



# ∞ The idea of Cultural IDs: tracing the uniqueness of our sector

# The idea of Cultural IDs: tracing the uniqueness of our sector

When you learn as a child that your fingerprint is unique to you, this almost seems magical. Like many other things, it makes you unique, but also trackable, as many detective stories and true-crime stories prove. The cultural sector and all that it produces is valuable and unique in itself as well. Nonetheless, on a digital scale, between organisations or sub-sectors, the cultural field is unfortunately hard to track.

With the cultural product as the positive driving force of bringing new artistic work into the world and towards (new) audiences, it would be very helpful to learn more about the digital tracks it leaves behind. Not only for the yielding of ticket sales, but also for the more idealistic aims of social benefits (like diversity and inclusion) of culture through policymaking.

When we want to learn more about the development of cultural trends, audience engagement or having an overview of what's out there, having a simple digital fingerprint could really help to combine all the information into a logical story to tell.

Thus, this article aims to advocate for issuing cultural IDs for the products and productions, cultural organisations, locations, and its producers (the makers/artists) on an international scale. It will acknowledge the downsides. Nonetheless, it aims to be used as a conversation starter between the cultural field and the tech companies providing their software to the sector. It aims for a collective and cross-border approach to the tracking of our mutual cultural value.



## How could this help us?

But why should we want to set this up? Having these unique IDs incorporated in all different databases is not a goal in itself. It's the means to an end.

1. The cultural ID would help to connect cultural products, organisations and makers across different applications and databases and give more insight into their total movement and impact within the field. This information could be used for a wide range of purposes: from yielding ticket sales to audience development and policymaking. Thus, helping cultural organisations in their daily practice of running their business as well as policymakers in developing future policies.
2. The EU, but also (local and national) governments could make their IT services much more effective and efficient by standardising and using a similar language, making the available data easier to compare. It will make their services for both businesses and citizens more reliable, recognisable, and user friendly<sup>1</sup>. This benefit is relevant to the usually highly subsidised cultural sector where public funding should be spent wisely.
3. It could help to provide an overview of what's out there on offer (for a specific time period and time), thus providing many agendas with crucial basic information. Whereas it is helpful for cultural organisations to have their products digitally on offer as wide as possible, but also for the (potential) audience, who will be able to find products of their interest easier via different platforms
4. It would form the backbone of all other information connected to the main assets like technical information or additional (marketing)content. It would also help to get details changed in all the right places, once expedient (like a business address or title change). For individual cultural organisations this could take away pressure in the daily operations where employees are often overloaded with work, and support more efficient and effective processes within, but also between cultural organisations.

In more general terms, having Cultural IDs would contribute to having a much better digital infrastructure in order for separate databases, different tech suppliers and cultural organisations to exchange better data more *efficiently*.

This basic hygiene and foundation paves the ground for a healthier, more inclusive cultural sector that helps to exchange aggregated data on audience engagement in order to learn about larger trends, yielding possibilities, but also ways to analyse what is happening in the field to feed into new policymaking. For example, to aim for minority groups or making sure that public money is divided fairly among the population. All of this would foster more data informed decision making.

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.rekenkamer.nl/onderwerpen/ict-en-digitalisering/digitalisering-rijksoverheid>



## What's the alternative?

Of course, the realisation of a cultural ID across (sub)sectors or even across borders will be quite a challenge. Not so much on a technical level, but rather on an organisational and governing level. Nonetheless, the alternatives also do feel suboptimal: having to undouble datasets from different sources to get aggregated insights, which is time-consuming, labour-intensive or asking for technical (suboptimal) workarounds. Or the need for individual organisations to manually enter basic information in all different booking, planning and ticketing software. If the sector really wants to go forward in the (digital) world, stay on top of their own game (and thus data), the basic hygiene of having cultural IDs for some main assets does seem like a no-brainer. Individual organisations could gain insights and time for employers to spend on more strategic tasks rather than unnecessary administrative labour.

If you add up all the hours spent by people entering data into databases and double-checking it, this is not only unnecessary work, but also error-prone, and it doesn't bring the data together beyond the individual organisation. Although these labour costs are divided among many organisations and subfields and thus could in itself feel trivial (*'there is someone there at the box office, thus why a problem for them to enter some data?'*), it is very cost-inefficient for the sector that usually really needs to watch its (IT)budgets.

## The downsides and a small step up

As with many solutions, the perfect one in theory usually has its downsides in practice. This also applies to the idea of having unique IDs in the cultural field. The most prominent challenge is the governance and implementation. For example, which independent body is suitable to give out and manage these IDs? What are the rules of applying for a cultural ID? Or said differently, when should a cultural maker or product be taken seriously enough to receive such an ID and who decides?

Also, in reality there is often a difference between official standards set and the unofficial working processes (the 'de facto standards') used in practice. These latter are often enforced by the larger – usually more commercial – parties in the field. From a governing perspective, this is not the ideal situation for a sector as these parties are not independent and could have – understandably – their own interests first. Technically it is easy to follow the working process of the largest company, but on a policy level it is better to organise a more democratic process for the set up and implementation of new standards.

Last, but not least, the real success of IDs falls and stands with being complete. A critical mass of tech suppliers and cultural organisations will need to be using such IDs in order to get the desired advantages.

The latter advocates for stretching the idea of ID implementation towards perhaps setting standards for data fields first. Standardisation of the (API)export functionalities would already move things forward substantially. To unify the data fields through which we share information on the date, time, location, title, description, and perhaps the artist involved of cultural products would already immensely simplify the way we share and collect information on a collective level.



## A communal dot on the horizon

Nonetheless, if it is possible to organise a unique identifier for products on a general level (EAN<sup>2</sup>) or more specifically for books (ISBN<sup>3</sup>), why not for the wide range of cultural products? Also, from a governing perspective, the NEN<sup>4</sup> has been able to organise collective norms and standards for over a hundred years. Thus, the road is most likely challenging, but not impossible. Why not at least try to set a standard for the cultural sector and start the conversation?

The music industry has made the exchange of data and information across the music industry more efficient through the DEXX initiative<sup>5</sup>. Behind this initiative are large commercial parties like Amazon, Apple, Meta, Google, Sony and Spotify. This proves that there is also something to gain for large commercial parties to work collectively on a certain level in order to exchange data more efficiently. Thus, it is the challenge of knowing our collective advantages and organising that the right way. Also in the Netherlands, DIP<sup>6</sup> (Digital Information Platform for the Performing Arts) was able to define collective definitions for ticket sales and financial settlements between theatres and producers all across the field. These definitions have been translated to all the different box-office and planning software systems. The process of this standardisation was done in close cooperation with the sector through the consultation of expert groups and representatives from the different trade organisations.

Now both small and large(r) cultural organisations are spending significant amounts of money on trend analyses, external research or marketing bureaus to do the work for them. This is not saying these bureaus do not play a valuable role interpreting the data available or translating it into practical (often marketing-related) solutions. But the preparational work they have to do, or the technical workarounds do carry a cost. For not spending it directly to clean up our wardrobe, we leave it to others to undouble and interpret the available data: both a time-consuming and expensive occupation. This calls for a united effort.

While getting fingerprints at a crime scene feels exciting and crucial to solving crimes, having unique identifiers in the digital world of cultural data is considered inferior compared to the wish to get more information on audience groups (through segmentation) or other marketing-related information. Nonetheless, we should not forget that it is exactly these identifiers that will lay the groundwork for many other wishes and technical possibilities. Or as Sherlock Holmes would say: 'Elementary, my dear Watson.'



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