

Review of available research on digital developments in the arts, and their impacts on and benefits to audiences for Federation of Scottish Theatre.

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This review of the research available from the art and cultural sector and its organisations about the impact and benefits of digital developments reveals that it is scant. This is why the Arts & Humanities Research Council announced in 2011 a programme to support research defined as an Emerging Theme: Digital Transformations in the Arts and Humanities. NESTA also currently have a call out for desk research to be conducted around the Digital Development Initiative for Scotland. They are also researching all the 8 English successful Digital R&D fund projects and the Scottish projects (commencing 2012).

The available research on digital performance content that explicitly focuses upon the audience development potential, the benefits and impacts of digital developments on audiences, are explored explicitly in just a few publications and surveys.

The National Endowment of the Arts study of US Arts Participation survey data, Audience 2.0, compared patterns of live and electronic participation of 'benchmark' and non-benchmark, and found:

Arts participation through media does not appear to "replace" live arts attendance, personal arts performance, or arts creation. In fact, arts engagement through media is associated with higher rates of participation in those activities, even after statistically controlling for demographic traits (National Endowment for the Arts 2010: 14).

There is now evidence that digital participation in the arts complements rather than threatens 'off-line' or 'real' participation, potentially offers a means to increase digital, social and cultural participation.

Beyond Live (2010), the research briefing prepared by NESTA, is an in-depth research study on the two NT Live pilots that were simulcast in 2010 - Phèdre on 25th June and All's Well That Ends Well on 1st October. The research shows how this innovation has allowed the National to reach new audiences for theatre, not least by drawing on established relationships between cinemas and their patrons all over the country (the shows sold out to a cinema demographic rather than to the NT's theatre-going demographic).

It confirms the centrality of 'live' for the audience experience - both in the theatre and in cinemas. Cinema audiences reported even higher levels of emotional engagement with the production than audiences at the theatre. They also claim that they are now more likely to visit the theatre in the future, suggesting that there may be positive spill-overs on the wider sector, and audience development potential for simulcasts.

Other research and survey briefings include Digital Content Snapshot (Arts Council England 2009), which examines the web presence of all RFOs in England. It argues that the digital presences, content and services of arts organisations are important to arts organisations as

they present opportunities for them “to position themselves as creators and distributors of public service content” as traditional models for public service broadcast change are challenged by fragmentation, divergence and convergence of the media sector. However the same study scores RFO against a range of criteria for the public service content provided, finding it prolific but variable in quality. (Arts Council England 2009: 7).

A further Arts Council study, in partnership with the BBC, conducted research into online content produced and held by arts organisations, Arts content online: assessing the potential (Hutton, 2010). The research comprised a questionnaire survey of 40 English RFOs to explore how digital technologies might – through digital services and platforms – connect publicly-funded arts content better with audiences, in order to explore the scope for partnership work between the BBC and the Arts Council England. It aimed to ascertain the extent and type of content held by selected Arts Council England regularly funded organisations and to understand the level of interest among regularly funded organisations in making content available via online platforms. The survey sheds light on discussions about digital archives and the potential capacity and willingness for content distribution through other platforms and services.

All the responding organisations said they had an archive, or some form of ‘content resource’ , other headlines are:

- the total content of the responding RFOs was quantified as approximately 60,000 hours and 31,000 items
- 60 per cent of items held were five minutes and over in length;
- the most commonly held content type were artist interviews (83 per cent of organisations), followed by recordings of performances (75 per cent) and talks and debates (73 per cent) Most (93 per cent) of organisations made their content available through their own website
- 60 per cent used YouTube
- 55 per cent distributed content through other means including: big screen (outdoor) and cinema broadcast, Vimeo, CDs, facebook and Myspace
- 28 organisations (70 per cent) did not charge for access to their content
- 12 organisations (30 per cent) charged for access to some of their content (Hutton 2009: 2).

The research aimed to find out broadly whether organisations’ current rights situation allows sharing of content via online platforms:

- 13 organisations (33 per cent) could distribute 100 per cent of their content themselves
- Three organisations could distribute 100 per cent of their content within certain limitations
- There was a widespread view among respondents that arts organisations struggle with rights issues, particularly of archived content (Hutton 2009: 3).

The concerns raised by the study include the curatorial aspects of content distribution and the need for greater expertise in rights management; some organisations expressed interest in participatory and interactive experiences rather than ‘linear’ broadcast models. The benefits of a possible partnership with BBC were perceived as access to skills and knowledge about archiving and content distribution.

The Art of Digital survey (Gilmore, 2010) looked at NW cultural organisations, 5 years on from the original Arts Magnet survey (Rudman & Morris Hargreaves McIntyre, 2006). The 2010 study found that although over 80 per cent of responding organisations create content, 40 per cent do not keep a digital archive of any kind. Further headlines are:

- Of the 64 per cent of RFOs who do have an archive, most used a dedicated online space (76 per cent)
- 91 per cent of all RFOs spent no more than 10 per cent of their budgets on digital content creation (with 22 per cent spending nothing at all).
- Only 21 per cent of the regularly funded organisations considered their use of digital media offered any potential for 'exploiting intellectual property rights'.

Among the organisations of the North West, it was noticeable that they concentrated staffing more in areas of social media use than that of archiving – particularly the regularly funded organisations. This may be because social media use is easier to integrate and habituated into daily lives and activities. Social media is by definition a reciprocating social experience that can be done in 'down time'. Archiving however requires dedicated time, specifically at the end of projects and integrated into project workflows. Archiving also, to a much greater degree, requires specialist knowledge of digital production processes.

Other publications reference the publications and reports listed above, but do not explicitly focus on audience development/audience engagement/audience participation potential. Instead, the other research reports and papers available focus on how new technologies open up possibilities for more effective pursuit of organisational goals. For example, Bakshi & Throsby (2010) in *Culture of Innovation: An economic analysis of innovation in arts and cultural organisations*, make the case that digital innovations broadly impact the whole of a cultural business' practices. Focussing on research studies undertaken by NESTA with The Tate and The National Theatre, they develop a framework that looks at digital developments through the following angles:

- Functionality – expression of value created by efficiency or rejuvenation of business model;
- Public service – arts as public service publisher/ broadcaster, responsible for improving well being (value creation);
- Digital Engagement for strategic relationships (audience and funds development, lobbying, advocacy, campaigning, co-production);
- Digital Aesthetics/art form development – new hybrid artforms and storytelling techniques; and
- Business model improvement in the creative economy.

Looking ahead, Arts Council England are likely to conduct further evaluations on digital developments and their impacts as The Space¹ initiative goes live in May 2012, and NESTA will likely publish their evaluations of the successful projects of their English Digital R&D Fund in 2012, with the Scottish projects launching in 2012 and evaluated by the end of 2013².

¹ <http://www.artscouncil.org.uk/funding/apply-for-funding/strategic-funding/thespace/>

² http://www.nesta.org.uk/digital_rnd_scotland

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