

Digital Engagement Strategies in Cultural Sector During COVID-19

A Preliminary Report



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PRELIMINARY REPORT

Museums across Australia and the world have responded to the COVID-19 crisis with new strategies of digital engagement. With physical venues have closed, many institutions have found ways to create, curate and translate modes of engagement for digital contexts. No longer a mere platform for institutional marketing and promotion, social media like Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, Tik Tok and YouTube have all become sites for creative intervention.¹ For many, it has been a time of quick digital literacy acquisition and recalibration of curatorial and public engagement methods.

This pandemic has unveiled huge questions about equality, access, how we socialise with each other, and who and what we value and, for our purposes here, and what role of the museum can play as we move forward. Technological solutions in the form of digital engagement have helped combat the epidemic and give us access to arts and culture. According to a recent Patternmakers' *Audience Snapshot Report – COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor (AS)*, 75% of respondents have participated in online arts and culture activities, like watching arts video content (52%), watching live-streamed events (42%), or doing online classes or tutorials (36%) (AS 11).² In other words, the cultural sector digital engagement has helped communities cope with the quarantine and physical distancing offering alternative way to connect to each other and what we love.

There's an opportunity to harness the curatorial and creative potential of digital engagement post COVID-19. As highlighted in the Patternmakers' *Audience Outlook Monitor (AS)* and A New Approach's (ANA) *Third Insight Report*, audiences have been quick to engaged digitally. And as we slowly progress to the opening of physical sites, it is important we reflect and enhance upon the learnings about the role of the digital to engage different sectors of the Australian Arts and Culture.³ The crisis no doubt will lead to more innovations—including changes in our use of digital solutions for the cultural industries. And so what are the challenges and opportunities ahead of us?

Digital engagement strategies can be broken down into **three general categories**. These categories are informed by distinctions in content based on the museum and target demographic. The categories are:

- 1. Virtual exhibitions, curatorial talks, viewing rooms, and tours** of current collections, art fairs, and touring exhibits;
- 2. Education and engagement** through remote learning, including drawing and photography classes;
- 3. Programming and events**, often interactive and based on speciality or demographic (for example museums asking people to recreate paintings from their collection at home or visual diaries from artists who are working in isolation).



¹ See Hjorth, L. & S. Hinton (2019) *Museums & New Visualities. Understanding Social Media*. London: Sage.

² Patternmakers – COVID-19 Audience Outlook Monitor. May 2020.

³ *A New Approach: A view from middle Australia: Perceptions of arts, culture and creativity*. 2020

These categories are not distinct as when a curator may hold a special talk about an exhibit, which may be a special program, and they may solicit entries for the museum's Instagram feed (for example, National Portrait Gallery's #portraiturecomeshome).

This last theme based on interactivity and speciality events presents opportunities to grow and maintain a digital engagement, specifically for older or disabled audiences. The ANA *Third Insight Report* indicated,

Great value was placed on *participating* in many different types of arts and cultural activities, often at a local, community level. Interactive, immersive experiences were valued over passive consumption (ANA, 35).

In other words, those surveyed preferred an active versus a *passive experience* (i.e., not background entertainment). The *Audience Outlook Monitor (AS)* determined that audiences enjoy interactive arts and culture, yet post pandemic since concerns for hygiene may curtail largely interactive exhibits, performances, and reduce social spaces within an institution. Of the 23,000 respondents to the May survey (aggregated from 159 Australian arts and cultural organisations), only 24% surveyed among frequent museum-goers across the country said would feel comfortable using hands-on exhibits at a museum, so there's a need to rethink visitor experience until there is a vaccine or the virus has been eradicated (AS 7). The AS also suggested there were respondents who indicated having venue programming make sense of pandemic, and that no matter where the content is viewed, they most likely want it to be more light hearted (AS 4).

ANA's *Third Insight Report* supports previous research on the benefit of arts and culture for health and wellbeing, community identity, reducing isolation, and social cohesion. As one participant noted, at their core, arts and culture are inherently about bringing us all together." Further, the report found "stimulating creativity and imagination as one of the core purposes of arts and culture in Australian society." These findings corroborate the significant role arts and culture play in our health, wellbeing and sense of belonging.⁴ In fact, ANA sees an opportunity for cultural institutions to "review pathways and mechanisms that connect and embed arts and cultural activities in mental health and social inclusion strategies, particularly those related to recovery from natural disasters and significant social and economic disruptions" (ANA 48). AS indicates 26% of respondents accessed online content for their wellbeing (AS 8) while 37% did so to support the institution.

According to the AS, older audiences and people with disabilities more likely to stay away from museums—over 31% of those over 60 and 20% of those living with a disability noted that would delay a visit until it was safe to return (AS 3). The intention to continue participating online post-pandemic is higher people with a disability (70%), those who are caregivers to older adults (70%) (AS 10). So, for older audiences, more digital strategies are needed. At the same time, most respondents indicated they did not pay for digital content (35%), yet most (68%) said they are willing to pay in the future (AS 14). National Director of Australian Museums and Galleries Association, Alex Marsden, suggests acknowledging the digital divide is important to remember, and that finding ways to engage visitors that are not digitally based will bolster the museum's role in social inclusion and redefining the value of art for all. From an institutional level improved external communications (emails, targeted, digital marketing) will support such endeavours (AS 11), and if there are technical obstacles accessing digital content, incorporating live chat might be one strategy to abate this and a way to have a facilitator during live events or activities.

⁴ The social and psychological (psychosocial) benefits of the arts in a countries' wellbeing has been evidenced in three key reports—WHO report (2019), the UK AHRC *Cultural Value Report* (2018) and the National Arts Participation Survey in Australia (2017). See Geoffrey Crossick & Patrycja Kaszynska (2016) *AHRC Cultural Value Project*, <https://tinyurl.com/qr5lk2p>; National Arts Participation Survey (2017) <https://tinyurl.com/qlvdb2m>; Fancourt, D. (2019) World Health Organization (WHO) *What is the evidence on the role of the arts in improving health and well-being? A scoping review*. <https://tinyurl.com/s4bgqeb>

Respondents who identified as disabled felt they had more access and took advantage of the digital offerings. Those who participated online most (67%) think they will continue doing so when the pandemic is over, suggesting there will be a long-term role for digital distribution of cultural content, which is more pronounced in people with a disability (70%), those who are caregivers to older adults (70%) (AS 13).

As mentioned above, the rapid pivot to online digital engagement creates a sense of overload and disembodiment, this shift has also led to changes in accessibility, including digital exhibition and program viewings. As Nate Freeman discusses about art fairs, but arguably this is a challenge for most cultural organisations, “translated into pressure to do it all online—organize Instagram Live talks, host special online exhibition previews, and create content, content, content.” To avoid fatigue and to promote sustainable digital engagement post virus, targeted primarily interactive events and where participants become content creators as well as consumers.

Since there’s a reduction in tourism, audiences will no doubt be more local, and they will find new way of interacting (digitally or in person), have more repeat visits, and embrace their local institutions more. ANA reported as one of its key findings the “particular way participants talked about wanting to see the diversity of their nation baked into their homegrown content”... and there’s an opportunity to “prioritise incentives, requirements and schemes that support production and distribution of diverse Australian content and iconography that will help to build a unified national identity and represent Australia to the world” (ANA 47).



CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Going forward post-pandemic, museums can become shared civic spaces where audiences (members, visitors) can participate in making digital content that inspires learning, interaction, and broadens worldviews, grounded in local connections, responds to diversity in all its forms, and contributes to the overall aims of the cultural institution.

There are key learnings we could take forward about the opportunities and challenges for engaging audiences during the COVID-19 period.

- **Embedding innovations around mobile media as part of the engagement curation:** With the rise of smartphones becoming a ubiquitous part of Australian life, there are ways in which Augmented Reality (AR) and Virtual Reality (VR) can be deployed through mobile devices to curate audience engagement in and outside

⁵ Freeman, Nate. 2020. Have We Already Gone From a Viewing-Room Boom to Viewing-Room Gloom? The Art World Feels the Strain of Too Many Online Events, https://news.artnet.com/art-world/online-fair-overload-1866516?utm_content=from_newscta&utm_source=Sailthru&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=News%20Saturday%205/23/20&utm_term=artnet%20News%20Daily%20Newsletter%20USE

⁶ The Future of Museum Engagement. ACMI RMIT report (2019) https://dcp-ecp.com/content/projects/14-the-future-of-museum-audiences-ii/acmi-phase-2-report_20191111.pdf

the physical museum space. As noted in reports with ACMI audience engagement research projects, older adults are keen to be involved in new media like AR and VR intergenerational digital storytelling workshops and activities.

- **Co-creating content for social inclusion** with digitally diverse audiences. COVID19 has highlighted the inequalities of accessibility to digital and online media and diverse needs. Reflection on how older and disabled audiences might need different types of technical support to encourage continued participation. In this exploration, lived experience models are required. Further, identifying forms of engagement that create a sense of community, inspire and activate learning will be key. Special events such as movie trivia nights, movie clubs based on select screenings, and sharing outcomes such as movie fanzines are just examples of the possibilities for sustainable and meaningful digital content. **VR/AR programming** and virtual exhibitions have also become more popular and in the future can offer continued engagement for publics who do not want to attend or who have disabilities. Such technology enhances not only the viewing experience, but also activates a haptic and immersive form of visualisation which blurs the line between knowledge and embodied experience, enhancing the experience of going elsewhere “beyond our usual limitation,”(2016) and forms part of what Nanna Verhoeff describes as a “performative cartography”(2012). Acute Director, Daniel Birnbaum sees VR playing a larger role in museum’s programming post-pandemic. He states, “for art institutions, the ongoing climate emergency and a changed public health landscape should not only mean doing less. It should also mean developing entirely new forms of art. Maybe in the future, VR will not be shown in museums. It might very well be the other way around. What we call museums will be shown in VR.”
- **Understanding digital engagement as communication science and knowledge repositories:** Digital Humanities scholar Rebecca Kahn proposes two opportunities for digital engagement, yet acknowledges the scale and budget of any one museum will affect their ability to implement these strategies, and outlines these in light of museums as “science communicators” and museums as “knowledge repositories” (2020). Kahn describes some museums are beginning to “experiment with the semantic web, and linked data as a way of connecting their databases (which may contain several million records) and creating multi-layered and multimedia collections, which focus as much on the records as the objects.” She suggests to focus on the affordances of the medium, which includes “autonomy, multi-layered multimedia, and linked content,” and to foremost design digital content for their audiences instead of taking materials and events and bending them into a digital platform as an afterthought. This strategy will assist in making museums sites for communication science and knowledge repositories.
- **Deploying social media as part of museum curatorial practice around new visualities:** Hjorth and Hinton write (2019) about the role of social media like Instagram being deployed by artists as not just marketing or communication science but also as an integral part in their creative practice. Linking these practices of artists to curatorial techniques could allow for more inventive methods for audience engagement.

⁷ Thomas, J et al. 2018. *Measuring Australia’s Digital Divide. The Australian Digital Inclusion Index.*

⁸ Verhoeff, Nanna. 2016. Surface explorations: 3D moving images as cartographies of time. *Espacio, Tiempo y Forma, Serie VII, Historia del Arte* 4: 71–91, 74. See also: Verhoeff’s *Mobile Screens: the Visual Regime of Navigation*. 2012. Amsterdam University Press.

⁹ Birnbaum, Daniel. “In the Changed World After Lockdown, We Will Need Smarter New Ways to Interact With Art. I Believe Virtual Reality Is the Answer.” April 21, 2020. <https://news.artnet.com/opinion/will-need-new-ways-interact-art-lockdown-believe-virtual-reality-answer-1839591>

¹⁰ Kahn, Rebecca. Kahn, R. 2020. The COVID-19 is prompting many museums to reconsider how they communicate their research to the public. *Elephant in the Lab*. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3751749>

Also cited as: Corona as Curator: How museums are responding to the pandemic. 15 April 2020. <https://elephantinthelab.org/corona-as-curator-how-museums-are-responding-to-the-pandemic/>