

June 2022

Listen, Learn, Connect

**Cultural Organizations and Digital
Strategy in the COVID-19 Era**

www.listenlearnconnect.org



Wyncote Foundation

Welcome

to the Wyncote Foundation's report on recent digital media efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focuses on 29 organizations that demonstrated field-leading approaches to digital programming and engagement in response to the pandemic's lockdowns.

Wyncote's 2014 study, *Like Link Share: How cultural organizations are embracing digital technology*, explored how large-budget, legacy cultural institutions were expanding digital capacity to reach and engage more people beyond their physical doors. This new report includes a wider range of organizations: those with small budgets, those reflecting and serving BIPOC communities, and founder-led organizations, along with several large institutions that met our selection criteria, defined in the next section.

Creating cultural experiences that take advantage of digital capabilities and online platforms—and connect meaningfully with audiences—is clearly a work in progress. The leaders profiled in our report describe organizational mindsets and approaches that can help grantmakers and policymakers discover new ways to facilitate experimentation and learning in the field. Nevertheless, producing high-quality online programming is a challenge that the cultural sector continues to grapple with and has not yet “figured out.”

As audiences return to exhibition spaces and performance venues, organizations that have developed vibrant virtual programming now face the challenge of supporting this work alongside in-person offerings. Many people interviewed for this study said that their organizations were at an inflection point, pausing to consider how much and what kind of programming they should produce for online, live, and hybrid audiences in the future. They are debating how best to balance their resources to support the wholly new audiences and delivery methods that have accelerated during COVID.



We believe this new report is particularly timely. The 2021 Culture Track study *Rethinking Relevance, Rebuilding Engagement* showed that two-thirds of Americans have participated in one or more online arts and culture activities during the pandemic. Audiences have come to expect online programming and hybrid options as important avenues for access and participation. Cultural organizations are recognizing that online programming can significantly expand engagement, and art forms are evolving to creatively incorporate media and digital technologies. Pathways are opening to new possibilities that are as promising as they are complex to deliver. For decision makers seeking to help the nonprofit cultural sector fully participate in our increasingly media-savvy society, this study should encourage reflection and action.

Finally, this study is based primarily on interviews and conversations, not on the compilation of data and quantitative analytics. We sought to speak to the people doing the work, to understand what it took to do it, and to learn how they are thinking about their work today. On this report's website, you can read stories about each of the study organizations, and find more information about their efforts. The report highlights insights arising from their challenges and successes, and reflects our collected takeaways and lessons learned.

Many thanks to all our participating study groups for your time, candor, and inspiring work. You are demonstrating how the arts can reach and engage with community, revealing new points of meaning and connection in a world that hungers for both.

David Haas
Vice Chair
Wyncote Foundation

Creating cultural experiences that take advantage of digital capabilities and online platforms—and connect meaningfully with audiences—is clearly a work in progress.

Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a global pandemic. During the ensuing weeks, businesses shut their doors, schools transitioned to virtual formats, and nations closed their borders. Arts and cultural institutions were shuttered as well. In the United States, the financial impact on the arts sector was nearly twice that of the overall economy, with performing arts presenters and companies among the hardest hit. While the arts and cultural economy rebounded in 2021, it has not recovered to 2019 levels.

This report explores the resilience, courage, and creativity among arts and cultural organizations in the midst of crisis. Within unprecedented constraints, many cultural organizations found new ways to use digital technologies, serve core audiences, and expand their reach and programming. We draw from the experiences of organizations over these past two years to identify promising approaches and areas of activity likely to benefit organizations through the continuing uncertainties of this era.

In addition to this printable report, the website **ListenLearnConnect.org** features profiles of organizations, along with resources and links.

Report Content and Key Questions

This report covers trends and standout activities, as well as emerging practices, that positioned organizations to navigate uncertainty and balance virtual, hybrid, and in-person programming. The takeaways and recommendations that follow were informed by a set of research questions covering organizational activities, capabilities, and lessons learned.

Assets: What specific capabilities did organizations have or acquire that supported their digital efforts during the pandemic?

Activities: What did organizations offer? How was the work created, funded, and distributed? How did efforts evolve over the course of the past two years?

Qualities: With so many organizations experimenting with digital programming, what qualities or efforts stand out as notable innovations or successes and why?

Gaps: What challenges did organizations encounter? What digital efforts failed to connect with their audiences?

Lessons learned: What picture is developing of organizations leaning into digital programming? What can other organizations learn from successful efforts and how might donors and grantmakers better support this work?



Opera Philadelphia,
Soldier Songs
Photo: Will Espinsola

Methodology

This report’s findings draw from interviews with 29 arts and cultural organizations as well as desk research conducted between March 2020 and April 2022. An advisory group of arts and cultural leaders representing funders and practitioners across the United States provided invaluable connections and insights throughout the process.

Organizations selected for research were identified through nominations, media coverage, published reports, and additional desk research. Selection criteria included:

- Organizational history of 5–10 years, and likelihood of continued work for 5–10 years,
- At least one paid staff member whose position includes digital responsibilities,
- Digital media efforts recognized as field-leading,
- Strong relationship to a home place, and
- Indication of lasting organizational change through digital initiatives as a result of COVID-19.

Additional filters included the organizations’ disciplines, geography, and community representation, with emphasis on identifying organizations focused on and established by BIPOC communities.

Beyond challenges directly connected to the pandemic, nationwide racial justice movements accelerated by the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers raised important concerns for the arts and culture sector. While the primary focus of this report is on digital projects and programs, research covering these past two years cannot be separated from larger cultural and social movements, which are evident in the activities of profiled organizations.



Curtis Institute of Music

Participating Organizations

American Museum of Natural History
New York, NY

Apollo Theater
New York, NY

Arab American National Museum
Dearborn, MI

BalletX
Philadelphia, PA

Baltimore Center Stage
Baltimore, MD

Barnes Foundation
Philadelphia, PA

Boston Lyric Opera
Boston, MA

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library
Charlotte, NC

Cleveland Museum of Art
Cleveland, OH

CultureSource
Detroit, MI

Curtis Institute of Music
Philadelphia, PA

The Dallas Opera
Dallas, TX

Dance Theatre of Harlem
New York, NY

DuSable Museum of African American History
Chicago, IL

Harvey B. Gantt Center for African American Arts & Culture
Charlotte, NC

Jacob’s Pillow
Becket, MA

Lucky Plush
Chicago, IL

Ma-Yi Theater Company
New York, NY

Miami City Ballet
Miami, FL

NEW INC
New York, NY

Pera Museum
Istanbul, Turkey

ONE Archives Foundation
Los Angeles, CA

Opera Philadelphia
Philadelphia, PA

Oregon Shakespeare Festival
Ashland, OR

San Francisco Symphony
San Francisco, CA

SFJAZZ
San Francisco, CA

True Colors Theatre
Atlanta, GA

White Snake Projects
Brookline, MA

The Wolfsonian-FIU
Miami Beach, FL

1 Know Your Purpose

To reach and serve audiences and participants effectively, organizations need to understand who their work is for and how they matter.

Profiled organizations expressed—with notable conviction—their commitment to connection and engagement on behalf of their communities. Leaders often began their interviews with storytelling, describing empathy for their constituents, who also were isolated at home. The leaders expressed urgency around finding ways to engage with their communities. Long-term programming plans were secondary; connecting with people was primary. The monetization of their pandemic efforts—developing a replacement for lost ticketed or earned revenue—was not among the initial motivating priorities.

Organizations' service to communities and constituencies formed the backdrop for effective digital efforts. Organizations had a strong sense of what they bring to audiences and participants; they wanted to continue to deliver. When debriefing on the successes and shortcomings of initial digital projects, measurements of success could be informed by their “why”—why they were doing the work in the first place. The same holds true for the creation of initiatives. As the organizations began to invest in online programming, they had a clear sense of who they wanted to reach, though online audiences often turned out to be larger, broader, and more geographically diverse than first expected.

To find and connect with communities online, you need to know who you are and what people want and need from you. Without a strong sense of purpose and connection, cultural organizations may misdirect precious time and money on their digital forays and lack a basis for measuring success. Our report opens with this takeaway because of its critical importance to digital engagement and experimentation.

“The mission is who are you doing it for? Why? Knowing those things, you are able to go back to programming 101. What do they need right now?”

—Ralph Peña
Ma-Yi Theater Company



Ma-Yi Theater Company

“Knowing that we can reach a national audience, a global audience, is a huge accomplishment. Now we can think about what’s next.”

—Diana Abdouali, Arab American National Museum

Be Present and Active in Supporting Change

The first year of the COVID-19 pandemic also saw the murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officers and renewed focus on social justice and racial equity. As more people looked for trusted sources of information, they turned to organizations representing and embedded in communities of color that had already been doing this work. The DuSable Museum, for example, held virtual talks and responded to consulting requests to offer DEI trainings. Dance Theatre of Harlem found that it could present its work as a multiethnic ballet company in a way that was “authentic and earnest,” says Anna Glass, executive director. And the Gantt Center, as part of its Unmasked conversation series, reached an audience of over 2,000 people, from 47 states and 7 countries, after Floyd’s murder. David Taylor, CEO, saw in that moment people from some of the wealthiest communities and the poorest communities all sign on for the same program; it was an “example of the power of what digital work could be.”

Connect in a Time of Isolation

Organizations found purpose in connecting with individuals and communities at a time when other connections were unavailable. True Colors Theatre Company found early success in a high school monologue competition held virtually. The event was meaningful for the participants despite its unusual online format. Charlotte Mecklenburg Library similarly saw that its early Zoom programming allowed community members to connect with each other. Focusing on this sense of empathy, organizations were able to support their communities and foster new relationships.

Understand That a Community Has Needs Beyond Art

Ma-Yi Theater Company leaned into mission and community as core drivers for digital initiatives. Responding to a spike in violent hate crimes against Asian Americans, the company organized online forums to discuss attacks. Investments in technology, training, and staff enabled the company to expand audiences as well via their channel Ma-Yi Studios, reaching 3 million viewers in the first year, including new audiences across Asia.

Realize That Your Community May Be Bigger Than You Think

The Arab American National Museum is in Dearborn, Michigan, a city with a large community of Arab American residents. Its mission is to document, preserve, and present the history, culture, and contributions of Arab Americans and to connect the community nationally. With the pandemic’s onset, the staff worked deliberately to connect community members passing their time at home. Its projects and events have now reached all 50 states and globally, with strong participation from younger adults.

Further Reading

Of By For All helps organizations develop authentic relationships in community. Its website includes free tools for self-assessment and capacity building.

The Art of Relevance, by Nina Simon, offers case studies, tools, and resources that explore ways organizations are working to “matter more” to more people.

TAKEAWAY

2 Learn to Learn

Profiled organizations demonstrate an open, learning mindset that they credit as a determining factor in their success.

Despite the pandemic's uncertainties, study organizations share a bias toward action. They described a willingness to try, observe, adjust, and iterate in order to discover new pathways for reaching people in isolation and creating experiences built for online environments.

While quickly generating new programming, organizations also gave staff leeway to develop ideas, letting go of rigid expectations for perfection. Staff from across siloed departments contributed ideas and expertise and created cross-functional teams to get work done. Recognizing that they had much to learn, organizations also hired external consultants and experts, drew on board expertise, and formed new digital advisory groups who could help fill gaps in knowledge and capacity. Notably, these approaches were often radically different from the typical pace and process of exhibition and production planning, which can take months or even years of meticulous work.

Organizations now predict that their new capacities will have long-term benefits. These include increased responsiveness and greater camaraderie and teamwork. Several organizations said that “new muscle was built” that will be useful for future projects, reorienting their organizations in important and helpful ways. Codifying new processes and ways of working is the next step, so organizations can build on learnings. The goal is a vibrant participatory organizational culture that adapts to continuous uncertainty and fosters resilience in its work and in the lives of its artists and staff.

“The real magic is the same people collaborating in new ways.

– Matt Tarr, American Museum of Natural History

American Museum of Natural History

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Empower Your People

Leaders were willing to experiment and learn from the outcomes, empowering staff who knew they would not be “blamed” if an attempted idea did not work out. This openness to dive in and respond quickly was balanced with a dynamic longer-term vision for the future. With an organization’s mission as the most important touchstone, leaders focused on possibilities, not problems.

Create More Satisfying Workplaces

Organizations mentioned the stress of uncertainty, isolation, and burnout. For many, this anxiety was heightened by the need to quickly learn new digital skills and then attempt to maintain digital efforts while returning to in-person work. Several organizations took pandemic upheavals as a chance to change practices, developing healthier schedules and processes rather than returning to a stressful “normal.” Retaining staff and budgeting for a staff size adequate for hybrid work, however, remain challenging.

Test Then Invest

Beyond social media, Boston Lyric Opera (BLO) had no digital presence pre-pandemic. Wanting to keep at-home audiences engaged during continued venue closures, BLO leadership began testing projects like digital book clubs, artists’ talks, and archival audio from past productions. Building on these experiences and positive audience responses, BLO decided to invest further and to enhance cinematic values and media production qualities. This led to the creation of operabox.tv, a digital platform for sharing commissioned, bespoke productions of both old and new works.

“We’ve had to pivot and then re-pivot in projects because we’re learning as we go.

– Salome Asega, NEW INC

“My directive was: try it. If it doesn’t work, don’t be afraid to cut and move on. We need to try a lot of things. If you don’t try you will get nowhere. Use this pandemic as an opportunity to express new ideas and new things.

– Ian Derrer, Dallas Opera

Try, Try Again

CultureSource, a regional arts service organization in Southeast Michigan, created its early pandemic programs and resources by trying out ideas and seeing what happened. Studying its member organizations’ responses, it then created a comprehensive program including technical assistance and research designed to increase digital capacity across the region’s arts organizations. CultureSource is now improving this model to develop its next iteration of programming.

Further Reading

Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds, adrienne maree brown

This landmark book encourages ways to feel, map, assess and learn from shifting patterns. See also: Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute.

The Practice of Adaptive Leadership: Tools and Tactics for Changing Your Organization and the World, Ron Heifetz

Associated with Harvard Business School, Heifetz writes about challenges faced and mindsets needed for organizational change.

EMCARTS.org has championed adaptive leadership principles on behalf of the cultural community. Human Centered Design resources are available on the website of IDEO, including tools and case studies.

3 Explore Your New Toolset

Some of the most adventurous work by profiled organizations involved creating audience experiences that take specific advantage of unique digital capabilities.

Such work can take longer to conceive and build, and it generally followed from the tracking and discovery of audiences' appetites and preferences and from artists' own curiosity about the media and tools they had at hand while venues were shuttered.

Examples include experiences such as:

- Creation of short commissioned works that were filmed vs. streamed, or created in collaboration with a filmmaker, in order to explore ways that three-dimensional, in-person experiences could be creatively translated onto a two-dimensional screen;
- "Serializing" content to bring audiences back repeatedly to follow a storyline;
- "Gamification" of experiences that incorporate components of adventure and discovery;
- Collaboration with media artists and digital practitioners with AI, AR, and VR experience to make multisensory, immersive projects;
- Adding commentary, captioning, audio descriptions, and other enhancements to make media projects more broadly accessible;
- Commissioning artists to create original new works whose length, content, or complexity bears little resemblance to typical concert or performance experiences in person.

"We don't want to think that digital replaces concert material. That's why we didn't choose to stream our concerts like other orchestras. Our projects are about digital storytelling and using digital media's multisensory capabilities.

– Oliver Thiel, San Francisco Symphony



Some of these promising explorations were widely noted in the cultural press and drew thousands of viewer-participants from around the world. This represents the field's increasingly robust attempts at the creation of entirely new forms of arts engagement, built with creative technology tools and intended for online consumption. A growing number of artists utilize digital technologies in their creative work, but research shows they often are not on the radars of established cultural organizations. These encouraging pandemic explorations can be further advanced with increased funding.

"What the pandemic accelerated... is this understanding that digital engagement, and remote engagement, is not secondary to live engagement or a substitute...It actually unlocks a new way of engaging and a new way of performance.

– Scarlett Kim,
Oregon Shakespeare Festival

Forge Cooperative Relationships with Local Unions for Digital Experimentation

Just a few years ago, standard union contracts required added negotiations for recording. It was time consuming for organizations to negotiate rights to record a performance and then show it live, offer it on demand, or show it at a later date. Each option required multiple specific union approvals and, typically, compensation.

In the early days of shutdowns, some local unions negotiated new agreements for streaming to help their members continue performing. Negotiations have developed over the past two years, and these new contracts are one significant factor in the volume of performances made available online during the pandemic. Several organizations noted that pandemic closures provided a much-needed jolt, dislodging old habits. Now, both arts organizations and unions face ongoing questions about compensation and rebroadcasting that will continue to develop over time.

Give Creatives Time, Space, and Resources

The San Francisco Symphony formed a team to work on new performance capture ideas, starting with questions around which technologies artists found most interesting and then inviting collaborators to explore these capabilities. SFSymphony+ is the branded outlet and portal for these new projects, each of which represents an experiment with new tools and a departure from past efforts.

Create New Tools and Forms

White Snake Projects developed a new form of opera that embeds performers into elaborate virtual worlds that unfold on audiences' screens in real time. The company's broadcast engineer combines feeds from performers across the country using a new audio plugin they developed named Tutti Remote, merging audio and video with environments and using avatars created with the game design platform Unreal Engine.

Further Reading

Tech As Art: Supporting Artists Who Use Technology as a Creative Medium

This report from the National Endowment for the Arts explores the multi-faceted creative practices of artists who engage with digital technologies.

Innovations in Socially Distant Performance

This website examines the aesthetics, philosophies, tools, and artists who use technology in virtual and socially distant performance.

In Real Life: Mapping Digital Cultural Engagement in the First Decades of the 21st Century

This report by the Australia Council for the Arts studies the ways digital technologies have changed arts and cultural participation as well as the acceleration of trends resulting from COVID-19.

TAKEAWAY

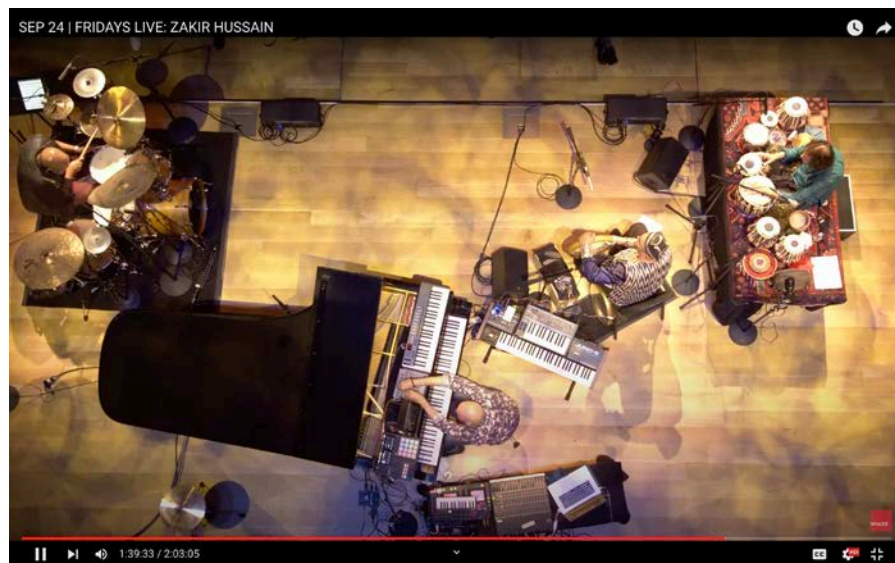
4 Put Audiences First

Profiled organizations improved their capacity to track aspects of their audiences’ online behavior. Most could quantify elements of audience reach, and many had compiled basic demographic information about who participated, such as their location and age.

These organizations are making deeper investments in learning from their content “uptake” and using this information to inform new activities. Data collection and analytics are helping build the case for funding and identify audience members who can be contacted for future programming promotions, fundraising, and other purposes.

Unfortunately, some platforms, like Zoom, do not provide analytics that could be helpful to content developers and marketers. One workaround is to require event registration, but organizations have learned that advance registration typically reduces the number of participants. Instead, organizations found other creative ways to identify users and build their databases.

In the most robust analyses conducted by profiled groups, audience members’ previous experiences with different kinds of cultural content were tracked, such as whether they had ever attended a performance of live opera, or had ever visited a museum. These research efforts showed that many of the people who found cultural content online during the pandemic were not regular attendees in person. These findings indicate that a much larger audience may exist for the cultural sector than is evidenced by in-person attendance and point toward new areas of public service and engagement that would allow the cultural sector to expand its reach.



SFJazz, Fridays Live

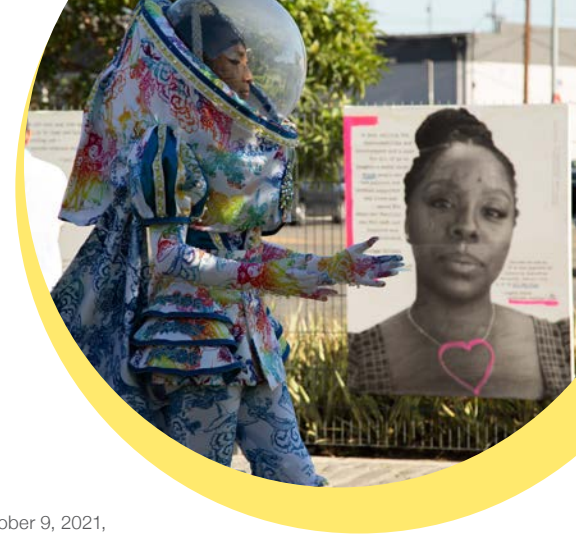
“This experience was designed for remote workers after our own team realized we were missing moments of connection and discussion during our remote workday.

– Jane Alexander,
Cleveland Museum of Art

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“We can’t serve everyone. Let’s make sure we serve the people we really care about, finding ways to elevate their work and giving them a space to organize, build relationships and community. That’s an ongoing process.

– Umi Hsu, ONE Archives Foundation



Pride Publics Opening Program, October 9, 2021,
LA State Historic Park, download LA. Photo by Priscilla Mars

Use Platforms That Are Already Widely Adopted

Zoom was the platform most mentioned in interviews as widely available and most frequently used. Nearly all the organizations had a social media presence before COVID, but closures forced them to learn to use the platforms more creatively and effectively. Some organizations described social media platforms as “our stage,” rethinking the strategy behind their social media use from promotion to content delivery.

Bucking this trend were a few organizations who created their own bespoke digital channels, taking inspiration from industry subscription models like Netflix. Examples include Operabox.tv (Boston Lyric Opera), SFS+ digital channel created by the San Francisco Symphony, and BalletX Beyond.

Produce Regularly

Organizations were asked how they are measuring and thinking about success. Though their answers varied widely, some organizations intentionally gauge success by their ability to produce digital work consistently, not episodically. These organizations realized that habit drives media consumption, and they learned to produce work at a reliable cadence to encourage audience habits over time.

Seek Outside Expertise

Jacob’s Pillow engaged outside consultants to survey audiences and support organizational strategy. Surveys showed digital audiences to be younger and more diverse than in-person visitors and that 82 percent of new donors to the Pillow in 2021 had registered for virtual events. In early 2021, the Pillow sought an external review by five BIPOC artists and practitioners, which has informed commissions, residencies, and educational programs.

Understand Audience Segments and Needs

Charlotte Mecklenburg Library began with a “best guess” for community needs, creating Zoom programming for connection and offering loaned wifi hotspots to help families juggling work and school online. From there, the library started to evaluate the needs of particular segments of its community: developing social media specific to teenagers, for example, and addressing digital access and literacy disparities with free computers, extended wifi around each branch, and a planned installation of towers for broadband in one part of the city.

Further Reading

Major platforms such as Google, Facebook, and YouTube have robust analytics training that is freely available, thorough, and relatively easy to navigate.

Arts service providers such as Capacity Interactive offer analytics training.

LaPlaca Cohen’s **Wave 2 CultureTrack** report offers insights on emerging trends in audience behavior.

TAKEAWAY 5 No Easy Answers

Inspiring stories of achievement are notable in part because they stand out from the many stories of struggle that are more commonplace.

The takeaways we've shared show many ways in which cultural organizations have worked to get to know and serve their communities, uplift creativity among their ranks, and cultivate curiosity and a willingness to experiment and learn. These successes point in the direction of what can be, despite unparalleled challenges. However, such inspiring stories of achievement are notable in part because they stand out from the many stories of struggle that are more commonplace. A 2020 analysis by Candid estimated that, in a worst-case scenario, a third of nonprofits could close their doors as a result of the pandemic. While the landscape is shifting and venues are reopening, difficulties facing cultural organizations are far from over. Managing both in-person and virtual programming simultaneously on a budget that has not yet recovered from pandemic-era losses is an entirely new labyrinth to navigate.

The effort to create online or hybrid programming is not a challenge met from equal footing. Many nonprofits are starting without basic hardware and software to make such a shift. Longstanding inequities

in funding distribution have also left nonprofits rooted in communities of color at a disproportionately greater disadvantage. Beyond the technical tools themselves, organizations require ongoing capacity to develop and manage programs.

Our optimism about this work is tempered by the persistence, financial support, and capacity that such efforts require. We can only imagine what challenges and opportunities the next 5 to 10 years may bring. The insights and recommendations included in this report and at ListenLearnConnect.org offer stepping stones while acknowledging that we do not yet know where the path out of this pandemic will lead.



Pera Museum, Plastik düşler

Invest Now in Technical Capacity

Every profiled organization began the pandemic with at least some level of investment in digital capacity, which was among the project's selection criteria. However, field-wide, many cultural organizations are starting from a place of deficit, for example without adequate working computers for staff or basic software to run the organization efficiently. In this study's group of organizations, past investments in their technical capacity paid off during the pandemic. Rather than scrambling to function remotely, they were able to use their existing tools to imagine future possibilities.

Experiment with Monetization Schemes

Organizations tried a wide range of monetization schemes: digital memberships; digital subscriptions; pay-for-view, -per-class, or -per-series; and encouraging donations or tips. Many offered programs for free, with or without required registration. The pandemic simply has not lasted long enough yet for organizations to market test and settle on the best ways to monetize and sustain their digital efforts. The constant among these organizations is their willingness to continue experimenting. Audiences are showing some appetite to pay for content, despite mixed results.

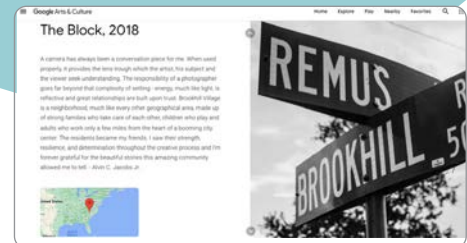
Build the Team You Need

Oregon Shakespeare Festival (OSF) began planning for digital transformations before the pandemic; COVID-19 accelerated these goals. First, it was necessary to build a digital team. With new staff in place, OSF reorganized to interweave digital strategy across the organization. From these initial steps, OSF has methodically built capabilities that support ambitious digital programming and experimentation.

Technology can be “a great equalizer”—even though there are still disparities in internet access, there is equalization, too.

—David Taylor, Gantt Center

Harvey B. Gantt Center
for African-American
Culture, digital exhibition,
Welcome to Brookhill



Dedicate Time to Developing Capacity

The Gantt Center has deliberately built its digital capacity over many years. Pre-COVID, it upgraded its hardware and wifi and employed a staff member to work on digital projects. This work allowed it to use the pandemic as a “launching pad,” says its CEO, David Taylor. Taylor wants to thoughtfully use all available technology in every aspect of the museum's operations. To do this, he acknowledges the importance of giving staff unscheduled time to reflect and create the space for innovation.

Further Reading

“The cultural sector needs support in order to benefit from a digital remake.” This article by Ricard Gil highlights opportunities and challenges for intersections of digital technologies with culture, engagement, and policy.

Covid-19 and the Global Cultural and Creative Sector: What have we learned so far? This 2021 report by Anthony Sargent, co-published by the Centre for Cultural Value, outlines COVID-19 impacts and practical steps for action across sectors.

Art and the World After This. This report prepared by Metcalf Innovation Fellow David Maggs in 2021 explores disruptions caused by the pandemic and asks big picture questions for charting a way forward.

Recommendations

Prioritize Technical Capacity

Many organizations profiled in this report started the pandemic with a baseline of deployable technical capacity, more so than many of their peers. When the cultural sector considers organizational capacity overall, it is imperative to add technical capacity to the pillars that comprise the field’s approaches. This means that organizational assessment and strategic planning should include a technical assessment and a plan to build technical capacity, alongside areas such as governance, financial, and management capacity.

An equity lens is also necessary. Decades of inequitable funding practices have led to large disparities in technical capacity among BIPOC-led and -serving cultural organizations. Research for this report demonstrates an appetite for the online programming BIPOC organizations can provide, and a significant audience opportunity for engagement and connection.

Start Small

Digital experimentation does not require a grand plan. Instead, organizations can start small, learn, and build from wherever their starting point may be. Stories of overnight sensations are compelling, but for most organizations, digital work is more like a marathon than a sprint. This often means trying out a modest new program or expanding to a new platform, learning, and iterating. Support staff’s creativity, start small, bring humanity to the work, and understand that there will always be something to learn, whether it be learning about wrong turns, identifying new audiences, or discovering processes that need retooling.



Boston Lyric Opera

Support a Range of Experiments

The cultural sector needs experiments, results, and shared learning. There are no perfect models, and no one has “figured this out.” Each organization will have to determine its own path, build on its own strengths, and support the needs of its own communities. Digital initiatives will and should look different for different organizations. Understanding this will provide perspective in supporting organizations entering into this work from a range of baselines and also help to foster a vibrant sector with many forms of creativity.

Recognize the Need for Bridge Funding to Bolster Promising Efforts

Organizations will need support to continue their digital work and learning as in-person programming resumes. Many organizations do not have the capacity to do both, and the differing cadences of digital and in-person work can hinder merging the two approaches. Grantmakers should note that flexible, unrestricted funding is the most highly valued by recipients. Many foundations and philanthropists became more flexible and responsive in their funding practices over the past two years, and this approach should continue. The pandemic is not over, and neither are related challenges.

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Support and Learn from BIPOC Leaders

Much of the media, news coverage, and research about cultural organizations’ digital experiments during the pandemic have focused on large, mainstream, highly resourced and often historically white organizations. But BIPOC-led arts and culture organizations have launched digital initiatives to connect with their communities both locally and beyond. Supporting the efforts of these BIPOC leaders opens opportunities for greater reach and impact not only within BIPOC communities but for broader engagement.



Arab American National Museum, virtual painting workshop Photo: Shad Kahativ



CultureSource

Realize Digital Programming’s Role in Providing Access

While existing audiences may have flocked to digital programming during the pandemic, organizations also realized that digital work reached people of different abilities and from far-flung geographies. Those who traditionally face barriers to in-person attendance, including the elderly or children in school, proved to be significant audiences for online reach. Further investments, tools, and discussions are worthwhile to continue and expand access in useful, meaningful ways.

Plan for the Long Term

Digital work is a long-term investment that will take time to show results. This is particularly true for monetary results. Interviewees described a process of jumping in and testing out new ideas, assessing their efforts, and moving forward with intention. After just two years, many organizations are at the point of regrouping—entering into a period of reflection and planning for intentional work. This planning may involve ramping up digital budgets over the course of years, continuing to try different models for monetization, or deepening work in a particularly promising area. All this work takes time and requires long-term support to develop.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the many individuals who shared time, insights, and feedback to support the development of this report. In addition to participants from the profiled organizations, we would like to thank the individuals below.



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Many thanks to all our participating study groups for your time, candor, and inspiring work. You are demonstrating how the arts can reach and engage with community, revealing new points of meaning and connection in a world that hungers for both.



Boston Lyric Opera

Jacob's Pillow Dallas Black Dance Theatre Photo: Jamie Kraus



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