

Museums, Covid and Digital Media

A Work-in-Progress Briefing published by Museums, Crisis and Covid-19

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Briefing Outline

Covid-19 has brought the biggest change to working and living practices in our lifetime. Museums and heritage institutions, and people across society, have demonstrated an ability to rapidly adapt to these changes. Although the changes have been dramatic and have come with significant challenges, there are also positive outcomes.

Our research has continually engaged with themes of digital practice and communication, with these topics cutting across our work packages. Changing digital practice has impacted on finance/funding and community wellbeing as well as forms of museum communication and interpretation.

By drawing on the expertise and experience of the co-investigators in game design (Alan Hook) and digital/blended learning (Helen Jackson), our project has investigated new ways digital practice that can be adapted to current and new museum learning and community projects. This briefing offers initial introduction to the breadth of digital themes explored in our research alongside some early policy recommendations.

Feedback

These briefing documents are presented as a summary of our work so far and with the intention of facilitating feedback on the project as it progresses.

Museums, Crisis & Covid-19: About the Project

Based at Ulster University Museums, Crisis, and Covid-19: Vitality and Vulnerabilities is a UKRI Rapid Response project (AH/V012819/1) focusing on how museums can contribute to community resilience and wellbeing in a time of crisis. It addresses sector adaptability as it adjusts audience engagement and collaboration (such as new collecting practices, programming and exhibitions) in response to Covid-19.

This briefing offers an insight into the project's work-in-progress. Your feedback on the work presented is welcomed, as the project seeks participation and engagement in the direction offered to the sector.

Responses can be emailed to museumsandcovid@ulster.ac.uk

1: The new, 'blended' normal

As lockdown measures were imposed in March 2020, many museums expanded their digital offer as a means of connecting with audiences. This included sharing on social media, online lectures, digital exhibitions, and school and outreach sessions being delivered remotely. As institutions have reopened, many have sought to retain the most successful of this digital provision.

I'm not convinced that we can just say "It's all about digital". I think it's "and digital". It's a few pieces together. (Brona Moffett, NMNI)

Practitioners see numerous positives to this 'blended' approach, with the potential for museums to continue to reach audiences that 'are never going to set foot inside a museum' (Anon005). While there have been concerns raised over the accessibility of digital materials to some audiences (such as those who are not digitally literate, or without internet access), blended approaches at their best allow museums to reach a variety of audiences with different accessibility needs.

Some museums have seen a change in practice as a result of this increasing shift to the digital. For instance, in some cases digital materials accompanying an exhibition were previously added on at the end, now such provision is 'built in from the planning and development stages' (Hannah Crowdy, NMNI). This change in approach better integrates digital into museum practice and respond to the labour time required to produce quality digital outputs.

As museums increasingly incorporate digital practice into each stage of their work, we need to gather new data sets to better inform and support future work. We are seeing a gap in meaningful and useful data that fully captures the new museum experience. Creating adequate data on digital audiences and engagement will lead to more confident decision making, greater operational efficiencies, cost reductions and reduced risk in the design and implementation of digital content.

The digital skills development and experience gained during the pandemic has allowed some museums to produce content and reach audiences that would not have been considered previously. We recommend that methods are developed to capture digital audience figures, and those are incorporated into annual reporting and/or made available to NI Museum Council through museum mapping.

2: Workload and Digital Fatigue

Alongside the positives emerging from digital content through the pandemic, there are pressures on workload and concerns for how sustainable these 'blended' approaches may be. As one of our interviewees noted, 'there is a resource implication' to a blended approach.

In the early stages of the pandemic, the impact of a transition to remote working were felt in 'Zoom fatigue', with potential impacts on the health and wellbeing of staff. This sense of the limitations of online interaction is reflected in those working on collaborative, community-focused or co-creation projects. 'Relationship-building', for some, is much more difficult digitally.

We are now seeing a transition towards consistent reopening of museums where fears over work capacity are being borne out and exacerbated by staff absences due to Covid-19. There is concern that staff are at capacity and being pushed to exhaustion by the need to maintain digital content while providing a full in-person museum service. 'The ability to compartmentalise', for one of our workshop participants, 'was a victim of the first lockdown'.

We recommend that existing staff are provided ongoing training and support in digital skills. Where possible, we recommend further investment in staff and exploration of creative ways of collaborating across the cultural and tourism sectors to support digital in museums. This is the only way in which the benefits of increased digital activity can be maintained without having a serious detrimental impact on the staff and in-person activities of museums.

3: Presence, Touch and Feeling

By taking new forms, digital experiences have the potential to provide in-depth and sensory experiences for audiences. The 2020 and 2021 Digital Attitudes and Skills in Heritage reports (National Lottery Heritage Fund 2020; 2021) shows an increasing level of digital skills within the sector. Our research has found, in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, increased use of digital tours and increased social media engagement within museums. Online virtual exhibition tours can allow visitors to get close to objects and experience the spatiality of an exhibition as they might through an in-person museum visit (see CI [Tom Maguire's blog post](#)). Although there is evidence of innovative practice, our research found that museum staff are looking for support to develop methods to evaluate the nature and impact of digital engagement with their museums.

The importance of providing a sensory experience is also tied to the role of museums in supporting health and wellbeing. The ability to feel and touch artefacts, it has been argued, can support wellbeing. If this is the case, then there are potential pitfalls with the experience that can be provided through virtual tours. There is keen awareness that 'the physicality of the visit is vital' including fostering opportunities for 'sensory engagement' (Moffett, NMNI). Digital content must consider the 'end-user' (Rahaman and Tan 2011), including considering how the experiential elements of a museum visit can be incorporated into digital practice. Delivering this may entail building an adaptive, human-centred 'ecosystem' of digital skills within the museum sector (Barnes et al. 2018).

"In some ways there's a level of detachment when you view things online. But online resources can add such depth of information.

The real experience in the gallery with the real object, is quite different than viewing it online. But they are both important in terms of the information and the emotions that they can provoke."
(Anon004)

Within the workplace there is concern regarding how digital platforms could replace the spontaneity and connection of in-person work. For the audience facing services, there is a similar concern that digital may not adequately replicate the sensory experience of a museum visit. These limitations are balanced against the positive additional reach that museums have found through digital content.

We suggest, through new forms of digital play and engagement, there is opportunity to tap into alternative experiences of presence and emotional responses triggered by museums, collections and their stories.

We recommend that the continued development of digital skills within the museum sector gives additional focus to the creation of sensory experiences. Online content should be embedded into exhibition design. The experiential goal of digital content should be aligned with the goals of in-person visits.

4: Digital Skills and Future Museum Workers

Alongside our work with the museum sector, the Museums, Crisis and Covid-19 project has been exploring methods of integrating digital skills development and museum interpretation into our work with students at Ulster University. This work can equip a new generation of museum sector staff with the knowledge to face the challenges of producing sustainable, engaging and well-integrated digital museum content.

Interactive Media Students from Ulster University's Coleraine Campus have worked with the Causeway Coast and Glens Borough Council Museum Services to develop interactive experiences in support of the [Council's centenary Northern Ireland 100](#) programme.

Working with CI Alan Hook, our museum studies master's students are producing interactive, web browser based interpretive materials based on museum artefacts. These projects develop students digital skills while maintaining a focus on museum collections, objects and the stories they hold. Alan is documenting this process in a [series of blog posts](#).

This work demonstrates that interdisciplinary and collaborative teaching can respond to the ever-changing needs of museums, ensuring new staff arrive with the necessary digital skills for museums to thrive.

We recommend that degree programmes, preparing individuals to work in the museum and heritage sectors, adapt their content and delivery methods in response to the sector's need for new digital knowledge and skills.

Summary and Next Steps

This briefing provides short insights into the opportunities, developments and challenges associated with the use of digital technologies in the museum sector. While these are discussed within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, much of what is discussed represents long-term challenges for the sector.

The increased production of digital content through the pandemic has allowed institutions to reach new audiences. However, the workload required to maintain this output alongside in-person activities is a significant concern for museum staff.

The recommendations provided here are directed towards museums, government departments, funding bodies, and academic institutions. It is clear that if museums are to capitalise on the positive developments in digital practice that have emerged through Covid-19, there is a requirement for stakeholders and partner organisations to support this work through collaborative practice, high quality research and well directed funding provision.

FEEDBACK CAN BE RETURNED TO: museumsandcovid@ulster.ac.uk

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Project Partners

Museums Association, Northern Ireland Museums Council, National Lottery Heritage Fund (Northern Ireland), Tower Museum, Derry City and Strabane District Council

Project Website

www.ulster.ac.uk/museumscovid19

