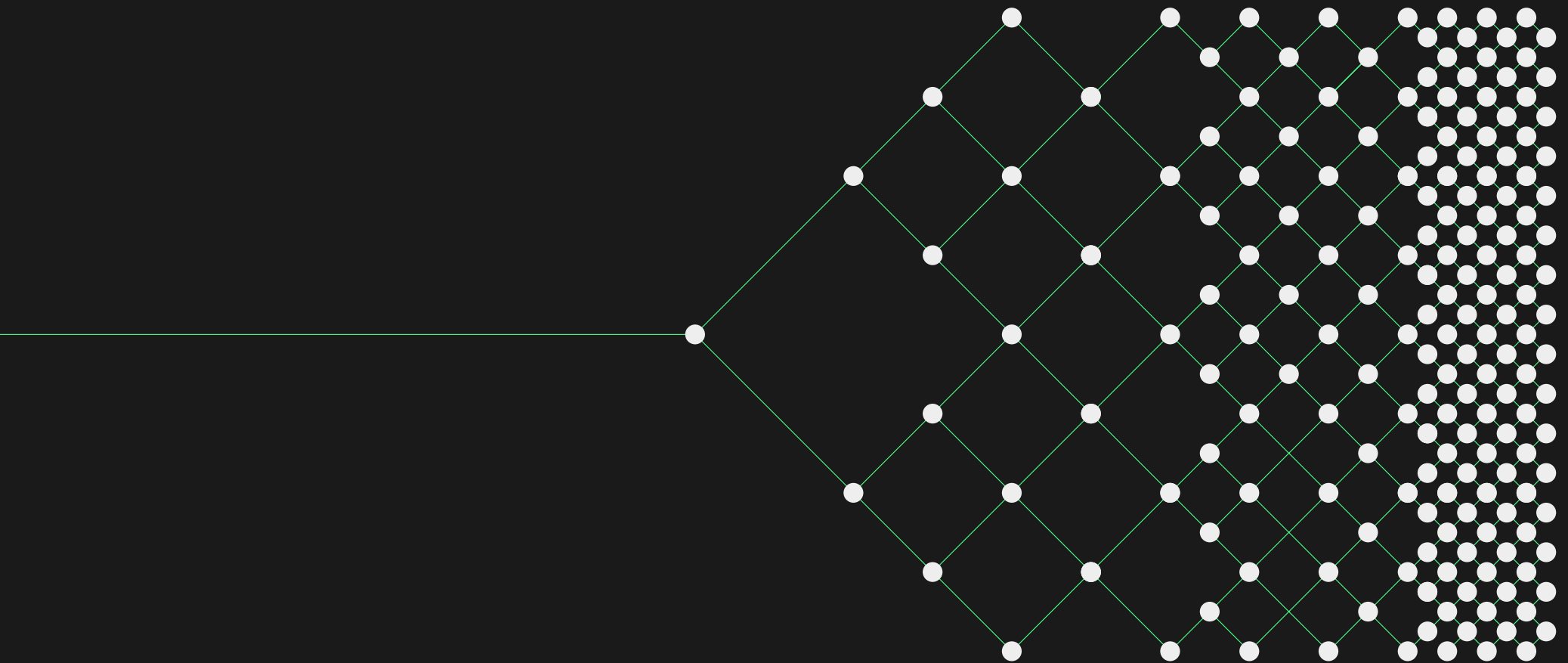# Digital Access to Arts and Culture

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June 2022

Opportunities

- **Online content can address multiple accessibility needs simultaneously.** Online, users can select closed captions, audio descriptions, and increasingly also BSL interpretation – individually or in combination. Digital accessibility features lead to benefits even for people who do not identify as having accessibility needs: for example, 50% of people use captions at home.

- **Online content is itself an accessibility feature.** Putting content online allows users to engage with it in a relaxed environment, and lowers material and cultural barriers to access associated with physical venues.

- **Digital features have the potential to radically improve the accessibility of on-site activities.** Digital accessibility is already feeding back into venues, for example through the use of QR codes in museums and AR glasses to provide captions. Could venues soon offer extensive menus of accessibility options that can be tailored to participants' individual needs?

- **Online participation can feed in-person participation.** The existence of a sector-wide 'substitution effect' is a myth. On the contrary, our research suggests the presence of a 'complementarity effect': digital engagement often encourages in-person engagement, especially among younger people and people from ethnic minorities.

- **Hybrid programming has the potential to achieve broader inclusion goals.** Programmes that include a diverse mix of live and online activities allow organisations to meet their communities wherever they are, rather than expecting people to come to them. Online participants are younger and more ethnically diverse than in-person visitors, which suggests huge potential for digital tools to engage new and more diverse participants.

Challenges

- **Accessibility features still have limited availability.** Specific accessibility features including BSL interpretation are often absent from in-person and online activities, while in-person acessibility options are usually offered selectively (for example, with features such as audio description or relaxed performances only available individually, and only for occasional specific events).

- **Online delivery is still often not regarded as an accessibility feature.** Though its access benefits are widely acknowledged, this acknowledgement has so far not translated into a sector-wide commitment to regard the availability of streaming content as an essential accessibility feature.

- **Many arts and culture providers still believe in the existence of a 'substitution' effect between live and digital activities.** Our research revealed evidence that various organisations, in particular producing theatres and receiving houses, still believe that digital activities 'cannibalise' live activities, and make programming decisions based on this presumption.

- **Digital content can generate new barriers to engagement.** Potential digital barriers include websites that are hard to read or navigate, or do not interact with users' accessibility tools; complex ticketing processes; videos without captions; hardware requirements (e.g. XR headsets); and lack of on-boarding for digital experiences.

- **Sector-wide inclusion and diversity gains from hybrid delivery remain latent.** The potential for hybrid live and online programmes to attract younger, historically excluded, and more ethnically and culturally diverse participants has so far only been achieved through specific projects. Sector-wide, online arts participation has tended to replicate in-person participation (Walmsley et al. 2022).

Recommendations: for arts and culture organisations

- ▶ **Incorporate accessibility best practices into budgets.** Accessibility is not an 'add on', and the delivery of features including captioning, audio description, and BSL needs to be fully resourced. Accessibility is not the place to cut corners.

- ▶ **Conduct extensive user journey mapping.** A cultural experience starts when we first hear about it and ends when we last think about it. Accessibility and usability need to be approached holistically, and to form an integral part of the design of any digital platform, process, or experience.

- ▶ **Address previously invisible accessibility needs.** The pandemic has revealed barriers to engagement for many people previously not perceived as having accessibility requirements – for example, those who are carers, who live in geographically remote areas, and who do not have easy access to transport.

- ▶ **Incorporate online provision into accessibility strategies.** Not everything can be offered online, but it is important to offer opportunities for engagement to people who cannot visit venues.

- ▶ **Use all available routes to engagement.** By continuing to work within their venues and out with their communities, in-person and online, organisations can develop a diversity of routes to engagement, as well as an ability to withstand future shocks if specific routes to engagement are again temporarily closed down.

- ▶ **Use multiple formats and platforms for digital distribution.** Diversifying digital routes to engagement can also significantly increase reach. For example, livestreamed performances are popular with older participants, while younger participants tend to favour on-demand and more technologically innovative content. There is no opportunity cost to offering both.

- ▶ **Experiment with new forms.** Livestreamed concerts and curator tours have become a mainstay of online arts and culture, and can provide high quality experiences. However, if digital activities aim only to replicate in-person experiences, they risk being regarded as 'second-best' options. It is important that organisations also expore the potential of emergent digital tools and platforms to deliver digitally native content.

Recommendations: for funders and policymakers

▶ **Stipulate digital as well as in-person accessibility requirements.** For example, closed captioning is now widely regarded within the creative industries as a requirement for all streaming video. Audio description and BSL interpretation are now widely regarded within the arts and culture sector as standard practice for online events including conferences and workshops, and increasingly too for online performances.

▶ **Require all NPOs and equivalent to report on digital accessibility.** All NPOs and equivalent should be required to produce digital policies as a condition of funding; these should also address how organisations' digital activities can contribute to their accessibility goals.

▶ **Ringfence funding for accessibility.** Could organisations be required to spend a certain proportion of their funds on accessibility? Among disability activists, a figure of 15% has been cited as a proportion of organisations' overall budgets that could reasonably be committed to accessibility (Hale 2021).

▶ **Incentivise digital capacity building.** Could the ways in which funding is currently provided for digital projects and digital R&D be adjusted to further inentivise long-term capacity-building?

▶ **Support R&D for digital accessibility tools.** Personal devices offer huge potential to facilitate individualised accessibility options for live and venue-based activities. Accessibility tech could be embedded more quickly as standard practice within the sector if policy makers and funders would highlight it as a priority, and facilitate collaborations with the tech sector to implement it.

▶ **Develop a framework for digitisation and diversification.** Recent research suggests that 'audience development' is not enough to diversify participation; organisational change also needs to be facilitated (Glow 2021). Frameworks such as Australia Council's 'Leading Change Audience Diversification Model' can support arts and culture organisations in diversifying their workforce, their programmes, and 'audiences'. Could such models be adapted to also facilitate inclusive digitisation?