



Policy Brief

Digital Access to Arts and Culture Beyond COVID-19

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KEY INFO

Research question: What have been the access and inclusion implications of the UK arts sector's pandemic-driven 'pivot' online, and what opportunities does this shift towards hybrid live and digital activity create for making the arts more accessible for all?

Policy area or themes

- Creative Industries
- Arts & Health and Wellbeing
- Equality, Diversity and Inclusion

Methods: Qualitative interviews (40 arts and culture organisations), surveys and analytics (6-8 organisations), analysis of nationwide Culture Restart survey (c. 400 organisations / 40,000 individuals), tracking of UK theatres' digital activities (c. 270 organisations).

Geographical area: UK-wide

Research stage: In progress (report to be published in March 2022)

Summary of the research

The opportunity. The last 20 months have seen a culture change across many arts organisations, from a rigid focus on venue-based programmes to a more agile combination of indoor, outdoor, and online activities. This shift has resulted in a number of unanticipated, and previously unimaginable, accessibility and inclusion benefits.

The project. Our project focuses on identifying and quantifying these benefits, and investigating how best practices in digital accessibility could in turn be incorporated into organisations future hybrid activities.

The team

- Dr. Richard Misek. Principal investigator. Expertise in streaming video and online arts.
- Dr. Adrian Leguinas. Co-investigator. Expertise in culture-focused statistical analysis.
- Kadja Manninen. Project officer. Expertise in digital business models for arts and culture.

The implications. Online arts programmes offer the potential for a technologically-driven revolution in accessibility, but there is already evidence of a 'snap back' to on-site only programming. How to embed recent accessibility wins within arts and culture organisations' on-going activities?

Key findings

- **Arts and culture organisations' pandemic-driven 'pivot' to online programming has achieved immediate and sustained accessibility and inclusion benefits.** In our interviews with arts

organisations, the most commonly noted benefits of digital programming were: widened geographic access (100%); digital capacity building (71%); improved access for d/Deaf, disabled, and vulnerable audiences (57%); and community engagement (57%).

- **Online programming has led to particularly significant benefits for d/Deaf, disabled, vulnerable, and older audiences.** For example, our surveys have found online programmes attracting up to 100% more d/Deaf and disabled audiences than the same content delivered on-site.
- **Online activity has achieved these gains without ‘cannibalising’ in-person programmes.** Rather, our surveys consistently indicate that high quality digital arts and culture makes users *more* likely to engage in future with arts organisations’ work – both in person and online.
- **However, putting content online does not intrinsically widen access to arts and culture.** The potential for online delivery to attract younger, and more ethnically and culturally diverse audiences has so far only been achieved in isolated cases. Analysis of the Culture Tracker surveys suggests that overall, the demographics of online audiences have tended to replicate those of live audiences.

Policy recommendations

- The three Arts Councils and Creative Scotland have the potential to take a leading role in providing incentives and support for arts organisations to develop their digital capacity, and to use digital technologies to achieve accessibility and inclusion objectives.
- More regular and reliable funding streams are required to achieve digital accessibility goals and broader digital capacity building. Current digital initiatives (such as The Space’s ‘Low Cost R&D’) often deliver innovative projects, but do not facilitate longer-term innovation.
- Small and mid-sized organisations have typically been far less able to develop their digital maturity than large organisations, and are in particular need of targeted support.
- In tandem, more channels need to be opened between the cultural industries and the tech sector, to allow the kinds of cross-sector collaboration carried out in the Audience of the Future project – but at much smaller scales and involving many more organisations across the UK.
- Finally, requirements around the use of digital accessibility tools (e.g. audio descriptions, captions, app-based support) need to be integrated into current accessibility frameworks.

Further information

‘Post-pandemic performance’. *Front Row*, BBC Radio 4, 5th October, 2021. Report on project findings and interview with Richard Misek.

‘50% of UK theatres streaming shows online during Covid revert to in-person only’ by Harriet Sherwood, *The Guardian*, 11th October, 2021. Report on project findings and interview with Richard Misek.

‘We know they can do it when it suits them: theatre became more accessible during Covid. Will it last?’ Lucy Webster. *The Guardian*. 15th, October, 2021. Follow-on coverage of 11th October article in *The Guardian*. Follow-on reporting.

‘Is the future of digital theatre in the balance?’. Richard Misek. *Arts Professional*. 1st December, 2021.

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