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Implications of the COVID-19 digital
'pivot' in museums and galleries:
lessons from practitioners

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Abstract

This discussion paper details findings from interviews carried out one year on from the first Covid-19 lockdown in the United Kingdom. It reports our investigation into the challenges presented for digital practitioners in UK galleries and museums by the rapid and extended shift to operating in the online environment (the so-called digital 'pivot'), and considers what the longer-term legacies of that period should be for institutional approaches to digital work, and for research in related fields.

Reports from sector bodies and allied agencies were quick to document these changes,¹ and researchers are now reflecting on their significance.² The particular aim of this study has been to complement that activity by developing our understanding of the pandemic's impact on the professional lives and outputs of those working at the sharp end of digital development and delivery at that time. The stories we have been told through this research help us make sense of other data that have been (and continue to be) collected, documenting changes in working practices, content strategies, and the delivery of programmes during this period.

Our findings show that there have been many digital 'pivots'. There was a pivot in terms of strategies and practices, as institutions negotiated the sudden centrality of their online presence. There was the intense challenge of re-thinking online engagement with a now exclusively digital audience. There was the need to respond thoughtfully and urgently to the Black Lives Matter protests, and there was a desire to be active and present within local communities, even if doing so remotely. But the pivot to digital approaches also affected the ways (all) organisations were operating behind the scenes of course; people were adapting to working remotely, and ensuring good communications and workflows within and between teams was paramount.

One key finding from this qualitative study is that our respondents wanted to question and challenge what we mean when we talk about digital approaches, and the possibilities that flow from them: Is digital strategy a question of technology or of technical skills, or is it a mindset, perhaps characterised by rich collaboration, participation and audience-centricity? Can we think more strategically about how digital practices may contribute to an institutions' mission(s) and in what ways, and be clearer about when they do not? Do we really understand who digital approaches work for, and with, and what or who they exclude? And does everything in an institution have to, or can it, pivot to digital environments in such moments of crisis? These questions have technological dimensions, but also deep financial, cultural, ethical and political implications that should not be underestimated.

This paper will be of interest to digital practitioners in museums and galleries, as well as those in senior management teams who are now trying to make sense of the impacts of the pandemic on their digital work, and to prepare a case for priorities going forward. It will also be of interest to funders and policy makers with a remit for

¹ See for example AudienceNet 2020, Audience Agency 2020, Art Fund 2020, ICOM 2020, Macfarland et al. 2020, NEMO 2020, OECD 2020, UNESCO 2020.

² Agostino et al. 2020, Galani and Kidd 2020, King et al. 2020, Kist 2020, McGrath 2020, Zuanni 2020, Samaroudi et al. 2020, Banks and O'Connor 2021, Gray and Wright 2021, Ryder et al. 2021.

museums and galleries, offering valuable insights and empirical evidence for consideration as we tentatively begin to talk about futures for the cultural sector. In doing so, this paper strengthens and nuances the case for a number of key recommendations from the July 2021 *Boundless Creativity* report from the AHRC and DCMS, which presents a post-pandemic pathway to recovery and sustainable growth for the cultural and creative sectors. These include recommendations to 'Build a Strong, Resilient and Diverse Digital Skills Base', 'Broaden Digital Access for Producers and Consumers', 'Reshape the Policy Environment to invigorate Creative R&D' and 'Increase Data Sharing'. For those researching in the fields of digital heritage, cultural policy, museum and heritage studies, the paper presents findings that have implications for how we understand and investigate digital practices in both online and offline arts and heritage contexts, as well as highlighting gaps and potential agendas for future research.

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Introduction

As museums and galleries in and beyond the UK went into full lockdown in March 2020 they intensified their efforts to interact with audiences in the digital environment, often accelerating digital plans and ambitions, and working at phenomenal pace (Gray and Wright 2021). There was a sharp increase in virtual tours, online exhibitions, podcasts, quizzes and social media interactions which has been documented and discussed elsewhere.³ Much of that activity was free to access, indicating that institutions remained unsure how to monetize it, or whether it was appropriate to do so in the circumstances.

Assessments of those activities have been mixed however. M. Sharon Jeannotte (2020) asserts that visual arts institutions, museums and historic sites 'have been among the most creative in using digital platforms, particularly social media, to try to recapture and connect with audiences and patrons' (Jeannotte 2020: 4). According to Gray and Wright's assessment however, such institutions have struggled during this period to create content that stands out for its quality 'in the face of strong existing competition', and they propose that cultural organisations remain uncertain 'how to use digital technologies to interact meaningfully with audiences' (Gray and Wright 2021). A report from the International Council of Museums (ICOM) concluded that the period had brought into sharp relief 'some structural weaknesses that have for a long time affected cultural institutions, in terms of resources and staff dedicated to digital activities and communication, and the level of maturity of the content produced' (ICOM 2020: 9). Critically, questions have been raised about whether accessibility of content has been a high enough priority, not least given persistent inequalities and digital poverty (OECD 2020).

These concerns – about skills, resourcing, access, metrics, maturity of content and approaches – and how the pandemic might yet prove to have alleviated or exacerbated them for museums and galleries, have not to date been explored qualitatively to include insight from digital practitioners. This paper does just that. It provides a rich account of the realities of working at the sharp end of digital delivery during the pandemic; the successes, the challenges, the volatility and the resolve. As we tentatively begin to talk about futures for the cultural sector, and of the role of digital activities in supporting those futures, these insights will be invaluable.

Our use of the term 'pivot' to describe the often fast-paced skew toward digital assets, practices and capabilities during the pandemic reflects broader discourse that has been in circulation since the start of lockdown. This was a term our interviewees used comfortably in discussions, and as such it became a shared short-hand to describe fundamental changes in operations experienced by all during the pandemic. That said, the term was not one that everybody felt comfortable with in case it undermined or misrepresented already established institutional or professional practices. For a few (perhaps more digitally mature) organisations, the pandemic meant more of the same, albeit against a background of disrupted working practices and timescales.

³ See for example Art Fund 2020, and beyond the UK, ICOM 2020, NEMO 2020, UNESCO 2020, OECD 2020.

In terms of internal pivoting to digital...we kind of did have the sense that, right, we're going to have to learn how to do things differently now.

There was obviously a pivot to digital while museums closed.

What we did have to work towards was every single project within the museum pivoting to digital at the same time.

In many respects, there wasn't a pivot, we've already always viewed our audience as a global one. An online global audience that is large and thriving.

I don't really like that term because digital's a channel we use all the time and we were talking to audiences in just a slightly different way. So I wouldn't say we necessarily pivoted to digital in anything apart from we've been streaming some online events.

In the sections that follow we introduce our methodology and key findings. For each set of findings we present key emerging questions to inform discussions about (digital) recovery post-pandemic for museums and galleries.

Study Methodology

This study was designed in follow up to research undertaken by the authors for the 'Impacts of Covid-19 on the cultural sector' project.⁴ That research project had involved a systematic analysis of a six-week snapshot of social media activity from March-May 2020 to explore the parameters of cultural institutions' attempts at engagement via those networks, and of audience responses to that endeavour (Nieto McAvoy and Kidd 2021).

In order to achieve a more rounded assessment of those activities, the decision was made to interview a sample of those responsible for digital content during the pandemic at a range of institutions across the UK. We opted to broaden those discussions to encompass a wider range of issues pertaining to digital activities during the pandemic, at the same time as focusing them more tightly on museums and galleries in particular.

The research questions underpinning this study were as follows:

1. How has the pandemic impacted institutional approaches to digital engagement for galleries and museums?
2. What impact has the pandemic had on institutional approaches to social media in particular?⁵
3. How do institutions understand/measure/articulate engagement with digital outputs? What worked, and what worked less well, during the pandemic? Have digital approaches helped diversify audiences?
4. Has the pandemic prompted more nuanced discussion about digital inequalities within institutions?
5. Has there been a shift in institutional understandings of the value and importance of digital work over the course of the pandemic?
6. What are the key takeaways about digital engagement that we should use to inform strategy going forward?⁶

For the study we spoke to Digital Managers/Directors and/or those responsible for social media in museums and galleries. In total we interviewed 19 people;⁷ nine of whom were working for national museums or galleries, and 10 working for independent and/or city museums drawn from across the UK.⁸ An overview of

⁴ Funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council as part of UK Research and Innovation's Covid-19 rapid rolling call. The project was led by the Centre for Cultural Value and included researchers from the PEC. More information is available at <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/the-team/covid-19-research-project/>

⁵ This question was designed to complement the work outlined above and in Nieto McAvoy and Kidd 2021.

⁶ The full set of interview questions is documented in Appendix 1.

⁷ We worked to secure a diverse pool of respondents in terms of demographic representation.

⁸ With the exception of Northern Ireland where we did not secure a respondent. This was an unfortunate consequence of the snowballing strategy: North East England (1); North West England (3); East Midlands (1); West Midlands (1); London (5); South East England (2); South West England and Gibraltar (2); Northern Ireland (0); Scotland (3); Wales (1).

geographical spread is presented in Appendix 2. In this paper, all respondents are quoted anonymously.

Key considerations emerging from the data

A series of common 'phases' to the lockdown response were identified by our interviewees. Together, they constitute a kind of shared arc or timeline which is helpful in framing discussions in the sections that follow:

Phase 1: For all institutions the first lockdown started with a period of intense communications activity to inform audiences of arrangements for closure, at the same time as staff transferred to homeworking. Interviewees describe these opening weeks as 'reactive'⁹ and with little time to think strategically.

Phase 2: This was then typically followed by a period of experimentation to explore what kind of digital provision would gain traction, utilizing what one interviewee called a more 'tactical' approach. During this period digital teams were more careful about where they invested time and resources, and to structure internal processes that could support this work.

The majority of digital practitioners we spoke to were *not* furloughed. Instead, they were tasked with producing or managing much of their institutions' outputs during the lockdown period, which became unmanageable at times. Colleagues from other departments were often seconded to digital roles during this phase, which became a way of better ensuring a productive relationship and proper knowledge exchange between different teams. Collaboration was frequent and more intense during this period than it would typically be.

Phase 3: Once institutions could begin to think about opening again, much of their digital work was devoted to supporting that reopening. Interviewees talked about fears that this would mean a retreat into business as usual in terms of digital production and engagement, and a few were concerned about the longer-term prognosis for their institution's digital work and related ambitions.

Yes, there's a lot of talk around pivoting to digital, and there's a lot of case studies out there of people doing really successful stuff. I have a bit of a sceptical hat on in some senses, in terms of once museums are back in the old kind of 'we are the venue first' mindset, a lot of that will fall away.

I think that digital in the way that we do things is probably slightly less securely part of our overall offer than it was before. Or at least the way in which we do things might slightly be at risk.... Before the pandemic we were getting on with a well understood area of work and the last year has shaken that a bit ... [it has] kind of impeded the momentum of our existing work and it's become sort of less clear how we fit into the whole organization.

⁹ All quotations from interviews are italicized.

In the sections that follow we present findings from the research, focusing on those which are of specific relevance to museums and galleries.¹⁰ We explore findings related to (1) institutional size, structure and digital maturity, (2) digital audiences, (3) content and programming strategies, and (4) post-pandemic ambitions for digital practice.

(1) Institutional size, structure and digital maturity matter

Beyond the above-mentioned broad timeline of events which was commonly expressed by interviewees, their experiences during the pandemic tended to differ depending on institutional size, structure, governance and digital maturity pre-pandemic. Institutions already undergoing periods of intense change in structure and governance felt the impacts of the pandemic greatest. This was often because they were understaffed or had experienced cuts, and in one instance was exacerbated by not being able to access Government support (in this instance through the furlough scheme).

Digital teams are constituted very differently, and there is a lot of movement in digital roles within the sector. Some 'teams' are very small (one or two people working across all activities), and others are much larger. Some include social media within their remit, or the management of audience data, and some do not. Digital teams grew during lockdown due to secondments (and later, appointments). Where secondments worked well colleagues from elsewhere in an institution were able to get experience of content production, to upskill, and to gain a feeling of ownership of digital outputs. Where they worked less well, they led to friction and increased workload for existing digital workers. Teams with extant digital assets (especially audio-visual materials) were able to make the shift online more seamlessly.

Only a few participants in our study had been on **furlough** themselves (and only then for short periods).¹¹ In most cases colleagues in other departments had been on furlough for extended periods, which made the work of digital staff challenging as it is typically very collaborative. This in turn led to a lot of additional behind the scenes labour for those in digital roles, which was often invisible.

¹⁰ There were of course many reflections which we might accept are more generic and tend to be more widely known – about the shift to working from home, the importance of internal communications, and challenges in re-assigning limited resource quickly and effectively for example – and these are referred to where relevant in the overview that follows.

¹¹ Only one digital team in our sample had been on furlough during the first lockdown.

During the first lockdown there were significant **pressures on digital capacity**. All respondents reported experiencing a deluge of interest from other departments. This put pressure on digital managers and teams, especially small ones: everyone in the organisation suddenly wanted 'a piece of digital'. These pressures skewed the kind of digital work being done in manifold ways (see section 3). Internal reflection on priorities for digital work going forward will be vital, alongside scenario-planning for any future rapid-response situation. Such reflection will be an important aspect of continued work toward digital maturity and confidence.

There were lots of meetings with huge groups of people from across the museum with ideas. And me and my colleagues were saying 'this isn't practical, this isn't manageable, we can't do this'. And so we needed people to step in and be like 'we need to have order, we need to funnel these ideas in a way that's constructive'.

After the sort of initial confusion and 'oh we've got to move everything online', I think it became a bit more strategic in terms of what we did. And this sort of recognition [that] 'no, we can't move everything online suddenly. We're going to have to sort of pick the things that we can do, and that we can deliver on'.

Prior levels of digital confidence and maturity significantly impacted institutions' - and practitioners' - experiences of the pandemic.¹² Having a pre-existing infrastructure and/or trajectory with digital approaches was advantageous, and the majority of our interviewees worked in organisations with a digital strategy. All respondents identified skills gaps in their institutions however, a situation which was not helped by the amount of 'churn' in digital roles as identified above. Three of our interviewees had taken part in - and spoke highly of - the *One by One*¹³ initiative (2017-) which has worked to identify digital literacy challenges in the sector and to 'build digitally confident' museums. There was evidence of broad, considered and rich understanding of the competencies required for digital work. Respondents wanted to move beyond talk about a '*digital skills deficit*' model in the sector, and instead to think about how best to enable good practices across institutions and teams, rather than trying to upskill everyone in every area.¹⁴ There was talk of digital competence being not just a technology issue, but a mindset or approach to thinking about and doing things differently, yet in complementary ways, to 'physical' practice on site.

¹² This tallies with findings from Burke et al. who note that 'Museums which prior to COVID-19 had invested in their digital and social media presence have had the value of their efforts confirmed' (2020: 123)

¹³ *One by One* is a 'multi-partner international initiative, bringing together cultural organisations, policy makers, academics, professional bodies, support agencies, and communities of practice, to build digitally confident museums'. It is funded by the AHRC and led by Prof. Ross Parry at the University of Leicester <https://one-by-one.uk/>.

¹⁴ Three people we spoke to talked about encouraging a 'hub and spoke' model which 'allows for a central vision and strong editorial control whilst involving other departments in digital activity' (Price and James, 2018).

I think there's still, in terms of digital literacy, there's still a long way to go... while some people were talking to us about pivoting to online provision of the stuff that they'd normally do in the galleries, there were other people who couldn't even work their computers. And so I think it really brought to the fore, just how big that divide is across the organisation.

I do think there's an understanding now across the sector that actually you have an onsite offer, but you also have an online offer and the museum exists in different kind of modes for different people in different places.

The [institution] is lucky in that we spent four years before lockdown investing in building capacity and capability in digital... we built a relatively sizable digital operation... so we are a relatively mature digital organization.

Skills are very varied across the entire digital estate and different teams that engage with the platforms. One of the things that we learned some years ago when we were doing a lot of internal digital skills training was that we can't expect those who are progressing quickly to bring up those that aren't maybe as skilled or as experienced. So what we need to do is to continue pushing those that have a level of expertise and interest, while also trying to kind of build confidence lower down.

It was generally accepted that further exploration of possible interfaces between online and offline activities and programmes would be fruitful. The value of 'hybridity' and 'blending' was noted, supporting the need to bridge 'the often-polarizing argument between museum materiality and digital engagement, and its implications/ramifications' (Galani and Kidd, 2020: 298, see also Agostino et al. 2020).¹⁵

I'm trying to gradually move towards having a much more hybrid approach... it makes much more sense to do something online when you are doing something on site, so the two can support each other.

We saw immediately in those first two weeks people wanting to have experiences that possibly are like surrogates for the physical experience, as well as experiences and content that are not to do with a physical experience, but are actually about tapping into their own interests, like making at home etc, which was obviously what we were all doing in lockdown.

All interviewees stated that the last year had considerably affected how their institution's senior management think about digital approaches, and **how digital activities and skills are valued**. Interviewees' responses on this point were informed at least in part by pre-pandemic investment in, and perceptions of, digital work within their institutions. The biggest shifts are happening in less digitally mature organisations; digital skills are being recognised and respected more, and investment in skills should follow. For more digitally mature institutions, the pandemic provided the impetus to

¹⁵ This is an observation that has begun to receive significant attention within digital heritage and cultural policy research (see for example the 2021 special issue of *Museum and Society* on '[Digital \(and\) Materiality in Museums](#)').

think about how to have a more measured approach going forward. Digital strategy and the idea of the 'digital estate' are firmly embedded in larger organisations meaning that digital projects, processes and supporting operations are often thought about in the same way as bricks and mortar ones, with their own life cycles and workstrands.

Our senior team I'd say is quite split down the middle between the people who understand digital and the people who think it's perhaps a bit of a phase. I know that sounds a bit bonkers to say, because how can you think digital is a phase now but members of staff, there are people who've worked there for over 30 years, so they remember working there without computers so to them it's still quite new. But since this year I think they all are now on board and 'okay, this is essential.'

There was definitely tension of people not quite understanding how social media works... You have to have faith in me doing my job and doing it to the best of my ability.

Certainly digital, I think, is being taken more seriously in terms of actually being resourced.

So we're quite tuned in from trustee level down into what digital means so, you know, it's quite a different kind of conversation [here] than a lot of cultural institutions. But there was a moment in April last year, where [the management acknowledged] that we are a digital only institution now. And that was the truth for six months out of the last year; there was only the digital [institution].

[digital] is an approach in itself and a key area, and the main way that people engage with us... that's really transformed the way that we work into the future. We were at a tipping point anyway, but I think [the pandemic has] accelerated it... real positives have come out of our work over the last year that we can take forward and it's not going to be a case of going back to where we were.

it's helped us think about the next stage of [the institution's] life, and make sure that digital is a huge part of it.

One recurring theme in discussions about organisational attitudes to digital work was **trust** (or lack of it). Interviewees hypothesised that this may be because of a lack of familiarity amongst colleagues and senior managers with digital approaches and platforms, coupled with acute awareness of the visibility of the content being produced and circulated, and the perceived risks that might stem from that.

Emerging questions:

- As digital approaches become sedimented as a core part of delivery on institutions' missions, how should they be resourced, implemented and actioned in relation to other institutional and financial priorities?
- As institutions re-visit and re-work their digital and engagement strategies post- pandemic, how will space be made for teams and individuals to reflect on this period?
- How can professional bodies and funders continue to support (in particular smaller) institutions and teams as they work toward digital confidence and maturity?

(2) A more confident digital audience?

What you have now is a much more digitally mature audience right... there is now a kind of captive audience of digital consumers who like the stuff we do, who also know how to actually use the blinking technologies that enable you to get to it. So if we let that pass us by and let it drift away, we would be pretty stupid.

Interviewees reflected that emerging from the pandemic there are opportunities for the sector when it comes to digital audiences. They cited early evidence that online audiences will remain even after attractions re-open¹⁶, and were excited by the possibilities presented if higher digital literacy in their communities could be expected. They forecast that audiences will be more appreciative than ever of high-quality digital content, even to the point of being willing to pay for it (as discussed in section 4). There remained massive uncertainty however about how and whether those prospects will manifest, and so interviewees struggled to articulate or anticipate how their institutions would grasp or approach them. Cross-sector discussion on these themes, supported by the latest research data on digital audiences, would be welcome.

Our respondents said they are utilising more **audience-centred approaches** now than at any time in the recent past, whether online or in person. They want to know as much as possible about their audiences, and their motivations. 15 interviewees mentioned using Google Analytics to try to determine what drives engagement, but they reflected that this only offered very basic demographic breakdowns. Only a small number had access to the advanced features third party sites can provide through paid subscriptions. Two of our interviewees mentioned working with the Frankly, Green + Webb programme *Insight for Change*¹⁷ to learn more about their digital audiences. In-depth analyses such as this can help (especially larger) institutions gain a more accurate picture of their online audiences, although smaller institutions felt they had a better sense of who their digital audience might be following pre-pandemic in-real-life interactions in their communities.

In reflecting on insights from the above data sources, interviewees noted that **online audience composition** often mirrors in-person museum and gallery audiences and lacks diversity; half of our interviewees mentioned a lack of audience diversity online, despite trying to reach new people. Our respondents were sceptical of any claims that social media in and of itself draws in younger or more diverse audiences that can be sustained. Digital projects which focused on local communities had been very successful during the pandemic, and local/hyperlocal audiences were mentioned

¹⁶ Audience Agency, 2021 for example.

¹⁷ <https://www.franklygreenwebb.com/insight-for-change/>

more often than international audiences. This is perhaps unsurprising given heightened emphasis on community, locality and place during the pandemic.

And so, one of the main things that we did was boost local food banks and say this is where you can drop food off if you need it. Or you want to contribute this is where you can go, signposting those resources in the community.

We have on site workshops, so these are free family activities that happen every Friday, and anyone can come and it is meant to be a safe space in a community for people to come and have a conversation, and when they stopped, it was really hard you know. The communities took it really hard, staff took it really hard so we moved them online. And that was a big undertaking in itself, because again, internet problems or people not having access to Zoom, not everyone's got a computer or a mobile device to login and we didn't want it to just be certain people that could access them. But we tried our best.

Our community engagement officer she did a project called [ANON] which was great. Again, it was just encouraging people in whatever way they wanted to kind of document what was going on, you know, so it could be photography, art, poetry, video ...so that was another really nice project that was going on.

And then I sort of continued with my program and worked with the artists and the producers to produce things and that really related to what was going on in the community at the time. So we did a project around LGBTQIA+ communities and thinking about the impact of the pandemic. So looking at the fact that pride events have been cancelled up and down the country, looking at the Pride flag being used sort of as a beacon of hope, as a symbol for the NHS and what that actually meant for that community, and looking at the sort of struggles, I guess that people were really going through throughout the pandemic, where there was a real lack of support systems. People were in lockdown and lots of people kind of felt trapped in their homes and maybe kind of unsafe. They kind of felt like they couldn't express themselves truly so we kind of concentrated on those things.

To me, the main one, we had a takeover with community artists... I got to work very closely with local community members and artists in that group, which was a bit of a departure for us, but great, great outcome.

Families were mentioned by a third of respondents as an important, but elusive, audience online. Only five interviewees reported any real success with their online home-schooling and learning initiatives, and others speculated that users had gravitated instead toward sites and resources they were already familiar with. The Science Museum's offer was referenced frequently here as a presumed default for many who were home-schooling.

Consideration of **digital inequalities** was mostly confined to talk about accessibility. Some digital teams had been in the process of auditing and reworking their websites to comply with the new legal framework on accessibility requirements for publicly funded institutions (a requirement for September 2020). While this process had made institutions more aware of the importance of making their digital content accessible to all audiences, a more nuanced consideration of these issues should be promoted

for institutions to truly understand the challenges brought about by digital disparities¹⁸ and ambivalence.

This is a piece of work that is a priority for us... funny enough, I said today that we would bring in a digital inclusion piece and the fact that there are similar, if not more polarizing barriers online, as there are physically, that we need to take that forward as part of [our] audience work.

Actually, I want to go on a training course about how we can make sure that people with screen readers can actually access our things. What language can we use? Is there anything that people with autism might really struggle with because our content can be quite difficult? ... we didn't want anyone to feel alienated by us... With accessibility especially, none of that probably would have happened, not as quick anyway. It would have happened eventually, but it wouldn't have happened as quickly, whereas there is a much better understanding of how we make our content more accessible now.

Actually accessibility is one of our key priorities in our new phase of web development.

Also, something else that gets overlooked is local authority services were implementing the government's accessibility legislation... so that was another large piece of work that needed doing with a deadline of September.

And so from now on, we're sort of baking in accessibility as part of our design and development process in a way we weren't before. And it's raised some really interesting questions beyond website accessibility for how we are more accessible to audiences full stop. We're really conscious that the content we produce needs to appeal to as wide an audience as possible. And that means thinking about who's telling the stories, and what stories we're telling in the museum, to whom, for whom, with whom.

We were also really conscious of families in particular not having you know four laptops when parents were working from home and kids were having to do school work as well.

Online events have changed access massively so paying for someone to do speech to text for online events is now the norm ... and thinking about translating the access that we traditionally did in the building to new kinds of access online is changing the way that we think about access modes.

[accessibility is] one of those jobs that is never quite done. You can always be doing better.

I think we shouldn't underestimate the scale of the problem ... this is not an arts sector's problem to solve, this is a socio-economic problem it's not a cultural problem.

Support for **measuring and articulating the impact of digital activities and programmes** in more nuanced ways would be welcome. Most interviewees noted that current metrics in use across the sector are helpful to a degree, but widely accepted as flawed.¹⁹ Quantitative KPIs and metrics are often seen by digital practitioners as ways to justify and explain their work to management and funders,

¹⁸ As detailed for example in Helsper, 2021.

¹⁹ 17 interviewees mention metrics provided by various online platforms in discussions (for example, social media metrics). All reflect on the fact that, while useful, they do not give a complete picture of who and why people are engaging. Specific projects and activities are often evaluated independently, so there is more scope to gather insights about engagement. In a few instances, this evaluative approach was transferred online, but not enough to suggest trends.

but offer very little valuable information on the more nuanced ways activities can generate meaningful engagement. Access to these metrics is often mediated by third party platforms, like Google Analytics or social media companies, which also presents ethical questions for digital practitioners. Finally, there is an awareness in the sector that the digital imprint of online initiatives is nearly impossible to capture. Digital/data and research/evaluation skills need to be spread more comprehensively through institutions,²⁰ and digital teams feel they have insights that could help other departments define their activities in more audience-centred ways.

Emerging questions:

- As we find out more about how (whether?) audiences for culture are changing as a result of the pandemic, how can that insight be shared and made sense of within the sector?
- What kinds of strategies and methodologies can be used to work across the broad suite of (quantitative and qualitative) data institutions now have access to in order to better understand and articulate the impacts of digital work?
- How can museums and galleries connect more emphatically with debates about digital inequalities, and lead work to challenge or counteract their impacts?
- What are the ethical implications of data uses in arts and heritage sites, particularly in relation to the roles and responsibilities of cultural institutions?

(3) Content and programming strategies

During lockdowns digital outputs including social media became the institution. As noted above having a keen understanding of audience needs, as well as an institution's USP, was seen as crucial by interviewees, and they felt particular attention needed to be paid to these online as a related, but distinct, institutional space (or 'estate') to physical premises. Taking this approach going forward will allow for more targeted initiatives and activities as, during the pandemic, our respondents' assessment was that not everything translated well online. The advice from interviewees was to stay on-brand when it comes to digital content; producing outputs that are consistent with and supportive of an institution's public image and values. It was generally accepted that less is more, and that consideration of quality over volume of outputs is crucial.

²⁰ The Centre for Cultural Value's work on 'evaluation principles' and the conversation around those could be helpful here <https://www.culturalvalue.org.uk/our-work/evaluation/evaluation-principles/>.

A main takeaway is that assuming that everybody is desperate to hear from you isn't necessarily the case [laughs]... a museum is just one of many, many things that people could want to engage with or do... In terms of content the ones that did best were the ones that were very on brand rather than suddenly jumping on bandwagons... if that's not part of your brand DNA then you're not going to be known for it and you're going to have a much harder time actually getting engagement through it.

We came under a lot of pressure to deliver stuff that we didn't necessarily have the capacity to deliver from curators and managers who didn't really understand the capacity of digital very well... So we ended up with a bit of a mishmash.

If we put out everything that we want to talk about there'll be significant overlap with other organizations potentially, other content outlets like the BBC for example, and sometimes it's not where our strength lies.

Everybody wanted some source of distraction and people were worried. They needed something to kind of try and take their mind off things that was quite lighthearted, and at the same time, it became really apparent that parents were going to need help with things like homeschooling.

You had no choice but to act because you were closed, and I saw as a result a massive explosion of people finding a way to innovate. Innovation makes it sound more formal than it was, but just a lot of very creative thinking of how the hell to get something done... it's not some mystical technical thing, you can just get out and make it happen one way or another. And that kind of 'just do it' attitude needs to prevail.

I think there was a fear amongst some of my colleagues that as the lockdown went on redundancies might happen. So I think people were looking to try and almost justify why they were employed. So lots of different members of staff... were coming up with new digital projects that they wanted to implement and it was quite overwhelming.

Do we make digital go dark? Do we say our team's on furlough we will be back soon, or do we just trickle sort of holding content? I can see the value of just saying 'we're not here we'll see you soon', but the museum understandably didn't want to do that because, especially because the museum was closed, they wanted to maintain the connection with their audiences, which of course makes sense. But as a result, it meant that the content was not particularly rich - it wasn't very engaging.

According to institutional insights and metrics **there were digital outputs that struggled to find an audience during the pandemic.** (1) Website traffic often reduced, especially on pages dedicated to visitation. This was to be expected given building closures. (2) A few interviewees reported a big drop in access to Collections pages. (3) As noted in section 2, downloadable learning resources often fared poorly.

However, **there were notable success stories in terms of reach and engagement.** (1) Blog posts, (2) podcasts, (3) some social media content (by no means all), and (4) e-commerce all did well. It was generally agreed that (5) online talks and webinars had proved a big draw in terms of attendees and should be continued, especially given the normalisation of high-quality events with international speakers online during this period. It was posited that many transformative moments will have happened for users within these contexts, but that these moments will not have been captured by the metrics (which relates to the point about evaluation in section 2). Interviewees mentioned being able to engage well through (6) smaller more targeted projects

within their local cultural ecology, supporting artists, freelancers and community groups. Those who were able to do this reported a renewed sense of purpose for their institution in fulfilling their civic mission; supporting the creative sector in their area, whilst engaging with local or more targeted community audiences.

Those we spoke to were wary about 'spamming' users via **social media during the pandemic** and acutely aware of the need to be thoughtful and measured in their engagement within these platforms (sometimes despite internal pressures to do more). Interviewees noted that social media initiatives often allowed for more dialogic engagements with users and the possibility of moving away from broadcasting strategies, but that these outcomes were never inevitable, and took work to achieve. They noted an increase in social media responses to their content when a member of the team interacted with the public. There was an awareness that social media is a good way to try out new digital initiatives that might turn out to be unsuccessful, as the associated opportunity costs are lower. This all speaks to the development of social media confidence and literacy in recent years, following open and extended reflection within the practitioner community, and informed by scholarship.²¹

Whilst we're closed you know, our social media platforms aren't promoting the museum, they are the museum, so we need to rethink how we use those.

Our interviewees were keen to make the most of social media to be playful and to use a less deferential or serious institutional voice. This was seen as desirable in the context of social networks that operate at a vastly different pace, and with different (digital) cultural logics, to in-person interactions. This involved changing the tone and framing of communications about collections, and about the museum more broadly. The ambition was both to appeal to traditional audiences and to entice new ones within these environments, although the latter was never taken for granted given what interviewees know about online audience composition (as outlined in section 2). Respondents talked about the importance of language – use of 'plain English' for example – and tone, noting that a change in tone could offer comfort and distraction for users during challenging times. It is clearly not easy to be both playful yet sensitive to context and wider debates, but practitioners felt this balance could be achieved with care. One challenge interviewees cited however was gaining recognition within their institutions that writing for digital and social media channels is a skill, and that it is not one that will be shared universally by museum workers.

²¹ Over the last decade, for example in Kidd 2011, 2014, Giaccardi 2012, Drotner & Schrøder 2013, Drotner et al. 2019, Villaespesa & Wowkoych 2020).

One of the outputs of the pandemic has been a new set of guidelines in terms of 'here's how to write for our blog and here's what to think about'. And we've also created kind of a new content plan, which sets out the principles of digital content and what we're trying to do with digital content, to kind of communicate across the organization.

Interviewees also used social media platforms to react promptly to real-world issues as they arose during the pandemic.²² One theme that emerged unprompted in a majority of our interviews as a key consideration for those in digital roles during the pandemic was **responding to the death of George Floyd and the Black Lives Matter protests**. This was an acute concern for those working on social media accounts especially.

People were looking towards us and that account specifically and our social media manager who runs that account really did an incredible turnaround job and became very engaged in these conversations speaking to people one on one, making sure that we're involved in dialogue... Being that campaigning voice it's not just promoting visits to the museum, it's not promoting the collections, it's being a voice of the community and giving voice to other people, so I think that was a huge success story for us.

All interviewees said they wanted to see their own and other organisations taking a strong stance in support of anti-racism, and crucially, to see that intersect meaningfully with robust attempts to decolonise institutions throughout. For digital managers and team members these commitments were not seen as remotely controversial, although it was recognised that this might be challenging work. In particular, it was seen as challenging for often junior and more precariously employed colleagues working in social media environments, with instances of adverse reactions and trolling reported. It was noted however that connecting with contemporary issues beyond the museum had seemed to bring in younger audiences that had typically been less engaged pre-pandemic, and, in a few instances, the attention of the press (which was not always welcomed). The digital work of the International Slavery Museum in Liverpool was noted here as of particular significance in discussing these themes.

Emerging questions:

- How can museums and galleries reporting an increase in local community engagement via digital means sustain that reach and its richness post-pandemic?
- What is research telling us about what worked on social media during this period? What nuances can be detected across different platforms, audiences, and forms of content, and how can we make sense of those?

²² Changes in regional or national Covid restrictions for example.

- What internal and external support structures do digital colleagues need when challenging debates occur on social media which demand an institutional response?

(4) Looking forward: digital practice post-pandemic

Interviewees were asked to reflect on **lessons learned from the lockdown period**, and how these could be carried forward into what we might tentatively anticipate as a post-pandemic scenario for cultural institutions. There were some straightforward observations about continuing to utilize specific digital approaches that had worked well (noted in section 3), and committing to digital ways of working day-to-day and behind the scenes, which for museums and galleries - as much as for other institutions - had been working well. Being able to build on insights about digital audiences gleaned during this period to support all activities across an organisation was also proposed as a beneficial approach to consider in the medium term.

There was hope that in the longer-term digital teams might be better integrated into workflows and that where they don't currently exist, digital strategies might be adopted in line with institutions' missions. The main challenges here include **ensuring that the implications of a business case for digital practices are understood by all stakeholders**, and that there is proper commitment to meaningful and productive digital work. Respondents are keenly aware that if digital engagement is to be embedded in institutional strategies and practices, then it needs to be looked after properly in terms of funding, resources, staffing and workflows.

While all participants noted that there were gaps in **digital skills** across their institutions, there was some variation as to what this meant and in reflections on how to resolve the issue. In a limited understanding digital skills might mean learning how to use certain hardware or software, understanding how to produce digital outputs, or make content available online. But for those who are working in digital roles, digital skills development often means a more fundamental shift in the way museums engage with audiences and communities. Interviewees wanted to question and challenge what we meant when we talked about digital approaches and skills, and the possibilities that flow from them: increasingly our interviewees understand digital as a mindset characterised by rich collaboration, participation and audience-centricity rather than a matter solely or even principally of technical skills, formats or platforms. Understood in such a way, digital engagement should be embedded in any new project or design process from the outset rather than added as an afterthought. It was the assessment of our interviewees that those working elsewhere in institutions often

had some way to go in understanding these points (as reflected in the quotes from section 1).

If I see the word digital on the agenda I'm always like you can't just write "digital" as a noun. You need to say what "digital" is... it could be digital engagement, digital content, digital practice, digital skills... I think we are slowly getting that, but we need to think about digital in the same way that we think about putting a display in the exhibition or putting on an event. It needs its own proper thought process and an audience-centred approach as well. It's not just an add on on top. I think there's been progress, but it's a new challenge with people getting excited about digital.

The lockdown amplified existing challenges faced by the workforce in digital roles. References to mental health issues and burnout were frequent in discussions, as was talk about precarity of employment and position. Digital workers, especially in small digital teams, can often feel unsupported and under pressure, and there were concerns expressed about what would happen after furlough ends. Organisational size and structure matters here too, as does the support of management and perceptions of the role of digital work within an institution.

I felt like I was having to call a lot of the shots about what was important and fight a lot of the fights by myself in this insecure job role.

The emotional labour involved in getting digital shit done, is not to be underestimated. And I think the greater part of my work, especially as the leader of a team, was involved in influencing, persuading, negotiating, making the case for, making the case for why not. And that was extremely emotionally taxing, and physically exhausting. And so I think we've come out of it quite exhausted, and then there's a burnout. I think there's a question about how do we keep the momentum going?

We can't just see digital as the work of one person in the organization. That's really, really important because one person can't be expected to carry the burden of digital for the whole organization.

Interviewees talked about **the importance of professional and personal networks** of support during this period, and hope that these will continue. They noted good online support and communication within the sector, on social media and via email lists; people had been checking in with colleagues in digital roles from other institutions. Insights and networks from a range of initiatives had been very valuable (*Insight for Change, Let's Get Real 10 Years On, One by One*).

Working with other institutions - whether GLAM or other - was noted by participants as an important way forward in order to promote knowledge exchange but also share resources and be able to reach new audiences. Partnership with the BBC and involvement in the BBC Culture in Quarantine and Museums at Home initiatives were mentioned. That said, it was noted that cultural institutions were, and will continue to be, in stiff **competition** with other (often bigger) cultural institutions in and beyond the sector. Beyond partnerships, most interviewees remain anxious to 'stay in their lane'.

Respondents talked about **sources of revenue** and how they have fared during lockdown. Five interviewees noted that the pandemic had improved sales in their online shop, and in one case an institution had been prompted by lockdown to set up a new e-commerce offer. Only three interviewees mentioned donations being a noteworthy income stream, and one talked about trialling a subscription programme. It was proposed that a discussion about how and under what circumstances to monetize online content was long overdue (see also DCMS-AHRC, 2021). There was acute awareness however that online content needs to be of very high quality if it is not free.

What really is the business model for producing online content free of charge? I think museums have to face up to this. We've gone through a long period where you could justify doing digital things because they were digital and digital has always been seen as an end rather than the means. But I think we've got to really think about how sustainable that model is.

If museums had been less sheepish about that [monetization], and you know got their act together to create valuable paid for content experiences, then they might be in less of a financial problem than they are now. I think some museums have been good at this ... So I think yeah not necessarily giving all the content away for free is going to be important, particularly in the kind of pandemic recovery.

Emerging questions:

- How can we ensure digital work is embedded in institutional strategies and practices in meaningful ways, and well supported in terms of funding, resources, staffing and workflows?
- As we emerge from the pandemic, is it time for a discussion about the monetization of (some) digital content within museums and galleries? What has worked, and what has worked less well, where this has been trialled?
- What can professional networks, funders and policy-makers do to ensure that digital work – and digital workers - are well supported?

Conclusion

Given how central digital approaches have been during the pandemic it is easy to assume that making the case for continued – or even increased – investment in this work will be straightforward. Yet our respondents are taking nothing for granted. Whilst all institutions now seemingly realise the importance of digital provision, what that means in practice, and how that realisation will translate into meaningful support for that work in the short, medium and longer term is not at all clear. A number of our interviewees were very sceptical about what the real impact of the pandemic on institutions' digital strategies and practices might be.

Engaging in digital practice for its own sake is likely to need further justification in light of ever-shrinking resources, and our interviewees – who themselves of course work in digital roles – think this interrogation is overdue within the sector. They have aspirations to think more strategically about how digital work contributes to institutional mission(s) and in what ways, and to be clearer about when a digital approach might not be possible or desirable. They want a richer critique of who digital approaches work for, and who they exclude, and more robust support mechanisms for those who work in audience-facing roles in social media contexts in particular. It is their firm belief that not everything in a museum or gallery needs to be able to 'pivot' to digital approaches, and that a better understanding of how digital ambitions contribute to institutional objectives and values is overdue. Digital practice became the default during lockdown, but digital practitioners were acutely aware of the need to see that work support the mission of organisations and the needs of their communities whilst the doors were closed. They didn't always feel that others in their institutions understood the importance of that targeted and considered approach, or that those people valued their expertise in making these judgements.

As we emerge from the pandemic there is a sense among our interviewees that an opportunity is presenting itself for researchers and practitioners to reassess the value of culture and the role of museums in communities and society more broadly. They particularly want to see the role of digital approaches within that mix scrutinized and re-articulated.

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Appendix 1: Question set

1. Can you tell me a little about how your institution, or your team if you have one, experienced those first few weeks of lockdown a year ago?
2. How would you describe your approach to digital work during the first lockdown?
 - a. What were the priorities for you?
 - b. What did you hope to achieve in terms of digital engagement?
 - c. What were people saying across the institution about the role of digital approaches?
 - d. Did people have to change roles? Or did digital practice become a part of more of your colleagues' roles?
 - e. Was there a need to rapidly up-skill people in your team or across the institution, and if so, what was your experience of this?
 - f. Were you hoping to do more of what you normally do, or to do something rather different in the context of the pandemic?
3. How (if at all) has your approach changed over the course of subsequent lockdowns?
4. Were there digital projects that had to be put on hold or completely re-fashioned during this time?
5. What have been the 'successes' in digital engagement terms?
 - a. What worked?
 - b. What worked less well?
 - c. How do you know? [ie what measures for success are in place]
6. Can you tell us about your approach to social media in particular - what you try/tried to achieve and through which channels?
 - a. What worked?
 - b. What worked less well?
7. What do you know about who was engaging with your digital content?
 - a. Was there diversification in the audience? If so how would you explain or characterise that diversification?
 - b. What can you tell us about engagement by platform - eg were different user groups using different channels?
 - c. Have you talked about inequalities in digital access more/less or the same amount during this period? [If more - can you tell us a little about how those conversations tend to play out?]
8. How do you typically understand/measure/articulate engagement with digital content?

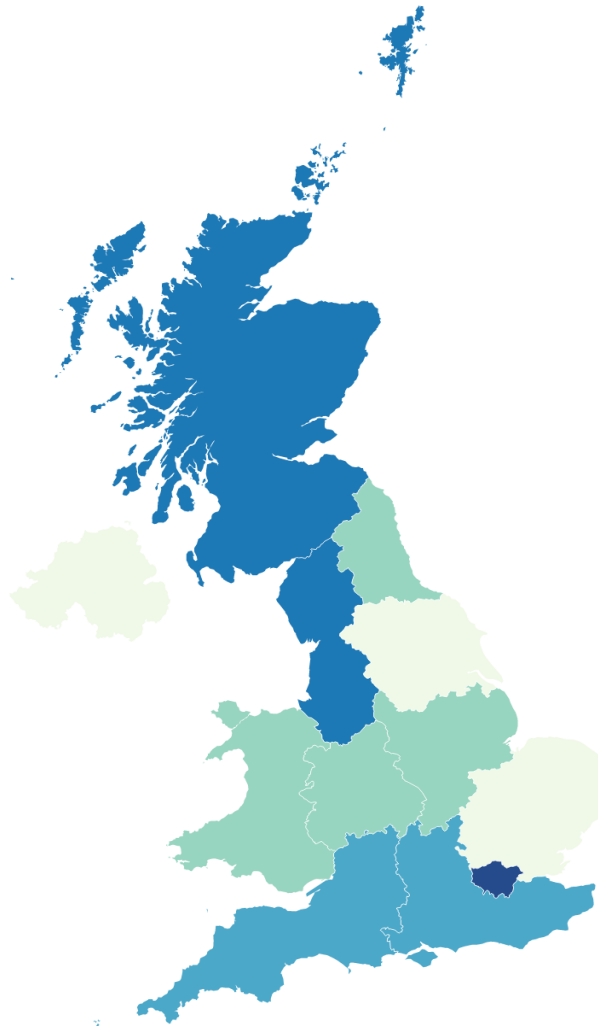
- a. What are some of the challenges or limitations of this?
 - b. How could this be done better?
9. Has there been a shift in understanding at your Institution about the value and importance of digital approaches over the course of the pandemic?
- a. If yes, at what level? [trustees, senior management, in your team]
 - b. If no, why do you think that is?
10. Have you had a chance to think about how this period might impact the institution's approach to digital practice going forward?
- a. If yes, can you tell us in what ways?
 - i. What will be the challenges? [Resources? Time? Competency? Other priorities?]
 - b. If no, what are some of the barriers to doing that work of reflection?
11. Looking across the sector, what are the key takeaways about digital engagement that we should use to inform strategy going forward?
- a. What should be the priorities?
 - b. What can we not afford to ignore/leave/roll back on?
 - c. Are there things you would now do less of?
12. Is there anything else you would like to say about your approach to digital practice during this period?

Appendix 2: Interviewee distribution

Geographical Distribution

Museums across UK regions and nations (n=19)

Number of museums



Created with Datawrapper

North East England	1
North West England	3
Yorkshire and the Humber	0
East Midlands	1
West Midlands	1
East of England	0
London	5
South East England	2
South West England and Gibraltar	2
Northern Ireland	0
Scotland	3
Wales	1