BRITISH COUNCIL

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Digital Cultural Relations

Reflections on current practice and key themes for future development

Foreword

This report 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 literature review 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 report, and the accompanying literature review 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.

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Introduction

Recent years have seen the accelerated digitalisation of cultural relations. By digitalisation, this document refers to a long-term process in which digital technologies impact the norms, practices and working routines of cultural institutions ranging from museums and art galleries to national cultural relations institutions. Over the past decade cultural relations institutions have adopted a host of digital technologies including websites, social media sites and virtual platforms such as Zoom. The term digitalisation refers to the fact that cultural relations institutions do not exist in a binary state of being either digital or non-digital but, rather, they are in the midst of a prolonged process of adopting and leveraging new digital technologies.

Successful digitalisation rests on articulating a clear definition that outlines an institution's goals and approach to digital activities. Such definitions offer members a vision of how digital technologies can best be leveraged. One definition may place an emphasis on reaching more diverse publics while another may focus on creating relationships with online publics. Definitions shape the very practice of digital cultural relations as they prioritise certain activities and identify which technologies are to be used, and when. As the aims of Digital Cultural Relations are the same as those of 'traditional' practice, this document adapts the 2018 definition and outcomes of Cultural Relations used in the Cultural Value report (p.7)

> Digital Cultural Relations are reciprocal transnational interactions between two or more cultures, encompassing a range of activities conducted by state and/or non-state actors within the space of culture and civil society, conducted through digital communications technologies. The overall outcomes of cultural relations are greater connectivity, better mutual understanding, more and deeper relationships, mutually beneficial transactions and enhanced sustainable dialogue between people and cultures, shaped through engagement and attraction rather than coercion.

The Covid pandemic accelerated the process of digitalisation. Forced to contend with quarantines and social distancing, cultural institutions replaced face-to-face activities with digital ones. Language classes and gallery openings took place in digital environments. Yet as the pandemic subsides it is likely that digital technologies will not entirely replace physical activities. They may, however, come to supplement an institution's physical activities.

Following in the paths of other professions and government ministries, cultural relations institutions will become hybrid, merging online and offline activities.

One interviewee commented on this acceleration, arguing that:

"I think there's a journey we have been on for a long period of time, a journey that's accelerated dramatically in the past two years and will probably continue to accelerate for the next couple of years. I don't see it as a line in the sand, so to speak… it's accelerated evolution."

It is important to note that the digital and physical realms are not separate. On the contrary, the two realms intersect one another and impact one another in dynamic ways. People who participate in online cultural activities may change their offline perceptions of a country or a culture. Conversely, people's offline beliefs about a country may reduce their willingness to engage with cultural relations institutions. Processes that begin offline may also continue online. For instance, networks of teachers that interact with one another online may organise offline professional conferences. This is an example of hybridity, a concept investigated next.
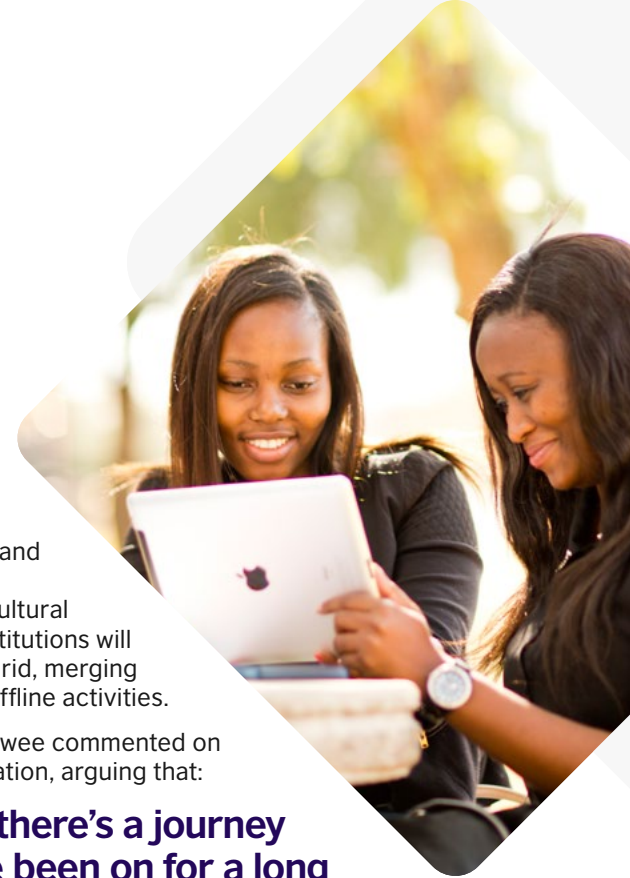
On Hybridity

Hybridity refers to a digital approach that seeks to blend physical and digital activities to obtain institutional goals. Hybridity rests on recognising those instances in which digital technologies may best be used to obtain positive outcomes. A cultural relations institution looking to engage with young publics may create virtual tours of museums and galleries. An institution looking to create a global network of professionals may turn to LinkedIn. In this sense, Hybridity is not about making a choice between physical and digital activities but, rather, asking if and when digital technologies can best complement physical activities.

One participant reflected on the use of digital technologies stating that:

"I don't think it's about digital. I think digital is just a tool to engage. I don't think there's any difference fundamentally in terms of the outcome but it's just one of the tools you will use to engage with people."

Hybrid activities may employ diverse technologies including virtual meetings, social media sites, websites and even radio broadcasts. A hybrid approach seeks to identify which digital technology may best augment or supplement an offline activity. For instance, meetings with new policy makers may demand physical interactions. In such face-to-face meetings, body language, social cues and even the ability to read a room may prove crucial. Yet as participants become familiar with one another, they may supplement offline meetings with online ones in which body language is harder to discern. In this way, digital technologies supplement but do not replace physical interactions.

As one interviewee put it:

"I think this is probably one that hybridity has to come back into the picture because on one hand, you reach people. In the digital medium, this is not something that is very stable, attention span is very limited, but in terms of combining this with some face-to-face event and see then who shows up depending on what kind of activities you do. It gives you a sense of how well you are engaging with digital publics"

Another stated that digital technologies may not be useful in building ties with senior policy makers.

"We are not able to reach the top guys (using digital technologies) whereas during face to face meetings you usually can get much closer to the top guys... With government stakeholders, I thought it was okay (relying on face-to-face meetings) as well because it was mostly discussions and meetings. So, you are able to agree, at a working level at least, you're able to progress things."

The question that now arises is how institutions can identify the best digital technology to supplement their various physical activities. One solution is adopting a tailored approach that seeks to meet the needs and preferences of digital publics, as elaborated next.

Tailored Approaches to Digitalisation

Different digital technologies offer different benefits and entail different limitations. While websites may offer a breadth of information, they are static and do not facilitate interactions between cultural relations institutions and their stakeholders. Likewise, while webinars may prove useful for language training, they do not enable collaborative co-creation of content.

A tailored approach to digitalisation segments digital publics while identifying the needs and digital preferences of each public. Tailoring acknowledges that individuals across the world already lead digital lives and employ digital technologies in most realms of daily life. Social media is used to maintain contact with peers; WhatsApp groups are used to coordinate family holidays or prepare papers for submission at University; push notifications are used to learn about events shaping the world while wearable digital devices are used to monitor physical activities. Put differently, digital publics of all ages have established digital preferences. Tailoring calls for an alignment between cultural activities and these digital preferences. Cultural relations institutions interact with diverse publics ranging from policy makers to civil servants, teachers, students, and artists. To best leverage digital technologies in cultural relations activities, institutions must employ those technologies favoured by each public. For example, age may prove an important factor with younger digital publics favouring one platform and adults another.

Moreover, cultural relations institutions must ensure that they do not lag behind their publics. In the digital age, digital preferences change quickly. Planning an activity on Twitter may be ineffective if the intended public has already migrated to another network. Similarly, institutions cannot employ innovative technologies that have yet to be adopted by intended publics. There is thus a need to continuously research intended publics' digital preferences.

As one participant put it:

"I think we are still learning and that's not necessarily a bad thing because if you are too far ahead of your audience, you might lose them, you might not take them along. If you are too far behind, again, they will not follow as well. So, I need to know how to pace and, like I said, you know your audience first, and then you decide which tools you use."

When adopting a tailored approach, cultural relations institutions should think 'Glocally'. A global project may be decided upon, such as promoting a specific cultural activity across the world. Yet in the next stage, this global goal is translated into local digital activities. Crucially, different technologies are employed in different countries in different ways. Thus, promoting an arts festival in India may best be achieved through WhatsApp groups while the same festival may be promoted on Facebook in France. Glocal thinking leads cultural relations institutions to consider important digital factors including local digital infrastructure, digital literacy, and available digital devices.

Importantly, tailoring requires that a cultural relations institution views its stakeholders not as consumers or audiences but as publics. The term public is accompanied by ethical dimensions. When you use the term public, you give birth to that public in that you recognise that the public exists and that it has needs and interests. Publics must thus be listened to and viewed as equal partners. Listening is an ethical act as it recognises that what the public has to say should inform cultural activities. Most importantly, institutions and publics seek to create mutually beneficial relationships that are centred on two-way interactions. This is not true of audiences, a term which denotes a broadcast mentality in which information flows from speakers to listeners. Consumers, on the other hand,

are often treated as mere numbers. The more consumers one has, the greater their financial prosperity. Yet this reduces individuals to numbers found on spreadsheets and ignores their agency. As such, the relationships that may be forged between cultural relations institutions and publics cannot be built between institutions and passive consumers.

One interviewee asserted that

"... in general, cultural relations is centred on mutually beneficial relationships that build trust... Those relationships being maintained over a prolonged period of time, and those relationships being inclusive, respectful, collaborative and mutually beneficial."

Tailoring also demands that cultural relations institutions take note of the different characteristics of digital environments.

Digital Environments

Digital technologies do not merely provide channels for communications. Rather, digital technologies create entire environments governed by certain logics, norms, and values. For instance, social media sites are governed by the norm of transparency. Social media users are asked to lead transparent lives, to constantly update followers on where they are and what they are feeling. This norm is enforced through the "Like" and "Re-Tweet" buttons that bestow status as the more followers one has, the greater their influence over their peers. This norm is based on the logic of social media sites that monetize data gathered on users. If users share no data, companies cannot turn a profit. To obtain followers, social media users embrace certain values such as creating a distinct online persona that can compete over the attention of other users. As such, the digital environment of social media is an inherently competitive one as all users compete over the attention of their peers.

Similarly, social media sites are digital environments that rest on the norm of reciprocal following and two-way interactions. Cultural relations institutions that use social media profiles as bulletin boards will be unable to attract digital publics. Institutions that fail to converse with digital publics will also be unable to cultivate a loyal following that may be used to amplify online messages and reach more diverse audiences.

Online meeting platforms, such as Zoom, are a very different digital environment. Dialogue within Zoom may be limited to brief interactions via the chat application. Moreover, when attending events on Zoom, individuals tend to multi-task (e.g., visit news websites). Effective use of Zoom demands that an institution summons and maintains the attention of digital publics. 'Zoom fatigue' is also a recurring phenomenon which is directly correlated to the length of an event. As such, cultural relations institutions should use Zoom for relatively brief events that do not centre on two-way interactions.

Reflecting on the use of Zoom, one interviewee asserted that:

"I don't think it's about doing different things. I think it's about curating your things. So, curating your content in a way that will make it more interesting when it's digital. When people sit in front of their computer, they don't necessarily just look at you. They have about 25 other things around them. So, how do you ensure your content is interesting enough for them to sit there and look at you on screen? That kind of thing. So, it's about that curation. It's about being very smart with what content and also, capturing that moment. Where previously, you might do things for 30 minutes or 45 minutes or 1 hour but now that it's digital, you might have to keep it to 10 minutes, 15 minutes at any one time. That kind of thing. You have to change how you have always done your activities because the tools you are using are different."

Digital competitions are greater than offline ones. This is evident when one compares the number of concerts held in one city, on one evening, with the number of online panels, seminars and webinars that take place every day online. As such, vying over the attention of digital publics may be more demanding than vying over the attention of offline publics. Winning such competitions rests on translating a brand's offline appeal to digital environments. It also rests on creating a digital track record. If individuals believe that an event offered them an added value, they are more likely to return for future events. This suggests that every digital activity must be measured and evaluated, as will be elaborated on later. Most importantly, activities in digital environments demand that cultural relations institutions retain their uniqueness or translate that which makes them unique offline to the digital realm. Put differently, cultural relations institutions should not simply mimic the activities of private corporations. Rather, they should seek to create digital activities that leverage existing offline strengths. French cultural relations institutions, for example, digitalise culinary classes, thus building on their offline brands.

Once a cultural institution has adopted a tailored approach to digitalisation, and has investigated the characteristics of digital environments, it may transition from digital tactics to digital strategies.

From Tactics to Strategy

Digital tactics may be defined as short-term measures used to increase one's online reach. In digital tactics, one often worries about digital platforms rather than tangible outcomes. Tactics prioritise reach over meaningful experiences. Thus, one digital tactic may seek to create viral videos while another may rely on memes to generate interest. Digital strategies, on the other hand, employ digital technologies to obtain a pre-defined and measurable goal. The goal and intended public determine which digital technology shall be used. Notably, if the goal cannot be measured, it should not be pursued through digital means. One of the main advantages of digital technologies is that they offer a greater ability to measure the outcomes of cultural relations, in terms of targeted publics and impact.

One interviewee noted that digital should not be treated as an after-thought, but be integrated from the start:

"In terms of the planning, I don't think it is that different. We're obviously looking at different partnerships, different types of organisations that we want to work with, we want organisations to think about their digital content and their digital offer first rather than as an afterthought, that's a big one in arenas that are digital by default."

Strategies bring structure and move beyond the mere use of technology to promote an institutional approach that seeks to reap the benefits of each digital activity. Additionally, digital strategies require that an institution clearly defines the public it wishes to interact with, prompting cultural relations institutions to worry about outcomes and not about platforms. Once a goal has been defined, and a public has been identified, preliminary research is used to identify the public's digital preferences and the digital environments in which it consumes culture. Next, a digital activity is planned so that it is tailored to the unique attributes of both the public and the affordances and limitations of the digital environment. Finally, each digital activity is measured. Specifically, you measure whether the intended public was reached and whether the pre-defined goal was obtained.

One example may be Tate Britain's offline goal of attracting young people to the museum. The intended public is 15–18-year-old Europeans who visit the UK. The identified digital environment is TikTok. Tate Britain can then create a virtual tour of the museum that is shared across TikTok. Over a duration of six months, Tate Britain can measure its ability to reach intended publics and measure a possible increase in the number of 15–18-year-old visitors. It is in this way that digital strategies bring order and structure to digital activities.

One important question is whether digital activities can foster trust between cultural relations institutions and their publics or stakeholders. There are two differing views on this topic, one that views trust as a variable and another that views trust as an outcome.

Trust as a Variable versus Trust as an Outcome

Trust as a variable considers trust to be a stepping stone towards a greater goal. For instance, trust may facilitate the creation of long-lasting relationships with stakeholders. If stakeholders trust that a cultural relations institution will deliver high-quality events, or enable them to develop certain skills, stakeholders will partake in an institution's event. The more events individuals partake in, the greater their willingness to establish relationships with a cultural relations institution. Trust also leads to credibility, while credibility leads to mutually beneficial relationships. Credibility can be defined as consistency and an ability to deliver on promises. If participants in digital activities obtain the skills promised to them, they may come to trust a cultural relations institution and view it as credible. This may lead to additional interactions which ultimately result in mutually beneficial relationships. For instance, participants that trust an institution may join its online network and help spread the institution's messages online.

As one interviewee put it:

"I'd say it's changed, but not because we've become increasingly digital… it's changed because we're trying to sell more from the website. I think we have a lot of trust with our audience and we always had… when I see certain promotional campaigns that say you're going to get X, Y, Z when really you're not quite because the wording's wrong, I think we're in danger of losing the trust that we've built up."

Another participant stated that:

"Trust… can be taken in a number of ways. We've got the trust that comes from credibility, there's also a trust that comes from predictability and ensuring that you stand for the same values. Then, there's a trust that is about reliability as a partner. Those are three quite different kinds of trust, that require three different kinds of solutions."

Yet trust may also be viewed as an outcome of digital activities. Trust may be built through meaningful digital engagement. By 'meaningful engagement' this document refers to two-way interactions between cultural relations institutions and digital publics in which public needs and concerns are addressed. Meaningful engagement enables a public to be heard and to impact online activities. As such, meaningful engagement rests on demonstrating an interest in public feedback and a commitment to integrate public feedback into future activities. Meaningful engagement also rests on providing publics with opportunities to converse, exchange opinions and share impressions both with other members of the public and with cultural relations institutions. Lastly, meaningful engagement relates to digital experiences that will be remembered by participants and that may impact attitudes and opinion towards a nation or its culture.

Trust is built differently with different publics, an important consideration when using digital technologies. Trust with civil servants, for instance, may necessitate face-to-face interactions and would thus be unsuitable for digital activities. Yet trust with social media artists may be built online so long as these artists recognise the quality and strength of a brand, such as the British Council. This suggests that it may be easier to hold digital events with publics that already have a positive regard for a brand. But events with publics that are unfamiliar with a brand may require physical interactions for initial trust building, which may then be deepened through digital activities.

Trust also stems from the quality of online events, which should be as high as offline events. This means that viewing online events as easy to orchestrate is misguided. Indeed, during the Covid pandemic many institutions felt the need to organise countless online events, an approach that lowered the quality of each event. It is preferable to organise five online events, as opposed to twenty, if these five are meticulously planned and are similar in quality to offline events.

An important question is whether trust and relationships can be built solely through digital interactions. The answer depends on the intended public. If young people build and manage relationships through digital platforms, then digital technologies may be used to facilitate trust and relationships. However, if the intended public does not use digital platforms to manage relationships, then you must rely on hybrid approaches.

The quickest way to lose trust is to fail to deliver on promises. This is a recurring feature of digital cultural relations in which institutes promise more than they can offer. Trust may also be lost if offline events are merely moved online. In these instances, experiences are diluted as the digital realm differs from the physical one. Notably, trust may also be lost if one fails to account for digital divides, which are explored next.
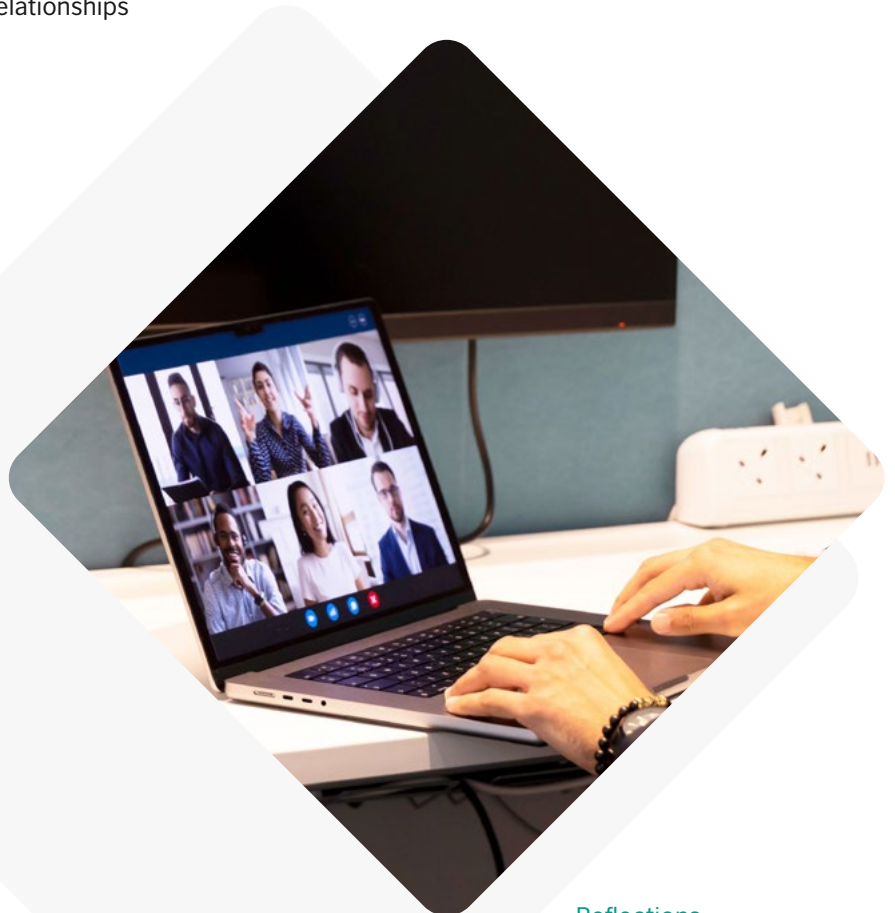
Digital Divides

The term digital divide refers to differences in digital usage based on economic and social factors. There is, for instance, a digital divide between the global north and south with regards to internet penetration rates. However, this divide is steadily narrowing and at times, cultural relations institutions may overstate the importance of this digital divide due to a supposed lack of inclusivity. It is commonly believed that digital activities exclude many individuals who lack the infrastructure or devices necessary to partake in online events. Yet the same is true of face-to-face activities which exclude people with disabilities, poorer populations that cannot pay for transportation or individuals living in remote areas or peripheries. In other words, offline activities are constrained by geography, logistics and budgets while digital activities may be regarded as inclusive in nature as they mitigate the impact of distance or physical disabilities.

As one participant stated:

"For quite a long period of time, digital has been integrated into our work in a slightly unconscious way in a way, we haven't really thought about digital replacing face-to-face, it's more a means to engage and have the impact we want… if we think about the limitations that people talk about in digital cultural relations, I could perhaps talk about some of the limitations of face-to-face in that face-to-face by its nature is episodic and time-bound. It's constrained by geography, by logistics, by budget. It tends towards urban centres…"

It is important to note that there are several digital divides. In any given location there may be digital divides between generations, professions, and social classes. Some professions require daily use of digital technologies while others do not. There may also be digital divides within the same generation due to social inequalities. Addressing digital divides requires a nuanced understanding of local contexts and the local factors that shape digital accessibility. The importance of context demonstrates once more the benefits of a 'Glocal' thinking where local offices implement digital strategies based on local digital divides.

Some participants and interviewees already think in Glocal terms.

"But actually we tailor interventions in particular countries and contexts, so at a global level, when we procure platforms, we take into account access, given that our audience is primarily in development contexts."

There may also be a digital divide within a cultural relations institution. One such divide may exist in digital proficiency where headquarters has mastered many different technologies whereas local offices lack the resources to do so. Another divide may exist if local offices are not familiar with all the capabilities of headquarters. This is especially important regarding data gathering and analysis. Local offices may fail to ask for headquarters' assistance in measuring digital activities as they are unaware of headquarters' ability to analyse swarms of data. Another internal digital divide may develop if headquarters has gained valuable experience in organising digital activities, an experience that has not been passed on to local offices. Reaping the benefits of digital cultural relations requires that institutions narrow internal digital divides through digital training and sharing of insight and resources.

One interviewee referred to this very divide adding:

"We understand our audience and have a good understanding of their needs in general terms, but we haven't had reliable data coming through our systems other than reach numbers… our ability to collect data has increased dramatically, our ability to handle that data has not… there are plans to address that organisationally but because of the size of our audiences and the depth of our engagement, which is everyday and in large numbers, the data we generate is very big data and we need some organisational support."

A final digital divide may exist between a cultural relations institution and its varied stakeholders. Such is the case if stakeholders or digital publics have migrated to new digital environments. For instance, digital growth is now most evident in messaging applications such as WhatsApp yet not all cultural relations institutions have utilised these applications, leading to a digital divide. Narrowing such divides requires that cultural relations institutions continuously monitor the digital horizon. This can be achieved by analysing which new technologies are used by stakeholders and by anticipating how future technologies will impact cultural relations. It is incumbent on cultural relations institutions to begin preparing now for the next wave of digitalisation that will include augmented reality and metaverse-related technologies.

Given that digital technologies facilitate the formation of global networks of information, practicing digital cultural relations calls for the adoption of a networked mentality.

The Power of Networks

Cultural relations institutions may seek to obtain three networked goals: creating networks, leveraging networks, and connecting with network gatekeepers or influencers. By creating networks this document refers to using digital events to attract publics that are then formed into networks through dedicated applications. For instance, all teachers who undergo training in the same city or country can become a network in which information, insight and best practices are shared once the training is over. Such a network can be managed through WhatsApp groups. Similarly, cultural relations institutions can manage alumni networks. Alumni of different activities can be invited to be part of a network that takes the shape of social media groups. This network can help maintain relationships with alumni, invite alumni to follow-up events and even foster collaborations between alumni.

As one participant from the British Council stated:

"It's not really enough but I think one of the things that success is going to look like is an active alumni network. And I don't just mean through universities, I mean an active group of people who have, in a sense, been given a break or an opportunity by the British Council, who are supporters and continue in their professional life to help us do the work that we do, because they believe in it, because they understand it, because they've experienced it"
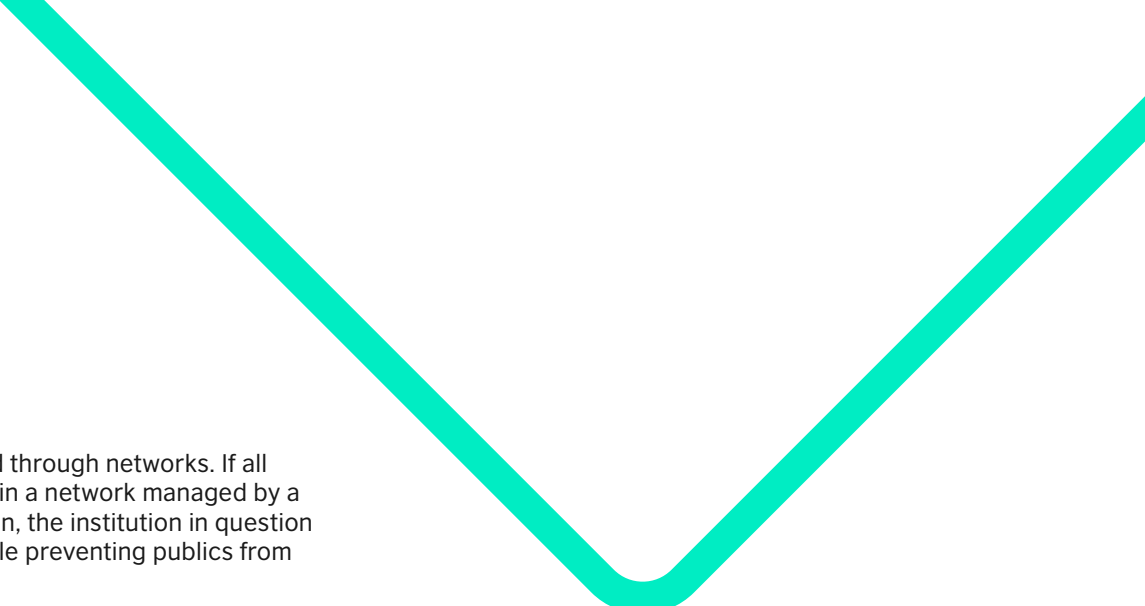
A networked approach can also help promote language learning, as English is a prerequisite for belonging to global networks. As such, part of language promotion can be the promise of joining trans-national networks of professionals. Cultural relations institutions may also seek to join existing networks. This can best be achieved by identifying network gatekeepers or individuals that manage or administer online networks. Through gatekeepers, cultural relations institutions can join, and take part in network activities thus reaching larger and more diverse publics. Digital gatekeepers may also include individuals who are networked or that have created their own network of followers and peers. Such is the case with digital artists that are at the core of a network of peers. Cultural relations institutions can introduce these gatekeepers to existing networks, thus enhancing the quality of their networks. These individuals, in turn, may promote cultural relations institutions among the networks they have built. As one interviewee stated

"Regarding online audiences, one advantage of the digital is that principally you should be able to understand your audiences better depending on the platform that you do. Simply because you might be able to do some research about using ways of tracking who is interested in the type of thing. There are different tools now that allow you to identify your influencers, for instance, to approach them and to establish digital connections with them. This digital networking in principle should help you to maximise your reach and by reach, I mean moving beyond your immediate circle of people interested and already sympathetic to your issues".

Notably, institutions that employ digital technologies often encounter a digital plateau – that is they steadily increase their reach until they reach a high point. Some then begin to experience a decrease in reach as digital publics turn to other activities or platforms.
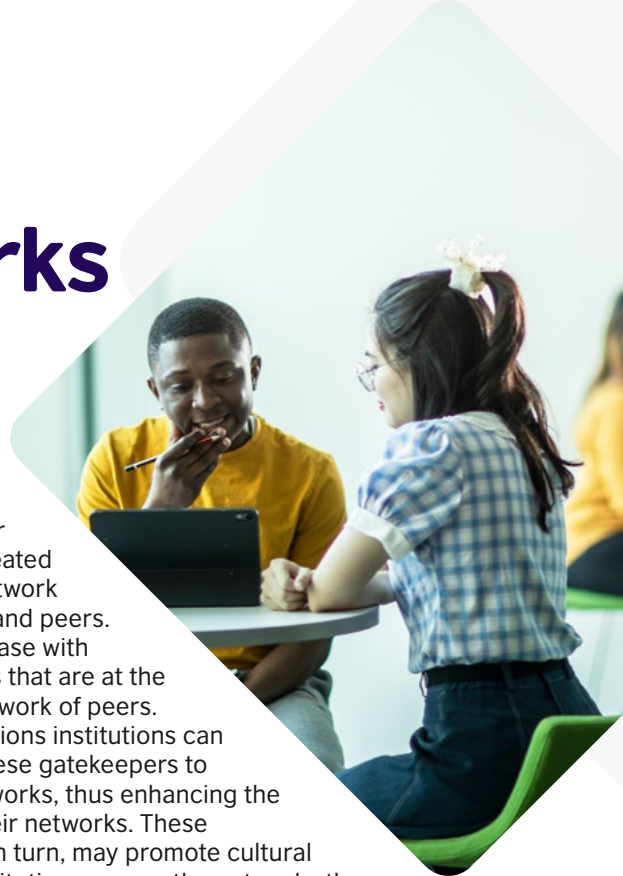
Plateauing can be avoided through networks. If all participants in an event join a network managed by a cultural relations institution, the institution in question can maintain its reach while preventing publics from drifting away.

A networked mentality requires the adoption of network analysis tools. Basic tools can now be used to map networks and, more importantly, identify network influencers. These are members of networks that are most central to exchanges of information within a given network. If cultural relations institutions nurture relationships with influencers, they may find it easier to join networks and increase their digital reach.

Digital activities yield data that can be gathered, analysed, and used to measure a cultural institution's impact. Yet the question at the core of any data analysis is what to measure? This question is addressed next.

Data Analysis

Digitalisation often leads to a fascination with statistics. One of the axioms of digital activity is that reach is the most important variable. The greater an institution's reach, the greater its impact. However, numerical fascination prevents cultural relations institutions from measuring the quality of their activities and the quality of those who attend digital events. This becomes clear when one considers social media profiles. One cultural institution may boast a following of one million Facebook users. Yet this figure may include fake accounts, inactive accounts or accounts belonging to people who are unlikely to attend cultural events. Another cultural institution may have a smaller following of 50,000 Facebook users. Yet each of these users may be interested in cultural activities. These followers may also include influencers such as other cultural relations institutions, artists, relevant policy makers and professionals. Thus, a small following does not immediately translate into a poor following.

The major benefit of digital technologies is considered to be the ability to interact with ever-increasing numbers of individuals. And yet a more sensible approach asks not only how many people attended an event but how many people were part of the intended public? How many people are likely to return to another event? And how many people altered their beliefs about a nation or culture following the activity?

One interview expressed the importance of assessing how many participants in one activity, return for another.

"One of the things that we have the potential to do as an organisation is to use data much more effectively so that we understand things like user journeys and repeat audiences and we capture alumni through the arts as well as through education, all those kinds of things. I think we're not very good at doing that at the moment."

Measurements of digital activities should avoid the temptation of vanity metrics that focus solely on reach. Data analysis should focus on measuring impact. This can be obtained in three ways. First, semantic analysis may be used to analyse comments published by individuals. It is very easy to "Like" or "Share" an online event. Yet commenting demands an investment of time and resources. As such, comments and testimonials can offer important insight into digital activities, and one must measure whether these comments are positive or negative in nature.

To quote one participant:

"My experience has been that colleagues ... are about numbers. It's partly a thing of the platform, but we have a huge weight of qualitative support, the interactions with users on the courses and things, that in my experience seem less valued as a source of data. It seems like everybody's concerned about the numbers whereas the stories that we hear and the comments are much more important."

Second, network analysis may also prove beneficial. For instance, cultural relations institutions may analyse what topics are associated with their brand in online conversations before and after a digital event. Alternatively, an institution may analyse what topics are associated with a nation before and after a series of digital events. Changes in topics, and more positive sentiment of comments, may both be indicative of impact, of changed minds

and attitudes. However, one should note that opinions and beliefs change over time. This necessitates that cultural relations institutions adopt a longitudinal approach that measures certain parameters over long durations of time.

Relationships may be more difficult to measure. Yet as noted earlier, trust may lead to relationships and trust may be measured. For instance, participants in online events may be asked if their expectations were met. Those who answer "no", can then become the focus of measurement as institutions must identify why expectations were not met and whether future digital events can be structured so that they meet participant expectations.

Finally, a cultural relations institution may measure itself opposite other, similar institutions. Indeed, other cultural relations institutions may serve as a source of information and inspiration. By evaluating the digital activities of museums, galleries or culture ministries, institutions may discover a host of digital activities that can be emulated. Similarly, cultural relations institutions may create networks with peers including galleries, museums and even government ministries to crowdsource ideas for digital activities or digital measurements. Lastly, cultural relations institutions may use peers they admire as a baseline for measurement. For instance, a cultural relations institution may assess the number of influencers their peers attract on social media and the level of interactions between peers and online publics. The results of these analyses may then be translated into institutional goals.

Thus far this document has dealt with various digital technologies. Yet a digital approach to cultural relations may seek to create an entire ecosystem.

Towards the Creation of Ecosystems

Building an eco-system relates to an approach that seeks to integrate all digital activities and services. Digital experiences are not shaped solely by participating in an activity. Rather, digital experiences are shaped by access to additional information (e.g., a website) and inclusion in new or existing networks (e.g., social media profile). Other variables include tech support and customer service as well as digital payment systems that can be easy to use or quite demanding. Digital experiences are also shaped by digital advertising as these set public expectations. Lastly, digital activities may be hampered by TMI or too much information. If an institution offers too many online resources, individuals may find it hard to navigate these resources.

As one participant noted:

"We can learn from the competition: the models that they use, the app based approach and unified approach that they have. We have websites, we have apps, but none of them are connected to each other. They're very disparate uses. So, it's not an ecosystem. Building up an ecosystem so that whether you get access via an app or via the web browser, you're having a similar experience."

To create an ecosystem, a cultural relations institution must envision the digital journey of an individual from the moment they learn about an event or a service, through the payment process, actual participation, and subsequent engagement once an event has ended. Moreover, within an ecosystem all digital activities supplement one another. A teacher gaining information from a website should be able to use WhatsApp to communicate with tech support, have easy access to databases and be automatically invited to an online network.

Creating an ecosystem requires more collaboration within an institution as each digital activity or technology may be managed by a different unit. If these units work in unison, they may be able to create an ecosystem. This demands a transition from silos, in which specific units manage specific digital activities, to horizontal teams that together shape an individual's digital journey.

When asked about the future of digital cultural relations, one participant stated:

"More coordination, fewer silos, leverage synergies… "

Towards a Research Agenda

While this document has highlighted the means through which digital technologies may best be leveraged by cultural relations institutions, there are areas that warrant further research. This document concludes by outlining a research agenda which rests on seven research questions.

1. The first question focuses on mapping existing digital divides within cultural relations institutions. A pertinent question is: How can cultural relations institutions identify, and narrow internal digital divides, be it in digital skills, competencies, or experience in organising different forms of digital events? Moreover, should cultural relations institutions prioritise one set of digital skills over another?

2. As noted, the quality of digital events rests on tailoring digital activities to the unique attributes of intended publics, digital environments, and digital capabilities. An important research question that follows is: If given the option between face-to-face or digital activities, under the same conditions, what are people more likely to favour? What variances are there across type of event, geography, and demographics?

3. With regards to hybridity, an important question is: Which digital environments should be used in arts and culture? Indeed, one cannot compare the experience of attending a modern dance performance with watching the same performance on a computer screen. The transition to digital technologies may dilute the overall experience and the emotional response it elicits. It is incumbent on cultural relations institutions to identify those digital environments through which arts and culture may migrate online.

4. It has been argued that the quality of events impacts trust and credibility. This raises the question: How to best reach, and engage with return users to measure the quality of digital activities? Should return users be asked to complete questionnaires? Provide testimonials through emails? Or be invited to a Zoom conversation? Though the insight they offer is crucial, return visitors may be unwilling to spend time offering feedback.

5. An additional question that requires further investigation is whether macro-level shifts in the UK's digital communications should also affect cultural relations institutions? Recent years have seen a shift in the UK's digital communications as is the case with the FCDO's emphasis on strategic, one-way communication to contend with disinformation. How does this shift impact cultural relations initiations' emphasis on two-way interactions, dialogue and relationship building?

6. An equally important question is whether geopolitical shifts should inform the digital activities of cultural reactions institutions. For instance, should the rise of authoritarianism, and the emphasis that authoritarian states place on digital communications, shape how digital technologies are leveraged in cultural activities? Similarly, can the same core values be promoted in authoritarian states and democracies? Finally, does trust rest on different dimensions in authoritarian states as opposed to democracies? This last question also demands more attention to how trust can be built, or enhanced, using digital technologies.

7. Finally, it is important to ask: How can cultural relations institutions best create a baseline for measuring digital activities? To whom should they compare themselves? Universities? Galleries? Culture Ministries? Given that cultural relations institutions offer a breadth of services they may wish to use different comparisons in different areas of activity.

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Digital Cultural Relations