Digital Cultural Relations:
Literature Review

Foreword

This literature review is part of a research project commissioned by the British Council and undertaken by ICR Research on the topic of digital cultural relations. The project examined the cultural relations outcomes and impacts that are enabled by digital interventions and asked how these are distinct or different from face-to-face interventions. It involved 30 interviews with practitioners drawn from across the British Council's global staff network and external experts, as well as a series of six workshops with British Council staff and external partners and stakeholders. The research had a particular focus on issues and questions relating to themes of trust, participation and engagement, inclusion and exclusion, and to the practice and implications of digital cultural relations programmes and interventions in Official Development Assistance (ODA) contexts. A separate report reflecting on current practice and key themes for future development has also been produced as part of this project and is published in the Research and Policy Insight section of the British Council website.

New digital technologies are transforming how people work, study and exchange ideas. COVID-19 has accelerated the transition already underway at the British Council and other international cultural relations organisations towards the digital delivery of projects and programmes. The British Council's own organisational target for 2021-22 was for 77 per cent of our meaningful engagement to be digital and 23 per cent face-to-face, compared with 48 per cent digital and 52 per cent face-to-face in 2019–20. By 2025, the ambition is to reach 140 million learners of English and to support 100 million people to actively participate in good quality connections with the UK and 30 million people to experience UK arts (up from 8 million in 2019–20). The majority of these connections and engagements will be made through digital products, programmes, processes and platforms. (See British Council Corporate Plan, 2020-21.)

This project was commissioned to help the British Council and other cultural relations organisations, researchers, practitioners and stakeholders better understand what 'digital cultural relations' means in practice. How is this digital shift is affecting the nature, outcomes and impact of international cultural relations, both across the British Council and in the cultural relations field more generally? As the digital shift continues and evolves, we need to understand if certain types of digital interventions and activities are more effective than others in delivering demonstrable cultural relations outcomes and impact: Which digital spaces and platforms should the British Council (and other cultural relations organisations) be prioritising? Where should investment be targeted? What geo-cultural and geo-political contexts and considerations need to be factored into these discussions?

We hope this literature review, and the accompanying report reflecting on current practice and key themes for future development that has also been published as part of this project, go some way towards answering these questions. The project was undertaken over a relatively short timeframe between January and March 2022. It is of course not the final word on what is such a fundamental and wide-ranging topic – and nor is it intended to be. Our aim was to generate new ideas and refine key questions and concepts, building on the experiences of the global network of British Council colleagues and external partners and stakeholders that are delivering digital cultural relations 'on the ground', rather than to test these ideas out or to undertake systematic impact evaluations. We hope that it has generated useful insights that can help to set the research agenda going forward. Many thanks to everyone who participated in and contributed to the project.

James Perkins
Interim Head of Research
Research and Policy Insight
The British Council

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Part 1: Introduction

1.1: Definitions: What digital cultural relation is and what it is not

As no single definition exists and its practices tend to differ globally (ICR 2021a, 4), cultural relations (hereafter CR) are a contested paradigm. CR have been viewed by some as a dimension of public and particularly cultural diplomacy, while others have argued for its distinct character marked by its functioning at arm´s length from the government, a consistent focus on dialogue and mutuality as well as its operation though people-to-people interactions (ICR 2021a; Murray & Lamonica 2021; Wright and Higginbotham 2019). The emergence of new technologies, digital platforms and (social) media has digitalised CR and the space in which it operates, resulting in its increasing affordability, accessibility for its various stakeholders, as well as the involvement of new (non-) state actors (Grincheva 2013, 40). Like its analogue variant, there is no agreed definition of digital cultural relations (hereafter DCR), though attempts have been made, such as

"the cross-cultural practices through digital and networked technologies, including the internet, mobile devices, and social media channels."

(More Europe 2021)

Although the scholarship on DCR is new, it is rapidly growing and can largely be situated in the field of (digital) soft power and diplomatic studies. Key research has covered topics such as the growing role of non-state actors (Grincheva 2019; Giannini & Bowen 2019) or the analysis of social media campaigns (Ozgul et al. 2021). In addition, evaluations related to the digital activities of cultural institutes constitute an important part of the relevant literature.

Our understanding of (D)CR focusses on

"greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue."

(Gillespie et al. 2018, 7)

This contrasts with those who consider it to be aimed at influence shaping or on economic or political agenda (Wright & Higginbotham 2019, 1488–1489). Therefore, it is necessary to differentiate DCR from other relevant digitalised practices such as digital diplomacy, digital soft power, and digital nation-branding, whose major objectives are respectively the digital engagement with foreign audiences, the branding of assets, or the shaping of perceptions, all with the aim of furthering an agenda whether state or non-state related. In contrast, (D)CR work through trust and knowledge exchange (Karanasou 2021, 9; Gillespei et al. 2018) and take place through "direct interaction between parties, providing a space for mutual influence." (Grincheva 2021b, 27). An important similarity, however, is the observation that the rules of engagement have changed in the digital space, prompting actors who wish to shape influence to effectively engage their audiences, rather than merely relying on strategic and/or integrated messaging (Grincheva 2021b, 24–26).

The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic is having an enormous impact on international cultural relations,[1] its various dimensions and sectors, and representatives across the world (Grincheva 2021a, EUNIC 2020). In addition to the disruption of analogue cultural relations across the world, cultural relations have been localised (Ukrainian Institute 2021, 6), and above all materialised online, resulting in the exposure of its fragility and agility on the one hand (Kultur in Bewegung 2022), and its accelerated digitalisation in terms of content production and stakeholder engagement on the other (EUNIC 2020).

While the reaction to the crisis tends to differ cross-culturally (Spowage 2021), the digital turn has been applauded and in many cases viewed as a success (EUNIC 2020, Karanasou 2021, 19), given its potential to break geographical barriers (Karanasou 2021, 14) or its greater outreach, many questions and concerns have been raised over its efficiency and viability, ranging from concerns over cost management (Ukrainian Institute 2021, 10), the absence of the human element, to the role of gender and colonial

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1 The COVID-19 pandemic has similarly impacted the practice of public and digital diplomacy. For more information, see Manor, I. and Pamment, J. "At a Crossroads: Examining Covid-19's Impact on Public and Digital Diplomacy." *Place Branding and Public Diplomacy* (2022).

biases (Karanasou 2021, 5–24) and emerging lack of skills/infrastructure (EUNIC 2020, 5) and strategies (ICR 2021b, 7). Finally, the digital turn has revolutionised educational practices across levels by, for example, introducing digital home learning as a viable alternative to face-to-face learning.

The novel and rapidly changing character of DCR represents both a challenge and opportunity in terms of its literature review. As the research in the area is still young, we draw on insights from a wide range of areas such as digital marketing, communications, and PR, which we complement with examples from the field paying necessary attention to threats, challenges, and opportunities as well as the inevitable impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

1.2: Bonding and Bridging: Digital cultural relations as a social capital

This literature review frames DCR within Bourdieu's (1986) social capital theory. According to Bourdieu, social capital results from the relations and networks people possess as well as the resources that can be derived from them. Social capital can be acquired through three types of social relations: bridging, bonding, and linking (Putman 2000). While bonding and bridging relate to horizontal relations, linking concerns the involvement of public policy actors and functions vertically. Bonding capital concerns those relations which depart from a certain common base, and can, therefore, be described as "maintaining and strengthening existing social relations." (Bina & Ijdens 2008, 2) Bridging capital considers those relations across divisions and are set to "establishing new social relations that did not exist before" (Bina & Ijdens 2008, 2). Depending on the specific actors and their interest, the building of social capital can result in tangible (material) as well as intangible (symbolic) benefits. Across fields, social capital has been linked to organisational success, influence and legitimacy gathering as well as competitiveness (Smith et al. 2017, 20). As the acquiring of social capital has been proven to be context-sensitive, it functions differently online compared to offline (Smith et al. 2017, 21). While the online variant tends to bring advantages, such as potential greater reach, it similarly presents risks, for

instance, the fostering of digital echo-chambers, or "cyberbalkanization" (Putman quoted in Sajuria et al. 2015, 4). Through the notion of social capital, and by examining its expressions and applications within the frame of bonding and bridging, we aim to analyse the paradigm of DCR.[2]

1.3: Digital cultural relations, international development, and the notion of resilience

(D)CR are intrinsically connected to the dynamics of international development as they address economic, political, environmental as well as security challenges and opportunities across the world (Balta 2021). In this capacity, they engage with a variety of actors and address a wide range of issues such as cultural participation, intercultural dialogue, human rights, climate change, cultural heritage, or gender equality (Singh 2019; Balta 2021). Despite the obvious limitations, the potential of DCR has been pointed out by Grincheva (2021a, 10) who argues "[…] these brief contacts can be very productive in exposing online participants to new cultural knowledge. They can unearth cross-cultural stereotypes, stimulate interest in other people's cultures and traditions and even generate cross-cultural curiosity leading to personal engagements across countries." The role of digital cultural relations as an effective bridgebuilder across people and societies has been exemplified in projects such as the EU´s Europeana[3] project dealing with the preservation of cultural heritage, or the work of the Alliance for Peacebuilding[4] which engages with digital peacebuilding, triggering international organisations, state and non-state actors to incorporate the digital in their external frameworks and strategies. Since the outbreak of the pandemic, CR as a whole/broader international paradigm has proven to be resilient in that it has been (relatively) easy transferred to digital or hybrid formats. Although this has enabled people across the globe to find a "source of comfort and connection" in culture (UNESCO 2020a), it has tested the resilience of the vulnerable cultural industry and its representatives, triggering individual nation states and international organisations to reflect on its current situation and future.[5]

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2 Forthcoming British Council research explores the value to the UK of the British Council's tangible and intangible cultural relations capital assets and argues that these forms of capital are the foundation on which assets such as programming, local relationships and institutional knowledge are built. The research also outlines the key theories, methodologies and models most relevant to analysing the value of a cultural relations institution. Further details of the research will be published in the second half of 2022 at https://www.britishcouncil.org/research-policy-insight

3 https://www.europeana.eu/en

4 https://www.allianceforpeacebuilding.org/

5 See for example UNESCO's ResiliArt initiative: https://en.unesco.org/news/resiliart-artists-and-creativity-beyond-crisis

1.4: Roadmap

The literature review consists of three further sections and a conclusion. The second section examines DCR within the frame of digital bridging and outlines the dynamics of digital engagement, its expressions as well as the question of measurement. The third section engages with the notion of digital bonding by not only focusing on the importance of trust and credibility as key components of DCR, but also considering the question of assessment. The fourth section deals with the limitations and gaps of digital engagements and proposes a way for DCR to work towards a sustainable frame of digital mobility while forecasting its impact. Finally, we set forth a conclusion, summarising the key ideas as well as suggestions for further research.

Part II: Bridging

2.1: Digital engagements: From outreach to interactivity to participation

Through digital platforms, tools, and new media, DCR actors have been able to grow their reach exponentially and inspire participation among its audiences (Kahne et al. 2015, 54). However, neither participation, nor democratisation, is self-evident and depends on a range of factors (Ozgul et al. 2021, 2). Given the limitations of the digital realm such as, for instance, "a lack of physical contact" preventing the forging of face-to-face personal relations (Grincheva 2021b, 152), digital engagement needs to be two-way oriented to be effective. This is particularly true for cultural relations, as they "presuppose a dialogical model of cross-cultural communication that goes beyond mere promotion and builds on the ability to effectively engage target audiences." (Grincheva 2021b, 29) Bjola´s (2018, 5) analysis of the digital diplomacy strategies of Ministries of Foreign Affairs (MFAs) demonstrates, however, that this is difficult given the focus on the "public-facing ´front-end´ of digital diplomacy," rather than thorough engagement with its "´back-end´ architecture," including data analysis, network development and skill development.

The complexity of digital engagement can be explained by distinguishing among outreach, interactivity, and participation. Outreach is understood as "engagement and a two-way communication"[6] between sender and receiver of a message. Factors such as transparency of content (Smith et al. 2017), understanding of audience preference across generations (particularly the so-called generation Z) and professions (Ferri et al. 2012; Dunkley 2017), the use of intermediaries such as bloggers and influencers (Uzunoglu 2014) and the notion of value creation through innovation (Pagani & Pardo 2017) have been explored. Interactivity is understood as a type of communication which is "dynamically shaped by the participants of the exchange."[7] The effective engagement of audience has been found to relate to factors such as narrative design and reception, strategic positioning (Ozgul et al. 2021, 2), the seeking of audiences' views and feedback (Jora cited in Grincheva 2021b, 29), strategic content selection, flexibility, cultural sensitivity, and dynamism (Grincheva

2021b, 151). Third, participation is conceptualised as the form of communication wherein audiences become actively involved. This has been related to the ability of actors to make messages meaningful to its audiences, for instance, through the facilitation of "interaction or exchange" as well as the empowerment of "individual creation" (Grincheva 2021b, 25). This has resulted from the understanding that a "top-down branding approach, which treats people as targets rather than participants in an exchange of views" is outdated (Leadbeater quoted in Grincheva 2013, 40).

There are, however, limitations to digital engagements. Besides the loss of personal contacts which comes with physical presence (see above), digital engagements bring as well as remove security and health risks. Furthermore, research has pointed to issues such as a loss of power through the increasing difficulty to "predict total participants" as well as the determination of duration of the programme (Russo cited Grincheva 2013, 44), or the complexity of successfully establishing multilingual and multiplatform digital campaigns (Ozgul et al. 2021, 13).

To successfully bridge capital in the context of DCR, it is of importance to consider the above-described dynamics of digital engagement to maximise the benefits and overcome the challenges. This is, however, not self-evident as many organisations and audiences only recently (partially due to the pandemic) have started to adopt or optimise their digital processes and services. In the next sections, we analyse recent examples of digital bridging in the spheres of arts, language, and education and point at successes as well as challenges

Arts as digital bridging

The realm of arts and culture represents a major dimension wherein DCR take place through digital bridging. Its occurrence has been amplified in times of the pandemic which has brought a variety of experiences. We find one example in the digital Kulturcafé initiative which took place in the context of Austrian-Ukrainian bilateral civil society relations and moved its activities online during the pandemic and which was marked by its multi-dimensional character and focus on audience engagement. Without the possibility of personal contact, the organisers faced a

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6 *Outreach and Communication Activities in the MSCA under Horizon.* 2020, https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/msca/documents/documentation/publications/outreach_activities_en.pdf

7 "Interactivity." https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100006404

tangible problem and were urged to find a sustainable way to bridge communities without falling in the trap of mere one-dimensional dialogue or nation branding and inspire cultural dialogue and exchange. To overcome this issue, the audience was exposed to a wide range of artistic/cultural, societal, and educational aspects of Austrian-Ukrainian relations by means of activities such as online readings, concerts, and live streams. Although, the audience was invited to remain effectively engaged (there were 40 broadcasts), this could not prevent a feeling of audience saturation and its increasing demand (Ukrainian Institute 2021, 38–39). Regardless of the efforts to engage the audience through a wide offer of activities, this does not organically manifest itself in active participation, nor does it guarantee a two-way dialogue. Therefore, we still position it on a low level. This could be improved by building in mechanisms to assure reciprocity and constructive dialogue.

Education as digital bridging

Intrinsically connected to the dynamics of cultural relations, education represents a second major dimension where digital bridging occurs. State and non-state actors have been using digital platforms to facilitate learning across borders as they did previously with analogue means. Their engagement has come with challenges in terms of establishing an innovative as well as secure and inclusive environment (ICR 2021b) and remaining relevant in relation to literacy and adaptation to the changing technological landscape. A relevant project in this respect is Europeana, a digital cultural platform focused on cultural heritage which was launched in 2008 and has, among its various goals, the aim to connect to students and teachers. It does this through a communication strategy involving an ambassador network, a blog, an online learning community, and MOOCs. To reach students, an important target group, they also train teachers, for instance, during the pandemic, through online workshops in storytelling. Of particular interest is their use of educational challenges, game-like activities (such as #reinventingbeethoven) which aim to spur students to engage in meaningful and creative activities. By diversifying and adapting its activities to new learning realities and generational preferences, Europeana

aims to maximise its digital engagement. However, as indicated above, simply offering various options does not necessarily equal success, it can even hamper interactivity and participation as it might lead to an overload of information on the one hand and diverge from the goal on the other.

Language learning as digital bridging

Language learning is another important aspect of cultural relations which has become increasingly digitalised. The COVID-19 experience has urged cultural institutes to broaden their horizons and explore forms of digital engagement. An interesting example is found in the #plusloin campaign of the French cultural institute which had a goal to reach out to new students during the lockdown. Carefully taking into account the distinct rules of outreach, the campaign considered the appeal of celebrities to younger generations by utilising their experiences in learning French through social media. Of similar importance was the strategic choice to use a variety of social media networks to enroll, engage and reach as many potential students as possible across the globe. (EUNIC 2020, 21). Although, this campaign is innovative, it remains an expression of a low-level engagement given its mere focus on outreach through the creation of viral effects and a celebrity hype. In addition, the question can be raised whether the campaign represented a mere commercial action, rather than expression of cultural relations and echoes therefore, the threat of the diminishing cultural relations´ component to digital (language) learning (ICR 2021b, 17). Particularly in the context of DCR, and based on the experience of social media companies, it is of importance to consider participants as citizens and not as merely consumers (McAfee 2015, 289).

2.5: Understanding and measuring digital engagements

Digital engagements present a new level of complexity to the infamously challenging task of measuring cultural relations (Macdonald & Singh 2017, 23–24). Echoing the discussion of measuring practices such as soft power and cultural diplomacy (Doeser & Nisbett 2017, 9), its difficulty relates to the presence of rather intangible components such as trust, dialogue, and reciprocity. However, the inevitable move towards digital engagement has brought new opportunities in terms of measuring DCR, more particularly in the form of audience research, which relates to the study of human behaviour and experience based on the systematic collection and analysis of data and which can be categorised in qualitative as well as qualitative methods (Grincheva 2018b). While its quantitative component engages with the collection and analysis of data on demographics and behaviour to understand involvement, participation and influence, the qualitative aspect tends to deal with audience segmentation, ethnographic research, as well as content analysis. AI-driven tools and big data analytics (such as, sentiment analysis, opinion mining and social media analytics) are becoming increasingly important in the measurement[8] of digital engagement and are particularly relevant to the understanding of DCR.

8 For more information on big data measurement, see, for example, York, P. and Bamberger, M. *Measuring Results and Impact in the Age of Big Data: The Nexus of Evaluation, Analytics and Digital Technology*. The Rockefeller Foundation, 2020.

Part III: Bonding

3.1: Digital trust and credibility in digital bonding

In contrast to bridging, bonding refers to existing relations which take place on the basis of a common ground and are marked by efforts aimed at strengthening the relationship. As key aspects to bonding, trust and credibility are similarly of crucial importance to cultural relations. Their dynamics differ, however, in offline or online contexts. While credibility and authenticity refer here respectively to the degree of trustworthiness and originality attached to, for example, an individual, organisation or idea, trust is more challenging to delineate. Trust can be defined as

"the belief that others will not act opportunistically"

(Keefer & Scartascini 2022, xvii)

and can be said to consist of three major elements: ability, benevolence, and integrity (Mayer et al. cited in Blöbaum 2014, 17). With respect to an institution, trust can relate to trust in individuals on the one hand, and/or in operations/programs on the other (ibid).

Digital trust relates to audience engagement, and more particularly, to the conducting of sharing activities (Möhlmann 2016), branding efforts (Pietrzak and Takala 2018) as well as efforts to solve emerging issues "through open and continuous communication and the willingness to concede" (Karanasou 2021, 6). Of particular importance is the management of audience perception, which tends to differ in relation to types of social media advertising across generational groups (Childers & Boatwright 2021) but comes together in the overall finding that "authenticity must appear non-commercialised" and that to bond, it needs to correspond as closely as possible to the audience self-perception (Rees 2020, 10–12). Therefore, both negative and positive reviews, for example in the forms of 'likes and dislikes', tend to have impact (Rees 2020), a risk which is tangible given the empowerment of audiences "to create either widespread excitement or to disrupt a company's reputation" (Rees 2020, 35) making reputation management an increasingly relevant tool for actors involved in the digital space.

There are however challenges of building and maintaining trust in the digital age as exemplified during the COVID-19 crisis in the form of digital fatigue, time difference, language, and cultural barriers, etc. (Karanasou 2021, 5–11). Of particular interest is the finding that the notion of credibility and authenticity has become increasingly undermined in the digital age (Peters et al. 2018, 116–117), a fact which might relate to the increasing scepticism about expertise in a world where information and knowledge appears to be freely available (Gardner 2015). In addition, levels of social trust and civic engagement have been related to access to internet (Borgida et al. 2002) which introduces the notion of the digital divide (see further). Tangible threats such as social engineering, privacy and copyright issues, bias, and fears over censorship/surveillance (Bogula 2018) have created widespread anxiety of further digitalisation, as Pink et al. (2018, 1) argue:

"Digital data is rarely thought of by its everyday users as safe, easy to access or manage, or, in the case of personal data, necessarily accurate."

A deficit of digital trust can be addressed, though, by an adequate adaptation of services to the digital age (Keefer & Scartascini 2022, 157), working towards a responsible internet (Hesselman et al. 2020) and the incorporation of pillars such as transparency, ethics, data privacy, security (Albinson et al. 2019) as well as identifiability, traceability (Mattila & Seppälä 2016, 1) and a diversity of opinions (Sambrook 2012, 4).

The building and sustaining of trust is one of the major aspects of cultural relations which differentiates it from soft power. Therefore, trust seeking should stand central in any expression of cultural relations whether they take place online or not. In the next section, we discuss examples of digital bonding in the spheres of arts, language learning and education.
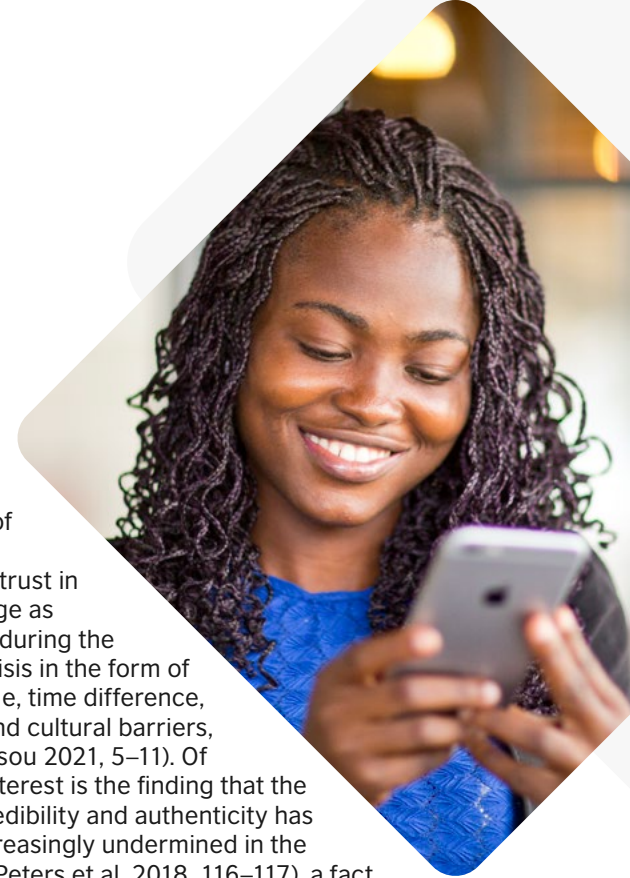
3.2: Arts as digital bonding

Due to the pandemic, many, prior existing cultural relations initiatives, and activities were forced to move online. An example is the online theatre residency programme organised by the British Council in Ukraine and the Gogol Fest, which aims to support socially relevant performances in Ukraine. In 2020, due to travel restrictions, the activities were conducted online and transformed in online residencies. As temporary residencies are meant to enable artists to expand their skills, forge connections, and promote their works abroad, the physical experience of travelling and residing abroad should not be underestimated. This makes online residencies particularly challenging. Although the organisation attempted to address this challenge by investing in preparatory research to smooth cooperation and trust building, for instance, through videos about the hosting theatres´ premises, the experience was not in all cases satisfactory. The forging of successful cooperation was, for instance, prevented by technical issues such as bad internet connections, a feeling of never-ending work-in-progress, and, most importantly, it appeared that "common ground" was not always found. However, potential for further collaboration was identified in an emerging "spirit of community" between certain theatrical companies. (Ukrainian Institute 2021, 67–69) While this points to the importance of trust, credibility, and authenticity in the process of digital bonding across DCR, this is not necessarily found while staying abroad, and should, therefore, be nuanced.

3.3: Education as digital bonding

Education represents a traditional platform for CR which has also seen a move from long-established offline forums to online formats. From primary, through secondary to Further and Higher Education, the digital pivot which was accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic has presented challenges to students and educators in preserving and enhancing bonding via digital means, as previous patterns of bonding behaviours, based on trust, needed to be recalibrated for digital relationships. An example of digital bonding within the realm of education is found in a British Council (Karanasou 2021, 35–36)-funded project between a UK partner and a Brazilian partner which collaborated on the development of an app which aims to help social entrepreneurs to manage their finances. Although the partners started off on the same basis, this was not a guarantee for successful bonding, as the collaboration, according to the participants, experienced difficulties related to the lack of community feeling, eventually resulting in a perceived lack of trust and respect which put the partnership at risk. This example demonstrates above all the importance of open and transparent communication, especially prior to digital interactions in managing expectations, as well as the necessity to invest in emotional bonding. This requirement particularly comes to the front in the digital environment, where physical boundaries are easily becoming obstacles to foster meaningful connections and might result in mistrust which is difficult to overcome.

3.4: Language learning as digital bonding

As a key component to the offerings of cultural institutes across the world, language offerings needed to move online during the pandemic, which resulted in a process of accelerated digitalisation: "Prior to the COVID-19 crisis, language learning was the most digitalised component of the members' activities. Despite this, the closure of physical classrooms both accelerated and reinforced the already prominent dematerialisation of language learning systems." (EUNIC 2020, 5) Regardless of the investments made in the digitalisation of language education, evaluations of projects have exposed various issues which might prevent bonding and learning, ranging from connectivity and the divide between urban and rural populations (British Council 2020a, 18; 2020b; 18) to the loss of real interaction between student and teacher and the introduction of teacher support systems (British Council 2020b, 6). Furthermore, concerns have been expressed over assessment of learning, online safety, particular language skills such as speaking, motivation, parental support, and the consideration of vulnerable groups (British Council 2020b, 8–19). While some of these issues seem to relate to inexperience and the novel nature of many educational programmes, other obstacles touch on structural inequalities and need to be addressed on a broader (international) level involving development aid, literacy and awareness raising.

3.5: Assessing digital relationships strength, durability, and network potential

The acclaimed opportunities as well as challenges in the realm of digital engagements urge a framework to assess its successes, failures, and growth opportunities. There are a wide variety of options to assess digital relationships that could be assessed here: ranging from interviews and focus groups to perception and sentiment mining. More recently, innovative methods such as geo-visualisation[9] have been introduced in the field. These are helping to assess cultural influence in the digital sphere through the mapping of data categories such as global and local appeal, reach and engagement, in this way enabling stakeholders to detect issues such as low engagement rates across geographical areas (Grincheva 2018a). More attention should be given to network analysis which proves to be an emerging and innovative method to determine major stakeholders with access to large networks. They can be identified through (a combination of) qualitative and quantitative methods enabling the evaluation of network strength through an analysis of its construction, development, and dynamics (Grincheva 2018a, 4). Of equal importance is the observation that the virtual space inevitably relates to its analogue counterpart, and that therefore an overarching approach is crucial (Baggio & Del Chiappa 2013, 16–17). Indeed,

"[...] the digital space is more than just a representation of other spaces but is itself part of the processes by which these spaces, and relationships, are forged."

(Geismar & Mohns 2011, 26)

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9 Geo-visualisation has been defined as "knowledge discovery in that it produces previously unseen patterns from a larger set of data." (Kim 2009)

Part IV: Gaps and limitations

4.1: Digital divide

Regardless of the many benefits linked to the emergence of new technologies and media – for instance an increased level of participation and potential democratisation – there is a consensus on the existence of a pressing global digital divide (UN 2021). Furthermore, scholarship has pointed out the correlation between inequality and digitalisation and found that "the rise of digital platforms [...] created new opportunities for cultural distinction, segmentation and, hence, inequality." (Mihelj et al. 2019, 1466) According to the UN (2021), 3.7 billion people are offline, which represents nearly half of the global population. Although the digital divide is a global problem, it is particularly pronounced in rural areas and low-income communities (Roese 2021). More than 80 per cent of the population in least developed countries are offline, while this for developed countries is 13 per cent and for developing countries 53 per cent (Cheng 2021). Since the outbreak of the pandemic, the digital divide has worsened as "those without Internet access have been unable to benefit from remote education, remote work, or remote health services." (UN 2021), which has prompted state and non-state actors to act.

4.2: Digital inclusion and exclusion

In addition to the unequal distribution of access and digital resources, the digital divide similarly refers to the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in the digital realm. This relates particularly to an unequal representation of communities across age, gender, ethnicity, physical ability, and socio-cultural background. This inequality is particularly relevant to the arts, which remain "highly exclusive" regardless of efforts to democratise digital cultural activities, as Mihelj et al. (2019, 1467) argue: "higher levels of engagement have not necessarily gone hand in hand with greater diversity." The evaluation of DCR projects across the world confirms the unfortunate reality that "the digital space is not an inclusive space at all." (Ukrainian Institute 2021, 11) as well as the systematic exclusion of various communities. The exclusion of communities carries a wider danger which has been related to polarisation, anti-democratic tendencies, and the construction of so-called echo chambers:

"Digital media [...] make inequalities more visible and can isolate individuals and large groups – regional, political, ethnic, class-based – in echo chambers or 'filter bubbles', compromising the existence of cross sectoral connections and of, at a large, a common space for public debate. Misused, it enables the spread of fake news, hate speech, populism, and xenophobia."

(More Europe 2021).

It could be argued that through the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, the inclusion-exclusion paradigm has been exposed.

4.3 Digital literacy and international development

A further aspect to the digital divide is the global disparity in terms of ability to understand technological changes and acquisition of digital skills. This relates to the changing and increasingly complex nature of literacy in the digital age. Following an expert group working under the auspices of the European Commission, media literacy is an "umbrella expression that includes all the technical, cognitive, social, civic, and creative capacities that allow a citizen to access, have a critical understanding of the media and interact with it. These capacities allow the citizen to participate in the economic, social, and cultural aspects of society as well as to play an active role in the democratic process."[10] An important observation is the fact that being a so-called digital native does not equal having "proficient skills at using the Internet to obtain and evaluate knowledge" (Spring 2012b, 120). As media literacy in the digital age increasingly determines the ability to navigate in society, it has become an important aspect to civic participation (Erstad & Sefton-Green 2012, 90), identity construction and self-expression (Sette & Brito 2019) and should, therefore, be considered as a fundamental right. While

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10 https://ec.europa.eu/information_society/newsroom/image/document/2018-51/call-for-proposals_-_media_literacy_for_all_54C4E29C-91F4-B23D-C80576613A756756_56325.pdf

the lack of media literacy is linked to tangible security risks as it is believed that it opens the door to propaganda, manipulation, and social engineering (see further), it is equally of importance to acknowledge the inequalities which exist across geographical zones, ethnicities, social classes, and gender. Due to the pandemic, the concern about media literacy has been exacerbated, particularly among young people. It was found that "about 826 million students do not have access to a computer at home." (UNESCO 2020b)

4.4: Digital mobilities

The limitations of the digital environment have been highlighted and exacerbated since the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. Impacting all spheres of society from right to information and basic security to mental health and equal opportunity, the necessity to establish a frame for digital mobility is urgent. Such a frame should encompass three aspects:

- First, digital inequality which concerns the equal access to internet, software, and hardware. This could be facilitated by improving access to internet through new infrastructure to the offering of devices and reducing costs (Allen et al. 2021a).

- Second, digital literacy which concerns the ability to understand and use technologies. Education is of key importance as well as the understanding that the economy of education has changed and that new practices such as the use of games and apps have become increasingly popular.

- Third, digital inclusion which relates in this context to equal social and cultural participation with a focus on the global south, marginalised communities and girls and women across the world. While this could mean considering disabilities or disadvantages by, for instance, providing services in sign language or special audio provision (GSMA 2020), it is directly related to awareness raising and research to understand existing as well as future gaps.

4.5: Understanding digital limitations and forecasting impact

Being aware of the above-described digital limitations helps us to forecast its impact. The accelerated digitalisation risks further aggravating the existing disparities and even create new ones. This has been exemplified by the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is important to recognise, however, that change will not occur suddenly. It is a long-term thinking and acting process. We see this in relation to digitalisation of the educational realm, which is said to offer "increased levels of access to a diversity of learning opportunities" and the "freedom to choose the educational options that best fit […] needs," but has failed to translate into "an increased diversification of learning opportunities" (Orton-Johnson & Prior 2013, 200–203). Of equal importance is the consideration of "hybrid DCR" which raises the question whether we should see the digital as an instrument to facilitate CR or rather view it as a new (inevitable) reality? This is particularly relevant in relation to the digital divide and the global south. An example from English' teachers in Sudan has demonstrated how hybrid methods (a combination of radio, WhatsApp, and the delivery of physical material) can be incorporated in the sustaining of teaching activities during the pandemic (Wiseman). Digital limitations are intrinsically connected to security on both individual and societal levels. The emergence of social media and the ease of how information can be transmitted across borders, communities and cultures has resulted in a reconceptualisation of maliciously driven strategic communications reflected in propaganda, disinformation, and hybrid warfare. Furthermore, we should consider the issue of data privacy and ethics, as its ignorance might result in authoritarian tendencies (Spring 2012a). Above all, we should realise that developments whether they take place in politics, technology, or culture can no longer be disconnected from the digital space and will inevitably impact people. The expected developments in AI and machine learning occupy an important role in this discussion, as they might exacerbate the security risk factor. With respect to DCR, this might signify a period of intense competition among its players, marked by a struggle for trust on the one hand, and the control to keep ahead of the narratives on the other.
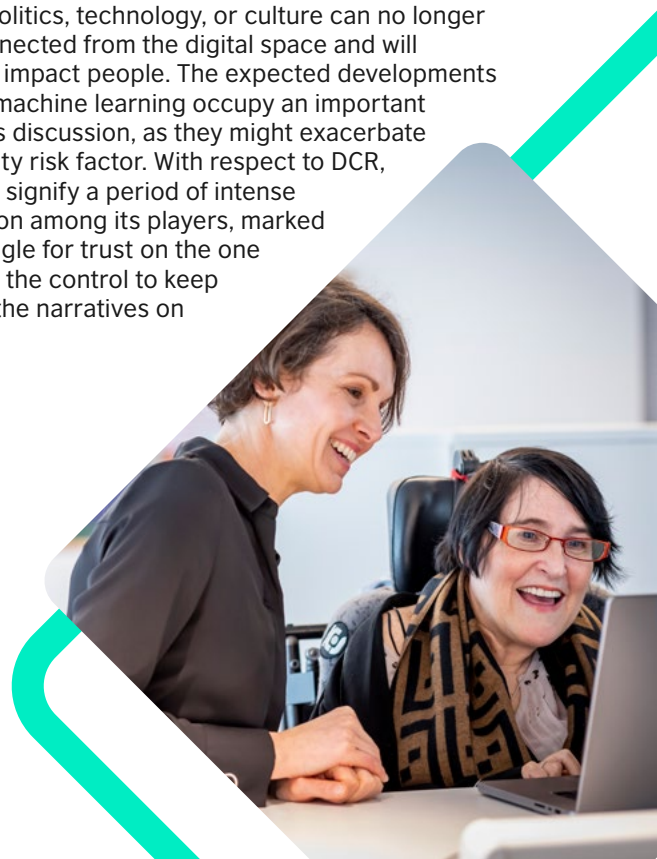
Part V: Conclusion

In this literature review, we have outlined the contemporary dynamics of DCR. We started by pointing at the peculiar character of DCR and distinguishing it from other practices such as digital soft power, nation branding and digital public diplomacy. Identifying the increasing importance of DCR on international development, the literature review pointed at the enormous impact of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic on cultural relations. While it has had a pernicious impact on many of its aspects, it has also triggered an accelerated digitalisation, urging the need for evaluation. Within the frame of Bourdieu´s theory of social capital, we have analysed DCR dynamics through two major types of relations: bridging and bonding. We have discussed the nature of digital engagement and how good and bad practices and experiences are shaping DCR in the spheres of arts, education, and language learning. Also, the possibilities in terms of measurement have been touched upon. Next, we have investigated the notion of trust and credibility as central components of DCR and how its deficiency affects the effective conducting of DCR. In the final section, we have examined the limitations and gaps of digital engagements and the risks to consider for DCR. Concretely, we have discussed the digital divide which we have divided in three components: the disparity in terms of access and resources, the disparity in terms of inclusion and the disparity in relation to literacy. While we have proposed a frame of digital mobility, we similarly made a forecast. This literature review demonstrates in this way the increasing importance of DCR, but equally points to the many issues and concerns which need to be considered to make DCR sustainable, accessible to all, to fulfill its goal, namely, establishing long-term relations across dialogue, trust, and knowledge exchange. Finally, the literature review points at remaining questions which need to be further investigated, such as cross-cultural research on the impact of COVID-19 on CR, the forecasted impacted of AI or the paradigm of hybrid CR.

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Lead authors:
Dr. Natalia Grincheva
Dr. Erik Vlaeminck

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