings with them, and they see a little improvement in their emotional behavior and their healing at the same time. So yeah, I think expressing art in any kind of way—music, singing, dancing, painting; there's a girl in the video who had cerebral palsy or something, and she was painting some gorgeous portraits. Not even being able to move her arms and legs, she can still paint a beautiful picture. So I think that's something that does help people healing-wise. That's what a lot of people do. They sing to express their emotion or dance to get something out. I think that's a very good thing.*** (Liberal African-American Woman, 30, Minneapolis)

There are a number of ways to express this core idea, but the following is an example of a text that performed well in testing. The accompanying notes point out some more particular aspects of how to make the point effectively, which receive additional discussion below.

Sample Language	Notes
Doctors are finding out more about how arts experiences—like going to a concert, attending a dance class, or looking at a painting—improve people's physical health.	*Uses effective label and examples to immediately establish the category on the right way*
In fact, doctors in Montreal are prescribing museum visits to their patients.	*Immediately emphasizes the core takeaway*
And a Connecticut study showed that breast cancer survivors who participated in dance had better health, including better physical health outcomes.	*Uses doctors as credible voices on the topic*
Storytelling, songs, poems and so forth	*Fleshes out core point with surprising and sticky fact*
	Reference to research study solidifies the point

Studies

Research participants were happily surprised to hear there are studies confirming the connection between arts and physical health outcomes. The point feels intuitively reasonable, and that people are glad can be objectively confirmed. Even when hearing other messages that focused on ideas that did not fare as well, people zeroed in on the idea that studies show there are connections between art and health—it is a sticky and compelling point, which people even reported wanting to share with others in their life.

> ***I totally agree with that, because music makes you feel good, and you can get a different emotion, and then instead of sad, mad, or unhappy, you can have a lot of emotions if you listen to music, and listen to the arts, and go and experience the arts.*** **(Liberal Black/Native American/ White Woman, 60s, Minneapolis/Woodbury)**

> ***Most stories do have some uplifting aspects, so again, if you're feeling a little down maybe that'll give you a little boost and kinda send off that depression a little bit at least for some part of time, which can't hurt either. So yeah, I can believe that study.*** **(Moderate White Man, 46, Bloomington)**

> ***Q:What do you think that you will recall most about this conversation later on? A:Definitely the benefits of art, all the importance that art has. I knew it was important and for me it helps a lot, but I didn't realize there's so much research based on it. I'll definitely tell my friends about it ….*** **(Moderate White Woman, 19, Minneapolis)**

People's enthusiasm for hearing about such studies often triggered thinking about similar studies they had heard about.

> *I've heard these really awesome studies about music and Alzheimer's and dementia and how music can bring people back to certain times and memories and I think it's amazing. But I think we devalue this connection when it's one of the most important connections that we have".* . (Liberal Mixed-race woman, 22, St. Paul)

Importantly, Topos' experience on this project and others suggests that the studies themselves are not the core point of the communication. People don't typically believe a point because they are offered evidence—rather, they accept and appreciate evidence because they are inclined to believe the point being illustrated!

Arts as a prescription to improve physical health

The idea that doctors are prescribing arts experiences for their patients is striking and sticky. Part of this effect is due to the surprise factor—novel points often fare best in communications. Another part has to do with authority: In most contexts, doctors are viewed as trusted experts, with a strong, practical focus on how to achieve the best health outcomes.

THE IDEA THAT DOCTORS ARE PRESCRIBING ARTS EXPERIENCES FOR THEIR PATIENTS IS STRIKING AND STICKY

> *I never would have made a connection on my own, but it's something I'll probably think about more and maybe try to experience more to see if it could help me.* (Apolitical White Woman, 44, Minneapolis)

> *That's great. I'd say let's do the research and let's tell people about it. The more encouragement of the arts, the better.* (Very Liberal White Woman, 24, Minneapolis)

> *Q:What about people who say, 'I'm already taxed enough. We don't need arts. Let me keep my money?'*
> *A:I think they should be directed to an article that shows the benefits to their health. Some people just are so closed-minded they won't change. It's kind of a bummer, but yeah—I think they should realize the importance of it from what you just explained to me.* (Moderate/Liberal white woman, 19, Minneapolis)

The message about arts experiences and physical health taps into default impressions, but sharpens and confirms those ideas while also leaving enough room for people to generate new implications on their own—the message is flexible and generative. It sparks a conversation, encouraging audiences to reflect and talk about their own experiences related to connections between art and health, or others' stories they have heard.

We were just talking about that today about how all these kids are dying off these opioids and all that stuff. We need to go out there and capture their attention or something like that. Show 'em some beauty and some art. Yes it would make a difference. (Liberal African American Man, 54, Minneapolis)

I had an auntie and she was paralyzed from the waist down but that didn't mean she had to stay in the house all day, you know what I mean? So if there was programs or resources that come and get those people up out the house I think that would be something that could be helpful … sometimes when it comes to people who are suffering mentally or physically it's like sometimes in their mind it's like them against the world because they're different, so it's like if people actually reached out and they might experience something that they never felt before, and I know that a lot of times that can help people physically and mentally because if somebody had that type of support or those types of programs or resources or stuff like that, like somebody who said they would never walk again probably walk again. It just helps the mind and the body, especially when there's support and resources, and it might not help everybody but it's good for the body. It's good for the mind. (Moderate African American Woman, 35, Minneapolis)

Bringing people together

When people are told that arts promote better health, they are quick to infer that the mechanism for this benefit involves mental health: Arts > Mental health > Physical health. In fact this inference is so natural that *it doesn't necessarily need to be stated.*

On the other hand, one of the stickier points in conversations was that arts improve mental health by "bringing people together" (therefore increasing social interaction, and other dimensions of what experts call social capital).

Based on the pilot study, we conclude that it can be helpful to mention—but not highlight as the core theme—that arts experiences improve health outcomes partly because they bring people together in positive and meaningful ways. (Note that this confirms earlier Topos findings in greater Cincinnati.)

I think what I've noticed is that for example downtown there's this really big wall, but they decided to draw stuff on it. They also decided to make a park there where people can sit. I think that plays into where it does bring a community together. Now people can go there and be out in nature but also admire the paintings on the walls and sit with each other, and meet new people also. I notice a lot of people have mental health issues, and that plays a part to where they're not just stuck home all day. They can go out and enjoy these things, and that can definitely help with mental health. (Apolitical Hmong-Asian Woman, 19, St. Paul)

Yes, absolutely. I truly agree with that statement. I also did acting—I was involved with Stepping Stone Theater when I was young, so I did see how if that was available to the community, art can bring the community together. You get to meet these other people who you probably would never cross paths with or associate with had it not been for that program. So yes, in terms of that statement and the arts in general, art can bring the community together. (Apolitical Hmong Woman, 30, St. Paul)

I really do think it does bring a community together. And I think it does benefit because when you have festivals you get everybody out and they come and enjoy the atmosphere and you can get connected with other people. I really believe human interaction is important to a person's well-being as well. And I'm a millennial, so I know you all like the texting and the computers. I get that. But I really still believe human connection is huge. (Moderate White/Middle Eastern Woman, 35, Lakeville)

To reiterate, the idea that arts bring people together in ways that promote their well-being is already an aspect of default thinking—and therefore does not do much work when treated as a central focus. On the other hand, it can be helpful to mention and reinforce this point as a simple, memorable mechanism for how arts improve personal and community health.

Community investment vs. neglect—raising the stakes

Another way to create a more focused and engaged discussion about arts and health (and get past the nodding along quality of some conversations) is to raise the stakes by emphasizing a more concrete ask than people are used to thinking about.

Specifically, it was helpful in testing to put the focus on investing public money to promote arts experiences in our communities.

Sample Language

One of the most important investments a community can make is in its local arts, music and culture scene. When a community spends money making sure these activities are available to people, it boosts the overall health and well-being of individuals and the community as a whole. When there are discussions about how to spend tax dollars in a community, spending to promote arts and creative experience should be a high priority.

Despite some uncertainty going into the research—about setting too high a bar—this focus on needed investment turned out to be very constructive. Residents of the Twin Cities region tend to readily accept the idea that arts are good for people and communities, in a way that can even lead to relatively flat conversations because the idea seems so obvious. A focus on investment lends greater concreteness to the discussion by emphasizing a specific, practical implication, and an implicit question that needs an answer, about where public money should go.

I think you could debate whether that's a core mission of government, but I think it's a very worthy way for us to invest our money, because I think it enhances our society in ways that can't really be calculated. (Liberal White Man, 25, Minneapolis)

[I]f the government's going to be involved in funding the arts, I think the government has a responsibility to make art accessible to all people, and not just to people with privilege or money or the ability to travel or something like that. Investment in the arts should benefit all of us. (Liberal White Man, 27, Minneapolis)

More specifically, the idea that Minnesota already has invested significantly, and reaped rewards from it, was generally met with enthusiasm.

Sample Language

Minnesota voters did something really smart about ten years ago when they decided on a very small increase in the sales tax to support things like the environment, parks, and the arts. This small tax means that Minnesota supports the arts far more than other states, and people in Minnesota get the benefits from that spending, like …

In my opinion, that should be done by the governments and stuff like that. It should be helped out. Our taxes, I feel like my taxes should go to pay for the government-run museums and that kind of stuff, so that I have access. I can go, and I can see where I came from, where humanity itself came from. (Moderate Multiracial Man, 24, Elko)

I think that's something we definitely need. I hope everybody eventually gets to that point. It's nice to know that the money we're spending goes to that—to our community… Now that we know that, it makes us not have so much hate toward the state taking out so many taxes. Right now I feel like it's not a bad thing that we have sales tax. (Apolitical Hmong-Asian Woman, 19, St. Paul)

The flip side of investment is neglect—i.e. lack of investment and attention.

Communities without art or arts opportunities are seen as atrophied and withered, deficient and in need of the arts, so instead of neglecting them we should support them. The absence of art in a community is also a signal that a community has been neglected: Unequal allocation of resources deprives marginalized communities of basic resources and services, and also deprives them of the arts.

Like investment, the idea of neglect, which emerged spontaneously in conversation, seemed to add greater concreteness and urgency to the topic.

Q: What would happen if entire communities let's say didn't get exposures to the arts at all? A: I think, I just don't think they could reach their full potential. I don't think necessarily that just because art is gone that something negative is going to happen to them, or that necessarily they're going to become close-minded or anything, but I just think they're missing out on another path to being able to fully embrace everybody, to reach full potentials of the community, and possible ways of enriching the community. (Liberal White Woman, 35, Oakdale)

Art isn't a stand-alone presence in your community. When your community is sad, deteriorating, neglected in a way, and its residents are neglected, it has an effect on the general whole. (Conservative Taino Indian/Puerto Rican Woman, 55, St. Paul)

It is a bit sad to see kids get involved in stuff they shouldn't be. When they don't have programs to help keep them together, keep them in line, I do see that it's almost like a movie—it does look duller. It's not as colorful or as bright as a community that's involved with arts or has arts available to them. (Apolitical Hmong Woman, 30, St. Paul)

While no language was tested in the pilot that explicitly contrasted investment with neglect, experience on other topics suggests this is potentially a very promising focus. This type of straightforward either/or point can help make a message memorable, sticky, engaging, clear and concrete in a way that could lead to motivation for action.

Sample Language

One of the most important investments a community can make is in its local arts, music and culture scene. When a community spends some of its tax dollars making sure that activities like going to concerts or taking painting classes are available to people, it leads to better physical health outcomes. If we neglect communities and these arts experiences aren't available, health outcomes are worse. That's one important reason arts should be on the list of priorities for public investment.

Photo ©Stagebridge, Stuart Kandell. Used with permission.

MESSAGES THAT MISS THE MARK

To more fully appreciate the nature of the recommended communications approaches, it is always helpful to consider some directions that are not as effective. In this section we briefly review some ideas that proved less successful in testing, *at least as central, organizing themes for the conversation.* That is, the following concepts may not be harmful to bring into the conversation, but are not strong enough to serve as a core focus.

Superfoods

One tested direction focused on an analogy with superfoods, as a potential way of conveying that arts aren't just good for health, but amazingly/surprisingly good.

> ***Some experts are now calling arts a superfood for communities. Health experts sometimes talk about "superfoods" that have amazing health benefits—and it turns out that artistic and creative activities are like a superfood for a community …***

The intent of this direction was to raise the stakes of the conversation by conveying that arts are even more beneficial than you already think—while also offering a potentially memorable image.

Unfortunately, few people picked up on this term or idea, *perhaps because it is unfamiliar.*

In all, it proved a conversation ender rather than a conversation starter.

Vitamins and exercise

Another tested direction also included an analogy to nutrition, and focused on the idea that arts are analogous to essential needs for our physical health.

> ***It may be surprising, but it turns out people need arts experiences almost like we need vitamins or exercise. Experts have come to see the arts as an active ingredient in our well-being because studies show that experiencing and making art makes people happier and less stressed, and also more connected to their neighbors and larger community …***

This concept was intended to promote the idea that our well-being is truly, and surprisingly, dependent on arts experiences.

In the end, however, researchers conclude that this idea comes across as overselling. It prompted people to talk about how art is positive, but not as essential as vitamins and exercise.

It may also be ignored as simply too obviously metaphorical, while people are interested in speaking more directly about the benefits of the arts.

Open-mindedness

Research participants responded very positively to the idea that arts promote open-mindedness, and often offered this idea themselves, as discussed earlier.

> ***Arts experiences help create more open-minded people and connected communities as people with different backgrounds come together to share them.***

On the other hand, as a central focus, this idea doesn't add much to the conversation, but can feel like it's restating something many people already intuitively believe.

In addition, conversations that focused on open-mindedness easily drifted away from a focus on health.

Overall, the pilot study suggests this is an idea that is positive when people bring it up for themselves, which they often do, but is not a promising focus for communications (which should bring new perspectives to the conversation).

Arts vs. Sports

The contrast between arts and sports experiences is important to consider, and there are a variety of ways of expressing it.

> ***It's not just concerts and plays and galleries and dance classes are distracting, like a sports event might be: They help us see the world through other people's eyes, think about bigger topics like beauty or truth, help us experience a sense of things more important and meaningful than our day-to-day worries.***

On one hand, as we have discussed, some people who value arts as entertainment and escapism, and a way for people to come together, draw a natural analogy to sports.

I don't know that I would say they differ all that much. I love sports just as much as anything, and both of them offer you an opportunity to see how good people can be, whether it's at hitting a baseball or painting a picture or sculpting a statue. There's an escapism in both—certainly in the arts. I think that's where, at least for me, the health benefits of the arts comes from. (Moderate/Liberal White Man, 42, Minneapolis)

On the other, many deep arts appreciators tend to clarify the benefits of arts by contrasting them with sports.

I think it makes your brain think harder, where baseball and sports is more escapism and art is more of a self-reflection and it puts your brain in a place where you're actually having to interpret and think about things. You never walk away from a museum or some other kind of dance thing going, 'I feel worse.' (Liberal White Woman, 58, Minneapolis)

I feel like watching a baseball game, if anything, kind of increases—maybe not your aggression, but your stress levels, especially if you're invested in one team vs. the other. If your team's not doing so well, if anything it would increase your stress levels a little bit. … I feel like with sports, it's more about the competition and not about enjoying the process. (Liberal White Woman, 39, Minneapolis)

Based on the pilot study, we conclude that a central focus on contrasting arts with sports is more likely to divide audiences (based on their existing perspectives) than to help focus and unite the conversation in positive ways.

More work will be necessary to determine how best to deal with the comparison when it is raised as an objection to the uniqueness of the arts.

Public health

Public health, of course, is a central concern for many advocates who believe arts are important for our well-being.

On the other hand, the research confirms that this is a term and a concept that it is not easy or natural for lay people to focus on. It is easy for people to think about how arts are good for us, promote well-being, and so forth—but not to think about public health in the exact ways experts use and think about the term. This is largely a matter of language.

Stigma

Another tested direction focused on the arts' power to help alleviate stigma and its health impacts–a potentially important causal factor from the perspective of existing public health research.

> ***One way the arts improve community health is by reducing prejudice and its effects. It's been shown that when a person is looked down on—due to race, poverty, being an immigrant, or mental illness, and so on—it has effects on the person's long-term health. But storytelling, plays, songs, poems and so forth are all ways that we can see the world through someone else's eyes—and that stigmatized people can see their own experience reflected—so everyone actually feels better, including the stigmatized group, and health outcomes improve.***

While this idea proves credible and intuitive, the research suggests it has two weaknesses. First, stigma may not be a widely understood term; respondents didn't repeat it or show the kind of interest and engagement we hoped for. Second, a focus on prejudice vs. open-mindedness is intuitive and appreciated, yet not particularly eye-opening, for reasons already discussed.

Photo by Caleb Timmerman, courtesy of Northern Spark and Meet Minneapolis.

OUTSTANDING QUESTIONS

The pilot study reported on here yielded a very interesting and helpful set of insights, but could not answer all the questions communicators might have about the topic. In this section we discuss a number of questions it would be helpful to explore through further research.

Special character of Twin Cities

The project left the researchers wondering to what degree findings might be similar or different elsewhere, since the Twin Cities appear to be a special environment for these conversations, perhaps due to effective advocacy that has supported the Minnesota Legacy Amendment, a 25-year commitment to a small increase in the sales tax, dedicated in part to supporting the arts and cultural heritage.

Residents of the Twin Cities tend to be aware and appreciative that they live in a metropolitan area where arts are uniquely central, and where there is a robust community-based arts scene in addition to the bigger arts institutions, and where engagement with the arts helps drive the region's growth.

[T]here is a vibrant culture here. I notice that a lot of nights of the week there are arts events going on that I've been invited to on social media in a lot of different forms. I think it's very open. I used to live in Boston and was a loose part of the Boston Comics Roundtable, and I've found that the art scene in the Twin Cities is a bit more friendly and a bit more diverse. I also think it's a bit more inviting here than other places I've lived. (Left-Center White Woman, 32, Minneapolis)

There is also appreciation for this state sales tax that supports the arts, once people hear about it (most were not aware before the interviews) because many feel they are reaping the benefits and can see the results.

I'd say our state has done in my view a pretty good job of promoting the arts, and we continue to be a destination for big companies. I know there's this myth out there that we're losing companies on account of our tax base, but it's not born out by the data. … National surveys—CNBC and beyond—always say it's a great place for business, and that's in spite of having our high tax structure. So why is it a great place to do business? It's because we've got great people here. Why do we have great people? It's because we're driving them here with great infrastructure, great arts, and just an overall great place to live. (Moderate/Liberal White Man, 42, Minneapolis)

I didn't know about it. I guess I'm not opposed to it, but I'm fairly conservative and that's not something I would have necessarily voted for. But now that it's here, I'm okay [with it]. (Conservative White Man, 75, Farmington)

These characteristics may mean that we can only draw limited inferences about how the lessons from the Twin Cities may apply in other parts of the country.

How best to combine the recommendations

This study identified a set of helpful elements in conversations about the arts-health connection.

Future research could continue the exploration, by helping to identify with more specificity the most effective ways of combining points like the following in a single concise, communication.

- Establishing the category
- Conveying physical health benefits, that have been scientifically established
- Contrasting investment vs. neglect
- Referring to the causal role of "bringing people together"

Role of awareness, promotion and accessibility

A common lament in the research conversations concerned a lack of awareness about arts opportunities. Many people expressed a desire to know more, or focused on how they try to let others in their life know about opportunities for arts experiences.

The barrier of cost is also a true concern for many people, and opportunities for free arts engagement are not widely known about. Some offered suggestions, like advertisements on city buses, so that people who take public transportation would not be left out, and know that they could attend the bigger arts institutions, like museums, for free.

Challenges related to cost, awareness and availability were particularly salient in discussions with people of color and immigrants, and were often brought up unprompted.

> *People aren't taking advantage of it. It's just not enough … unless you're on certain cable channels, you just don't hear enough. There's just not enough information getting out. I remember when I was raising my daughters, I was hearing a lot of information about the Children's Science Museum, because there was little people I was associated with so I kept hearing the buzz. But if there's no information, there's nothing to catch my attention, I don't think about it. So of course, sure, get rid of that—I don't use it, I'm not concerned about it, I'm not aware of it. Honestly, since my daughters have all become adults, I don't even think about the arts. I reminisce about the arts, of times before we shared, but moving forward it's just not … everyone's just so busy. No one's taking the time. But again, it's not enough marketing.* (Apolitical Black Woman, 49, Minneapolis)

> *Going to museums, it's really interesting because it gets you out, first of all, and it is some kind of exercise too, and it does make you feel good whenever you can go out and do things, listen to music, go to museums. It can be kind of expensive so I understand where that's coming from. I think if we were able to make it more affordable for people, it would be even better. I think it would really benefit especially kids and things like that.* (Apolitical Hmong-Asian Woman, 19, St. Paul)

On one hand, this context is part of why messaging about investment vs. neglect may prove compelling: People often recognize that some communities offer more opportunities than others, and enjoy greater well-being as a result.

On the other, it may be important to sort out through future research how best to promote arts experiences and venues in different communities, as well as the degree to which the deficits in a given community are about a genuine lack of opportunities as opposed to lack of awareness of existing ones.

Demographic differences

While the study was intended to explore widely shared perceptions related to arts and health, and to identify communications approaches that resonate across a broad cross-section of audiences, the researchers did note some differences in discussions based on demographics. The research was not at a scale that can yield confident findings about how different groups respond, but the following dynamics are worth considering and perhaps following up in later research.

Socio-economic status

This round of research deliberately included a significant number of conversations in lower-SES communities, with high concentrations of immigrants and/or people of color. Importantly, individuals in these communities were inclined to agree with the importance of arts experiences, and to believe in their potential to promote positive health outcomes at the individual and community levels. Individuals in these communities responded positively to messages discussed in the Recommendations section—which is an important part of why these approaches have emerged as helpful.

On the other hand, there are some particular dynamics to note about these conversations. An important pattern, already alluded to, is that people in lower-SES communities tended to point out a relative lack of opportunities and/or awareness related to arts experiences.

> *Maybe there's not enough funding. I know for my community there's no such thing. There isn't a program that says, 'We'll teach you how to sew the traditional way,' or teach you folklore or mythology. They don't have that in this community.* (Liberal Hmong Woman, 38, St. Paul)

> *You really don't know what state-funded money could do for people. For example, when I brought up mental health, let's say you live in a really bad neighborhood and you have issues and you're just not feeling the best. If you were to fund a playground, a park, where there was no life in that neighborhood and now you have life there because now you have kids who can go to the park, or you can take a walk and see beautiful things and feel good—instead of just fixing potholes and things like that. Of course that's important, but you never know what you could do.* (Apolitical Hmong-Asian Woman, 20, St. Paul)

> *[Asked if she had 100 dollars to distribute to both the police and to the arts, how would she do it, a women replied:] "50 police. 50 the arts. I'll do 50/50. Yep! … I need the security, and I need the art."* (Liberal East-African Woman, 32, St. Paul)

Asked if the arts could also help with the crime in the area:

Of course. Give them something to laugh about. Something to enjoy. Something to love. Something interesting. That way you can get them out of their misery and just being happy. (East-African Woman, 32, St. Paul)

I think here in Minnesota to be concerned, you have to put the word out. Like I told my girlfriend about that, because she has little ones—I said you know it's free days, you don't always have to pay. It's free days at the children's museum, it's free days … you just have to put the word out. People don't know about it, so I don't think they access the service because they don't know about it. But it is vital…. the resources are here, I tell people that all the time, but you have to look for it. It's just not readily available, like you don't hear about it. It's here, but you just don't hear about it… Like, people ride the bus—the community you want to reach. You might want to put that on the bus; bus stops. I'm just saying. Do commercials. You have to get your audience. You wouldn't know about free days sometimes with museums unless you go, you have a membership. Like the science museum, you need to advertise that so people know that the resources are there. ([Declined to state political views] Black Woman, mid-30s, Minneapolis)

Overall, this pattern may mean that residents of lower-SES communities are particularly receptive audiences for good messaging about the need for public investment (as opposed to neglect) to promote the arts-health effect.

Politics

The recommended messages had the capacity to engage people across the political spectrum, and many of the positive and negative patterns noted earlier in the report characterize people's thinking regardless of their politics.

On the other hand, enthusiasm for the topic did not seem to be entirely independent of politics. Perhaps not surprisingly, those who leaned more democratic/liberal tended to be more excited about discussing the arts and their implications. Those who, by default, were more resistant to having such conversations, and to the idea of greater public support for the arts, tended to be more conservative—and also to live at a further remove from Twin Cities metro area.

As communicators are no doubt already aware, liberal audiences are likely to start out at a somewhat more receptive place for the conversation—but a large part of the point of the recommended approaches is to help bridge and transcend these differences.

Ethnicity

An interesting observation from conversations with immigrants and people of color is that some see arts as particularly important to people in their own culture. American cultural common sense often frames arts as a relative luxury, and a secondary consideration lower in priority than more "practical" concerns.

But when we asked a 27-year-old Somali interpreter about his connections to the arts he responded, "I'm Somali"—as if to say his enthusiasm for the arts was predictable from his ethnicity. Reflecting on our conversation, he noted:

> ***It's good. I like it. We need to talk together. We need to come together as a community, do a dialogue. It's kind of like cultural interpretation. But we need to learn cultures. We need our neighborhood to learn our culture, so that we can learn our culture too.*** **(Democrat Somali Man, 27, Minneapolis)**

Other non-whites, and particularly immigrants, reflected a similar sense of arts' cultural centrality.

> ***It [arts] should be [a priority for public funding]. It should be. I think that's what we live for. Art. That's how we live. I don't think you can live your life without art. So art is part of everyone's life. (Liberal East-African Woman, 32, St. Paul)***

> ***I think one thing we overlook is having a program for arts, creativity, expression. As a young person, I didn't have that. I didn't have a way of expressing what I was going through. I'm Hmong, so trying to balance my heritage and what I went through at school. So I think having a program like that would be really meaningful and great for the community as a whole. (Liberal Hmong-American Woman, 38, St. Paul)***

> ***I think sometimes we intellectualize art to the degree that it's seen as the garnish on our society instead of potentially a significant part of the meal. (Conservative Taino Indian/Puerto Rican Woman, 55, St. Paul)***

When the rubber meets the road

The research did include discussions about public funding—and yielded hopeful findings along these lines, discussed earlier. But there is certainly room for additional exploration of the dynamics as the discussion turns to much more concrete proposals regarding taxes and funding, for instance, and objections about "taking money out of people's pockets."

The researchers' impression is that positive conversations about the arts do not tend to suddenly turn lukewarm or critical the moment money and taxes comes up. Nonetheless, there is certainly additional work to be done in determining how best to frame arts as a public funding priority in the give and take of real public debate.

Group tour from the Meet Me at MoMA program. Photo: Jason Brownrigg.

CONCLUSION

As arts advocacy continues to evolve in the U.S., there is likely to be an increasing emphasis on the social benefits that arts investments offer. The pilot study reported on here suggests that a focus on health benefits in particular has great potential to engage attention and support—to tap into default perspectives about the benefits of arts experiences, while sharpening those impressions and turning them into concrete beliefs that are the basis for action. When a diverse pool of Twin Cities residents heard about scientific studies demonstrating the physical health benefits of arts experiences, and heard that doctors are even beginning to prescribe such experiences, they were quick to embrace this information, and often eager to share it. When they heard messages about the rationale for investing in the arts in order to improve health outcomes in a community, they recognized the value of the approach and engaged in a constructive conversation about it. In short, the focus on health built on an already positive foundation and helped turn it into a more focused and motivating sense of the arts and their importance.

While this is only a modest pilot study in a single location, the results confirm that communications approaches like the ones recommended here are well worth continuing to explore in other locations and contexts.

APPENDICES

TEXTS

The research included conversations about the following texts, or variants of them, each of which approaches the arts-health connection from a somewhat different direction, in order to explore which core focuses are most productive.

Legacy Amendment Funding

Minnesota voters did something really smart about ten years ago when they decided on a very small increase in the sales tax for things like the environment, parks, and the arts. While only about 20 percent of the proceeds from the special tax goes to the arts, that's enough to make the amount of arts funding available for every person in Minnesota significantly more than people in any other state. As a result, people in Minnesota get the benefits from that spending—things like more connected communities as people come together to share arts experiences, and more open-minded neighborhoods as they learn about people with different backgrounds through the local arts, music and culture scene.

Superfood

Some experts are now calling arts a superfood for communities. Health experts sometimes talk about "superfoods" that have amazing health benefits—and it turns out that artistic and creative activities are like a superfood for a community. When people in a community have access to concerts and plays and galleries and dance classes, they are healthier in many different ways. These activities not only improve individual health outcomes for participants, but they connect the community together in ways that lead to even more health benefits for everyone. *We need to take the connection seriously between arts and well-being, and spend some of our public money making sure everyone has access to activities like these.*

Studies I

Many, many studies show a connection between arts and health. For instance, research in Australia has found that people who attend more concerts, museums, dance performances etc. have significantly better mental health than those who don't—regardless of the people's income, education, gender, age, etc. A Connecticut program brought breast cancer survivors together to engage in movement and dance, and showed that participants reported better health and quality of life than people who didn't participate. People in hospital rooms have better recoveries if they have a nice view of nature—either an actual view or even a photograph—than if they have just a view of the wall. We need to take the connection seriously between arts and well-being, and spend some of our public money making sure everyone has access to activities like these.

Studies II

Many, many studies show a connection between arts and health. For instance, research in Australia has found that people who attend more concerts, museums, dance performances etc. have significantly better mental health than those who don't—regardless of the people's income, education, gender, age, etc. A Connecticut program brought breast cancer survivors together to engage in movement and dance, and showed that participants reported better health and quality of life than people who didn't participate. People in hospital rooms have better recoveries if they have a nice view of nature—either an actual view or even a photograph—than if they have just a view of the wall. In fact the link between the arts and health is so clear that doctors in Montreal are prescribing visits to the art museum.

Community Investment

One of the most important investments a community can make is in its local arts, music and culture scene. When a community spends money making sure people have access to concerts or galleries, dance classes or choruses to sing in, it boosts the health and well-being of individuals and the community as a whole. Research has shown that people who participate have healthier individual outcomes, and that communities get more connected and more effective at promoting their own well-being. So when there are discussions about how to spend tax dollars in a community, investments to promote arts and creative experience should be a high priority.

Connected Communities

Experts say one important factor in people's health is whether they live in "connected communities." And arts experiences like attending concerts or galleries, or taking a dance class or singing in a chorus, help create these more connected, healthier communities. In places where these activities are more available, people have more opportunities to connect with each other, share meaningful experiences, learn about each other, and develop a sense of common purpose. And more connected communities are healthier communities—where people make sure that important services are available, that streets are safe for pedestrians, and so on.

Vitamins & Exercise

It may be surprising, but it turns out people need arts experiences almost like we need vitamins or exercise. Experts have come to see the arts as an active ingredient in our well-being because studies show that experiencing and making art makes people happier and less stressed, and also more connected to their neighbors and larger community. Like vitamins and exercise, arts experiences—such as concerts, dance classes, or arts festivals—increase people's resilience and overall health outcomes. And these activities promote the overall health of the community too, acting like vitamins that promote connection, engagement, and shared purpose.

Budget cuts

There have been hundreds of studies showing that artistic and creative activities have important health benefits—which is why communities have to push back against cuts to arts budgets. When things like concerts, dance classes, or arts festivals are available in a community, people are healthier: less stressed, more connected with one another, more socially engaged, etc. But when these things aren't funded, everyone in the community ends up suffering, sometimes in measurable ways related to their health.

Stigma

One way the arts improve community health is by reducing prejudice and its effects. It's been shown that when a person is looked down on—due to race, poverty, being an immigrant, or mental illness, and so on—it has effects on the person's long-term health. But storytelling, plays, songs, poems and so forth are all ways that we can see the world through someone else's eyes—and that stigmatized people can see their own experience reflected—so everyone actually feels better, including the stigmatized group, and health outcomes improve.

Not just mental health

Doctors are finding out more about how engaging with the arts—theater, dance, music, paintings, sculptures, etc.—not only helps with mental health, but with physical health. In fact, doctors in Montreal are prescribing visits to the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts to their patients. A Connecticut study showed that breast cancer survivors who engaged in movement and dance reported better health including better physical health outcomes. And relatedly, people in hospital rooms have better physical recoveries if they have a nice view of nature—either an actual view or even a photograph—than if they just have a view of a wall. We need to take the connection seriously between arts and well-being, and spend some of our public money making sure everyone has access to activities like these.

Investing in health

Some people think of the arts as a treat, like the icing on the cake, something that people do occasionally for fun, but not strictly necessary for a healthy community. Yet doctors in some places are starting to emphasize that cities and states should put tax money into supporting the arts, because of the health benefits. One area everyone agrees it makes sense to invest public money is in things that keep people healthy—from food inspections to clean water supplies to reducing smog. It turns out that arts experiences—like attending concerts or galleries, or taking a dance class or singing in a chorus—all have significant physical and mental health benefits. Doctors in Montreal are even prescribing visits to art museums to their patients, with positive results. If we take health seriously, we need to take arts experiences seriously and invest in them to make sure people have access to them.

SAMPLE DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The elicitations and ethnographic conversations for the project included questions like the following. (Note that all conversations were semi-structured, with room for variable wording, probing on different topics, and so forth.)

When I mention the arts, what comes to mind?

What's your relationship to art in your life?

Are you originally from the Twin Cities area? Do you think that people relate to the arts differently in this area, compared to other places?

Most cities have a lot of issues that need to improve, from reducing crime to trying to create jobs to fixing schools. What are some priorities that come to mind in your community?

If someone asked you why arts are important for a community, what would you say?

How important are the arts, compared to the other kinds of issues we talked about earlier?

How would you distinguish the kinds of health benefits of concerts or arts festivals, compared with something like a baseball game?

If someone said public money should be put into more important things than arts, how would you respond?

How might the arts be better at promoting a sense of connection and belonging than other things people do together?

Why do you think this topic is important for communities—or is it?

Does it matter whether a person is doing the art or just experiencing someone else doing it? (Why? How so?)

What do you think keeps the arts from impacting more people?

Does your community offer much in terms of opportunities for people to have artistic or creative experiences? What do you think the consequences might be?

What do you think that you will recall most about this conversation later on?

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ABOUT TOPOS

Developed over 15 years of close collaboration between its three principals—a cognitive linguist, a public opinion strategist, and a cultural anthropologist—the Topos approach is designed to deliver tools with a proven capacity to shift perspectives in more constructive directions, give communicators a deeper picture of the issue dynamics they are confronting, and suggest the fundamentally different alternatives available to them. This exploratory project deployed multiple Topos methodologies, including cognitive elicitations, media analysis, and ethnography.