Digital technologies are disrupting established practices and creating new opportunities for innovation across the creative economy. Some arts and cultural organisations are experiencing transformational impacts, using digital technology to reach bigger audiences than ever before. But how can we make the most of the opportunities?

Arts Council England, the Arts and Humanities Research Council and Nesta have commissioned independent research agency MTM to track the use of digital technology by arts and cultural organisations in England between 2013 and 2015.

This Research Summary highlights the findings from the first year survey of 891 arts and cultural organisations, including digital activities, barriers, enablers and impacts.

Some arts and cultural organisations are experiencing transformational impacts, using digital to reach bigger audiences than ever before. But how can the arts and culture make the most of the opportunities?

Over the next two years, the research will map the changing picture of technology in the arts, so we can learn from the experience of those who use technology most effectively, and maximise the potential for the arts and culture.

Read on to learn more about the use and impact of technology, major digital growth areas and the ‘cultural digirati’ in 2013.

“Digital activity is forcing us to rethink our creative practice. For over a hundred years our activity has been grounded in collections displayed in buildings. The affordances of digital means we are rethinking this.”

Tate Modern produced new interactive digital projects ‘Bloomberg Connects’ to invite visitors to connect with art, artists and other visitors in new ways and make their ideas visible around the gallery.
Key findings

Use and impact

Almost three-quarters of organisations now regard digital as essential to their marketing, and almost 60 per cent view it as essential for preserving and archiving, and for their operations.

Almost half (47 per cent) are creating ‘born digital’ works native to, and created for, the digital space, and one-third (32 per cent) see digital technology as essential for distributing and exhibiting their work, although the picture varies by art and cultural form.

In other areas, technology is yet to have a widespread impact, with just 11 per cent reporting a major positive impact on revenues.

“The Royal Opera House is developing a free hybrid app to build engagement with their growing digital and broadcast audiences, with support from the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts.”

“Over 28,000 people attended the Royal Opera House’s final BP Big Screen of 2013, a series of free outdoor live relays. Trafalgar Square in London reached its maximum capacity and thousands more lined the edges of the square to enjoy one of the most loved of all operas.”
Different parts of the sector are experiencing different levels of impact from digital technology. Museums are much less likely to report positive impacts from digital technologies compared with other arts and cultural organisations. For example, just 37 per cent of museums say that digital technologies have had a major impact in terms of reaching a bigger audience, compared with 51 per cent of the total sample.

**Figure 1: Organisations reporting a major impact on audience development**

- Reaching a bigger audience: 37% (Museum) vs 51% (Total)
- Reaching a more diverse audience: 25% (Museum) vs 32% (Total)
- Engaging more extensively with our existing audience: 29% (Museum) vs 47% (Total)

**Major growth areas**

Many arts and cultural organisations have introduced new digital activities for the first time in the last year. Five technologies stand out as major growth areas, where the number of organisations undertaking these activities has increased particularly significantly over the past 12 months.

Three of those five relate to digital content and distribution activities, such as producing digital experiences designed alongside art works.

Whilst live streaming is performed by only 15 per cent of organisations, it is the fastest growing digital activity. More than half of those engaging in it say they started doing so within the past 12 months.

**Figure 2: Activities introduced in the past 12 months**

- Simulcast/live stream performances: 7% (already doing) vs 8% (new activity)
- Standalone digital exhibits or works of art, i.e. without a non-digital equivalent: 14% (already doing) vs 12% (new activity)
- Use cloud computing to run software, host/store data or content: 22% (already doing) vs 18% (new activity)
- Digital experiences designed to be used alongside and at the same time as the artwork or exhibition: 15% (already doing) vs 11% (new activity)
- Accept online donations: 20% (already doing) vs 15% (new activity)
Barriers and enablers

Over 60 per cent of arts and cultural organisations report that they are constrained in their digital activities by a lack of staff time and funding, and over 40 per cent report a lack of technical skills such as data analysis and database management.

Organisations identify a number of sources of advice and expertise as enablers for their digital work: 69 per cent say that informal mentors, networks and partners are their most important sources, followed by in-house research/data analysis (59 per cent) and help from funding bodies (58 per cent).2

Many respondents who are aware of the Digital R&D Fund have discussed the Fund or its projects internally (39 per cent) and one quarter (25 per cent) have engaged with its case studies and podcasts. Although the Fund was established shortly before the time of the survey, some respondents have already been inspired by the Fund to try new things with digital technology (12 per cent) or learned useful lessons from the Fund’s projects (7 per cent).

The ‘cultural digirati’

When organisations are ranked by how important they judge digital technology to be to their different activities (creation, marketing, distribution and exhibition, preserving and archiving, operations and business models), the top 10 per cent can be analysed as a group of ‘cultural digirati’.

On the following page we profile the impacts they see, and how they work differently, so that others can learn from their experience.

“As expectations of digital and interactive experiences for audiences grow, so too do demands on arts organisations to be more innovative in audience engagement.”

Sheffield Doc/Fest are working with EE, the University of Sheffield and Blast Theory to explore the potential of high-speed networks for interactive artistic experiences, with support from the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts.
When it comes to embracing digital technology the ‘cultural digirati’ are showing the way by...

...trying new things

The digirati are 2.2 times more likely to create standalone ‘born digital’ works of art than the sector as a whole.

2.5 times more likely to use data in the development of new products and services.

...working differently

2.4 times more likely to say digital technology has had a major positive impact on strategy development and prioritisation.

2 times more likely to have digital expertise distributed across their organisation.

...and seeing rewards

3.2 times more likely to say digital technology has had a major impact on their overall revenue.
What next?

Share your thoughts

Join the conversation on Twitter, using the hashtag #artsdigital, or email us at digital-rnd@nesta.org.uk

Read the full report

Digital Culture: How arts and cultural organisations in England use technology presents a comprehensive picture of technology use by arts and cultural organisations.

It explores digital activities, impacts, barriers and enablers across the arts and cultural sector. It also profiles the cultural digirati – their attributes, behaviours and the positive impacts they experience. Survey participants can also access the Portal – to see how their activities relate to their peers.

Download the full report at:
native.artsdigitalrnd.org.uk/digitalcultureresearch

Explore the learning through Native

Native is the journal for the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts – a resource with insightful features on key learning themes and practical advice about digital R&D in the arts.

Through the Native website you can read stories about the funded projects, explore insights arising from the teams’ experience of developing projects as well as features from the big learning themes emerging from the Fund. There is also a growing bank of practical tips from arts organisations, technology companies and researchers, ranging from effective tools for collaborative working to how to effectively involve users in project design.

Explore what is being learnt at: native.artsdigitalrnd.org.uk

Get the big picture

Nesta’s Manifesto for the Creative Economy calls for publicly-supported arts and cultural organisations to experiment with digital technologies and share their experience:

‘The arts and cultural sector is an essential part of the UK’s creative economy. But as we enter the third decade of the digital revolution, most UK arts funders and arts organisations are well behind the technology curve. To catch up, they need to experiment more and ensure that, as far as possible, the results of that experimentation are accurately logged and shared. As part of this, like other businesses, arts organisations need to understand their data resources and develop the skills to exploit them.’

Read the full set of policy recommendations at: www.nesta.org.uk/home1/assets/features/a_manifesto_for_the_creative_economy
About the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts

The Digital R&D Fund for the Arts is a £7 million programme established by Nesta, Arts Council England and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) to support experimentation with digital technologies in the arts.

Between 2012 and 2014, it will award funding to around 50 projects that use digital technology to enhance audience reach and/or develop new business models for the arts and cultural sector.

Funded projects are genuine three-way collaborations between organisations with arts projects, technology companies and research partner, ensuring that learning from the project can be captured and disseminated to the wider arts sector.

To find out more about the Fund, including how to apply, visit: www.artsdigitalrnd.org.uk

Extant are using haptic technology to create cultural experiences for blind and sighted audiences, with support from the Digital R&D Fund for the Arts