My Audience is Global
The Essays

Digital and the global opportunity for arts organisations
Contents

1  Introduction and foreword
Fiona Morris, CEO and Creative Director, The Space

4  Regardless of audience, quality counts
Rankin, photographer, filmmaker, director

6  Local vs Global – Taking work to international audiences online
Javaad Alipoor, writer, director

9  Famous for 15 people – Influence and Microinfluence – leveraging networks
Sam Shetabi, Content Manager at podcasting platform Acast

11  From one audience to many communities: defining, refining and discovering who you engage in digital media
Jay Owens, writer, author, researcher

16  The audience in the digital era
David Ripert, Founder and CEO of the Augmented Reality startup POPLAR
Introduction & foreword

As we approach the end of the first two decades of the 21st Century, it’s impossible to overstate the impact that digital technologies have had on the arts. From the manner in which we make work to the way in which we consume it, the landscape of audience and institution has shifted radically, and at a pace which has often seemed dizzying.

One of the greatest changes – in terms of the opportunities it’s afforded to artists and institutions alike – has been the shift in the relationship with the audience. The shortening of virtual distances and widening of access has been one of the hallmarks of the digital revolution, with artists and arts organisations now being able to take control of their relationships with the wider public; being able to talk and respond directly to audiences, whether it be those living 5 feet from their front door who never walk through it because ‘it’s not for them’, or those on the other side of the world who would like to engage but can’t because of geography.

This direct engagement is hugely powerful – both in terms of building a market for a body of work, and in terms of developing connections between artists and their public. In this collection of essays we’ve sought to bring a variety of perspectives to bear on this new reality – what it means for artists and institutions, what opportunities and risks it has created, and what individuals and organisations can do to harness digital means to deliver deeper, more meaningful relationships with the arts consumer of the future. As we witness the breakdown of traditional media power structures and the cultural curation role in mainstream media becomes ever-more marginalised, the opportunity to interact directly with the public will become increasingly important. It’s part of our role as The Space to help the arts navigate these interactions, and develop the tools and skills to best make use of them; we hope that these essays will go some way towards helping with that.

With contributions from photographer Rankin, who reminds us that trying to talk to everyone can often mean talking to no one; playwright and performer Javaad Alipoor on discussing contemporary themes with an international audience through online channels; David Ripert on what the term ‘audience’ even means in 2019; Sam Shetabi on how the world of ‘influencers’ actually works; and Jay Owens, on how digital tools can create huge opportunities for even the smallest of institutions. We hope that this collection will provide help and inspiration for artists, institutions and organisations as they strive to find their audience – wherever it may be.

Fiona is a music and arts producer with over 25 years’ experience producing and commissioning programmes. She has worked in the UK indie sector for most of her career but spent 6 years working in BBC Music. She has produced a variety of award winning films including performance, documentary and entertainment programmes that have received Prix Italia, Emmy, Grammy and BAFTA awards. She has extensive experience working with cultural institutions in the UK and has provided consultancy services on the arts and the digital world to organisations including Arts Council England and English National Opera. A former chair of climate change charity Cape Farewell, Fiona is currently Chair of The Cornwall Museums Partnership.
Regardless of audience, quality counts

I’ve been communicating with people using images – still, moving, you name it – for 30-odd years now. Nothing has changed the way I work and the way I approach my work quite like digital and the web.

So much of the change has been positive, and has helped utterly transform art and communications for so many. I love the fact that there’s an immediacy with creating work. I love the fact that the barriers to entry have fallen for anyone to create for anyone else, that there is a cost factor that makes it cheaper – the entry level cost of photography now is £150 an hour; it used to probably be like £5,000 to £10,000 when I was starting out as a photographer.

Back then, it was more expensive to actually take pictures – to make anything, really – so it was more of a closed shop. Now, anyone has access to the means of (artistic) production, and anyone can use tools and platforms to find an audience for their work. Warhol famously said that in the future, we would all be famous for 15 minutes; in 1992, Nick Currie wrote that Warhol was wrong, and instead we would all be famous for 15 people.

That’s what digital and the web have wrought – a world in which anyone can create, anyone can find an audience, in which anyone can join a global conversation about their passions and the art, the subjects, the work that they care about.

I have always loved the inclusivity of digital. I am very much a believer that you collaborate with people to make great portraits or great advertising or even great artwork. There is an element of collaboration and I really, personally, love that way of being able to show people work and ideas and themes and be inclusive about it. This is at the heart of everything that is best about digital, for artists, institutions, brands and everyone else – that utopia of the web uniting the world around our shared interests and passions, and the way in which we can build communities that collaborate and self-sustain and create within these digital spaces. I enjoy the process of putting work out there. I love the way that you can put something out and have an immediate response. It doesn’t need a magazine or a media owner, it can be direct to people that like your work, whether through established communities or targeted paid promotion.
The opportunities, as we’re always told, are endless. There are no barriers any more.

This means freedom!

It also means there is a lot of crap. A lot of crap.

I still feel to a large extent that we’re toddlers in this world, that we are still trying to work out how to have respect for the medium or how to have respect for the platforms and how to use them, how to get better at them... and we are making mistakes.

I think there are some important things that we should all remember when using digital technologies to communicate – whether as artists or institutions, or even in our personal lives.

Who are you doing this for? Who are you speaking to? Unless you know what the point of being on Twitter or Instagram is, it’s pointless – and all you’re doing is spending your time and money producing content for a machine. If your reason for ‘doing’ social media is ‘engagement’, you should probably stop. What does engagement even mean? If I kiss you, that’s an ‘engagement’; if I spit on you, that’s an engagement too.

We all need to think smarter about why we’re on these platforms and who we’re talking to and what we want these people to do – without that, we might be having fun but we certainly won’t be achieving anything worthwhile.

What are you making? What are you putting out on these platforms? How’s it speaking to your audiences and your aims. One of the great side effects of this democratised access to creative is that there’s so much more stuff out there; the other side effect is that there’s so much more rubbish.

I’m not suggesting you need a studio shoot for every photo, or to hire an army of copywriters for each Tweet – but just because it’s quick and ‘free’ to use these platforms doesn’t mean you shouldn’t produce stuff that’s good. I don’t think there’s anyone who’d disagree with the statement “there’s too much crap on the internet”; let’s not add to the digital landfill.

Good doesn’t have to mean ‘shiny’ or ‘expensive’ – it just has to mean ‘interesting or useful or helpful or inspiring or thought-provoking or fun for the people I want to talk to’. That’s it. But if you look at what you’re producing and it doesn’t tick any of those boxes then, well, perhaps you should stop. And if you don’t know what ‘good’ looks like, you should definitely stop.

Just because you can doesn’t mean that you should.

Ultimately, whether for individuals, artists, institutions or whoever, it’s crucial to realise that there are an awful lot of negative aspects to social media, and these are negatively impacting the way we all use it. It’s not about millions of followers – it’s about being able to speak to the people that matter to you about the things that matter to them, in a way that is meaningful and which helps everyone involved get something out of it, not about ticking a box on an Arts Council funding form. Yes, fine, it might also be about selling tickets – but it’s not about ticking some arbitrary box of ‘6 Stories, 14 tweets and 3 FB posts a week’. Or at least it shouldn’t be if you’re doing it properly.

John Rankin Waddell, known under his working name Rankin, is a British portrait and fashion photographer and director. He has taken photographs of many famous people and has shot campaigns for well-known brands like Coca Cola, Levi’s, BMW, Hugo Boss, Nike and many others. Rankin founded Dazed and Confused magazine along with Jefferson Hack and was awarded an Honorary Fellowship by The Royal Photographic Society in 2002.
Local vs Global
Taking work to international audiences online

It’s not, I accept, a hugely novel observation, but the ability afforded by digital technologies to take local work and make it international is vital right now, and one of the most interesting opportunities available to artists and institutions, outside of considerations of artistic form.

What we see all across the world is that what you think of like a national conversation, not to mention national identity, is more and more disparate, and that shared language is more and more fractured in countries all over the world, whether it’s in this country, America or wherever else; and in a way, it’s this fractured nature of the global discourse that creates opportunities for work to find an international audience. The most globally popular work in 2019, or at least that which seems to create the greatest degree of international discourse, across art, music, theatre, opera, is that which jumps out and captures the imagination and which often uses distinctly local perspectives to try and address universal issues.

Take, for instance, Phil Collins’ work, which takes as its inspiration Engels’ two-decades in Manchester and uses those to make really deep and political points about identities being redrawn, the heritage of Manchester, the changing nature of urban narratives and who defines them, all wrapped up in quite a playful thing about the regeneration of urban spaces and the sociopolitical effects thereof. It’s a deeply local work, drawing on specific instances of Mancunian history, and yet the themes it deals with are ones resonant with residents of any major urban centre in the world.

The past few decades have seen the UK becoming an increasingly international country; they have also seen the nature of urban existence change significantly, to the point where one could argue that a place like Bradford has more in common on certain levels with cities in other countries than it does with London – which also means that work can attain international cut-through.

Take, for instance, Phil Collins’ work, which takes as its inspiration Engels’ two-decades in Manchester and uses those to make really deep and political points about identities being redrawn, the heritage of Manchester, the changing nature of urban narratives and who defines them, all wrapped up in quite a playful thing about the regeneration of urban spaces and the sociopolitical effects thereof. It’s a deeply local work, drawing on specific instances of Mancunian history, and yet the themes it deals with are ones resonant with residents of any major urban centre in the world.
There’s a degree to which the granularity of a very locally-focused work can, oddly make it completely universal - because these granular human experiences are universal. We all have these very granular, localised experiences, but the fact that we all have them makes them everyone’s in a strange way. And the web enhances our ability both as creators and audiences to appreciate, explore and exploit this – and to discover commonality of thought and experience across international boundaries, and use the web's network effect to leverage this for audience development.

For me, there is a deep artistic and cultural conservatism in the way that art is curated within this country, and that, I think, comes from the model of cultural curation, distribution and adoption fostered in the post-war era – an idea that the one thing we do is preserve a tradition, a canon and a collection of objects or forms of work that we look after. What the web affords us is the ability to look beyond this 'small c'-conservative view of our work and its place within the wider culture and instead begin to explore its resonance with broader global conversations and themes; and in the very best cases, to begin to establish a working dialogue with the wider world about what the work means and what it is for – which is how the best digital interaction, and art works.

Think about theatre – for a certain type of urban theatregoer, for the past few years now the ‘best’ work – or certainly that which garners the most attention - is that where the audience has to do something very very active, where we play with expectation and imagination to try and make our audience implicit or complicit in the work that we’re creating - we establish a dialogue with the audience. Digital affords all artists and institutions the opportunity to do this, across form and media, across barriers of language and geography; sadly, although this has been the case for over a decade now, it’s fair to say that appreciation of this fact is less universal than one might hope.

Reaching international audiences – and doing so meaningfully - isn’t about simply broadcasting something in the hope that hundreds of thousands of interested people will magically find you. As with anything, it’s about knowing what is interesting about your work, which audiences it might appeal to, what themes might resonate, where these people are, and how to talk to them.

The ability afforded by digital technologies to take local work and make it international is vital right now.

More than anything, though, it’s about understanding that a parochial mindset is limiting and unnecessary. Whatever the work – whether it’s about the radicalisation of young men in the North West of England taking place online, the struggle for recognition of a trans man in Kuala Lumpur, or an amateur women’s handball team in Lima – there will be qualities and themes it addresses which can and will resonate outside of a local, domestic, physical audience (and, if there aren’t, one might argue there are fundamental issues with the work itself).

There will be conversations happening about these themes online, in which voices from across the world join in discussion and debate – its our responsibility as makers of work, engaged in a global discourse of ideas, to demonstrate our interest and get involved with the ecosystem; in my experience, when you do this you will find the ecosystem cares a lot more about you when you have something to put out there.
Makers and institutions have an unprecedented opportunity to expand the reach of their work and the discourse around it, to reach new audiences outside traditional boundaries of geography and interest – but it requires effort and understanding, time if not money (if you believe one can ever separate the two concepts...).

The nature of work is simultaneously and intrinsically both local and global, per se. We as artists have a need – perhaps even a duty – to get involved with communities of interest and to make our work in such a manner that it can flow as freely as possible, regardless of boundaries of geography or language. We have the opportunity to create work that exists free of the space in which it is exhibited or performed, to allow our ideas to travel across previously impermeable borders – it simply requires us to think beyond traditionally prescribed boundaries and, perhaps, to do more listening and less broadcasting if we want the world to listen.

Javaad Alipoor is an artist, director, writer and activist who regularly makes theatre with and for communities that don’t usually engage in the arts. He is a Scotsman Fringe First and Columbia University Digital Storytelling Award winner. His play, The Believers Are But Brothers, was performed at London’s Bush Theatre before its world tour and adaptation for BBC Four, commissioned by The Space. Last year, Alipoor directed the stage adaptation of One Flew Over The Cuckoo’s Nest for Sheffield Theatres, to mark the end of his three-year tenure as Associate Director at The Crucible Theatre.
No one likes the word ‘influencer’ – it’s every bit as clinical and cynical as it sounds. It has become the catch-all term for individuals with dedicated online followings, be they sassy beauty gurus on Instagram or meme-loving comedians tweeting in 280-character bursts.

The great irony is that those who tend to revel in the term are those who want to use said influence for their own ends. In the age of social media, that tends to be marketeers, leveraging legions of followers to drive engagement and sales. And it’s easy to see why.

Whether it’s YouTubers looking straight at you down the barrel of their camera lens, or podcasters speaking purposefully into your ears through your headphones, social media influence increasingly means intimate, direct and vivid connections between influencers and their audience. Fundamentally it’s the trust, consistency and authenticity which they nurture, that fosters their influence.

While most of the attention is often on leveraging the megastars of this newest New Media to reach their legions of followers, that same trust is all the more concentrated for influencers with far smaller followings. And if by the laws of the internet any niche will find an audience, then this is where artists and arts institutions alike can find networks of people across the globe to galvanise around their work.

For me the most common error made by people trying to work with influencers is treating them like billboard space on the street, half-heartedly piggybacking on their social media interactions with minimum effort. Fans of an influencer will see through a cynical ploy to use their influence instantly, whereas meaningful and authentic endorsements – especially in the arts – are key to reaching their audience credibly and effectively. Finding an individual who shares your values and wants to speak with a unique tone of voice is much more important than the sheer reach of their fanbase.
Where once influencers were celebrities – anointed by record companies, film producers or modelling agencies as the icons we’re all meant to follow – follower counts and engagement metrics mean ‘influence’ is more democratised today than it has ever been. To gain a following you need to not just be iconic, but also talented, engaging, honest, disarming and often downright alluring. Those few people who manage to cut through the noise online and become modern influencers have therefore truly earned it – cynically or otherwise. But this means brands, institutions or art projects themselves can become ‘influencers’ if they speak the language of the internet, inspire community, and engage with their followers as real people, rather than corporations.

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The Moving Cities project, founded in 2014, uses striking, incongruent imagery to promote dance around the world. Capturing “international dancers in real settings”, the project has earned a small but potent following online. Not only is the fascinating photography innately shareable, the images are just intriguing enough to encourage you to click through to find out more, and ultimately follow that online engagement offline.

And the weekly Twitter event from London’s Design Museum is a fantastic example of a brand finding a global audience. By reaching out beyond its base in Kensington to a worldwide audience of design lovers, it has become the architect of its own engaged network. Each Sunday is @DesignMuseum’s celebration of an everyday form of design we see all around us – typography.

A theme is set each week, often suggested by their own followers, and dedicated “type enthusiasts” are encouraged to tweet fonts from everyday scenarios. From the expected (like shop signs and packaging) to the esoteric (manhole covers and bottle tops, anyone?), design professionals, eager students and casual admirers alike connect with The Design Museum through this simple idea each and every week. #FontSunday has even become a weekly event in their calendar of events and exhibitions.

Both of these projects are examples of artists or organisations becoming the influencer, because the power of social media means anyone can cut through and find an audience. But if you want to leverage the influence of others, working with an influencer to find out what they’re passionate about is the more challenging, but often more rewarding path.

Art Fund’s unique podcast Meet Me At The Museum offers an intimate insight into the tastes and motivations of writers, actors and even comedians, as they tour around their favourite galleries and exhibitions. By inviting these influencers to host their own episode, choose their favourite museum to visit, and lead the conversation throughout, they have been able to leverage the guests’ influence to promote the charity with authenticity and clarity. The format of Meet Me At The Museum is merely a framework for the influencers to make their episode their own, and is a fantastic example of working meaningfully with influencers on work their followers will want to consume.

This is a stand-out example of being led by the influencer, rather than dictating the terms. And above all I have learned from getting the best out of influencers, the trick is not to just use them, but to work with them.

Sam is Content Manager at podcast hosting platform Acast where he oversees podcasts including Off Menu, Athletico Mince and The High Low. With a background in TV – including at BBC Studios – he has also worked at Gleam Futures where he developed award-winning content across podcasts and multiple other platforms with some of the UK’s leading influencers.
Each new media format has changed the nature of the arts audience. Photography let visual art live beyond the gallery walls; radio and television brought theatre and drama into millions of living rooms. Yet these audiences of the 19th and 20th centuries remained manageable: they were mass audiences, nationally-bounded and reached through a finite number of media gatekeepers (the BBC, the national press). And they remained passive audiences, cultural consumers whose tastes and attention were to be shaped by curators, commissioners and critics alike.

The digital and social media of our present century has disrupted this ordered landscape. Audiences now go to galleries to make media as much as witness it - observe the crowds in front of the Mona Lisa or the sold-out ticketing for Yayoi Kusama’s polkadots, and see these artworks recontextualised and reauthored as selfie opportunities. Book, film and music audiences fragment across a plethora of media-on-demand services and personalised algorithmic recommendations. (When was the last time anyone talked about the pop Top 40?). The individual audience member, too, has perhaps fragmented into a multiplicity of intersectional identities: no longer can we assume commonalities from shared basic demographics: age, gender, location (if we ever could). People understand themselves as part of communities organised around lifestyle and political polarisation, from Brexit to yoga.

This also holds true in the practicalities of arts management: a plethora of communications platforms produce a bewildering multiplicity of audiences to navigate. There’s the audience already attending your film or exhibition in person; your email list of previous customers;

From one audience to many communities
Defining, refining and discovering who you engage in digital media
the audiences following your organisation's accounts on Instagram, Twitter and Facebook (each distinct). There's the audience who actually sees your social media posts (not the same as your followers) – and the much wider audience who see content about your event, whether from news media, journalists or artists they follow, or friends and word-of-mouth content. There are the audiences of the artistic creators; broader contextual audiences for your work (“contemporary art fans in Manchester”; “independent cinema-philes”) – and the audiences you want to reach (younger, more diverse, less London-centric).

Social media management platforms and digital analytics were meant to bring about visibility and greater control, but instead only makes the confusion more apparent.

What to do?

The first step towards finding direction lies in mapping where you currently are. Who are the audiences you are currently able to reach through all communications media to hand – and how far do they overlap?

Next, recall where you’re trying to go. Root your audience strategies in your overarching organisational purpose – what are you trying to do, and who are you for? – to prioritise amid the cacophony and refine your focus.

From this, you can refine your focus: which audiences have you already got and need to nurture? Which do you need to acquire, develop and grow?

Used smartly and creatively, social media can offer huge potential for reaching both new and very specific audience segments. Before we get into the practicalities of tools and tactics, let’s explore two case studies.
The Museum of English Rural Life is a small collection, part of the University of Reading, with a mission to help people “explore how the skills and experiences of rural people, past and present, help shape our lives.” This may seem a tough sell in an urban, ultra-online age – yet the MERL, as it’s known, has seen extraordinary success on Twitter.

In April 2018, the MERL shot to worldwide attention after a vintage photograph of a particularly large sheep – captioned “look at this absolute unit” – went viral. Social media manager at the time, Adam Koszary, had taken an image from the museum’s Farmer & Stockbreeder photographic collection and memed it. Through a combination of skilful social engagement and, admittedly, a quantity of sheer luck, the MERL achieved 1.5M engagements and reach of 23 million impressions and coverage in The Times, BBC Three, The Independent and Buzzfeed, for an image that otherwise only a few dozen people might have ever paid attention to. In an exchange earlier in the year, American entrepreneur Elon Musk (26.4M Twitter followers) chatted with the museum and made the now-famous sheep his Twitter profile picture.

“It should be fairly obvious to anyone that the museum doesn’t just make memes, and that the memes are simply one way of engaging people with our collections. And once they’re following, we can pummel them with our smock and wagon collections to our heart’s content,” said Adam Koszary to PR Week in April 2018. When the tweet went viral, Koszary used a combination of “sassy” follow-on content and interaction to sustain momentum, alongside programming that sought to deepen people’s engagement with the museum and its collections, including an expert blog on animal portraiture and live-tweeting a tour of the museum.

As such, the MERL demonstrated how arts & cultural organisations can use digital media to explode their old ‘audience’ thinking, and bring their content and message to far wider and vaster communities than they may have imagined. It starts with thinking not in internal organisation terms, but from online communities’ point of view: what content or stories have you got that resonate with wider internet culture and humour? And how can you create not only a digital strategy but an organisational culture that welcomes these moments of serendipity to engage with that wider, infinite public?
At Pulsar, the social media research firm I worked for, we did a lot of work on film audiences and who’s engaging with early trailers and marketing. At the heart of our thinking is audience segmentation: recognising that there’s not one, homogenous audience for a film online – but rather that a release will reach into many different pre-existing communities. We use social network analysis, a computational social science technique, to understand how online audiences engaging with a film release map out into a network of different communities, collecting around different influencers and media sources – and engaging with film marketing materials in different ways and for different reasons. This breaks down an “infinite public” into manageable, addressable groups.

We see it as a five-part process:

- As early as the development stage, building a marketing model based on historical digital audience analysis of analogous films
- Once a film is announced, evaluating early reactions to solidify positioning
- After trailer #1, understanding which community segments are engaging and who to invest in targeting going forward
- Optimizing marketing with segment-specific content, e.g. cutting custom trailers based on affinities
- As theatrical release nears, determining how & where to deploy media spend efficiently

Audience mapping reveals how the shape of an audience affects a movie's path to mainstream interest. For example, audience analysis of a recent Hollywood children's film revealed that the “mommy bloggers” segment were missing – despite being prominent for competitor titles. The studio were thus able to reach out to influencers who were instrumental in sharing competitor releases, to ensure they were invited to screenings and had material to share with fellow parents. We also map segments’ stated intent-to-view the film – and found that fans of the original games property were disappointed in the film's safer and “cuter” treatment of the characters. This insight enabled the marketing team to recognise that they needed to showcase other dimensions of these characters and include more mischievous moments, so as not to lose the “weird” & “strange” that drew fans to the property in the first place.

By understanding the audience not as a homogenous, passive whole, but as an array of different, pre-existing communities – the marketing team were able to make specific and targeted course corrections in the run-up to theatrical release to help reach every segment of relevance.
An audience analysis toolkit

So, what tools and tactics should you use to start mapping the infinite possibilities of digital audiences, and defining who you want to interact with, where and how?

Profiling the audiences you’re already reaching in social media – your followers and the audience engaging with your content – is easy using owned platform analytics tools, and it’s likely something you’re already doing. So where next?

Tracking the audience talking about your properties – which will include many people who aren’t following you. This is the most organically engaged audience you’ve got – and is one to grow. Look at these audiences holistically: not just what they say about you, but what else they talk about, and who else they follow – so you can communicate in terms that matter to them. Social media monitoring tools such as Pulsar, Brandwatch and Talkwalker can help you do this.

Track and profile the audience talking about the wider category of event – be that “arts exhibitions in Manchester” or “immersive theatre events” – to identify media, influencers and message to help engage these groups with your work.

Two tools, Audiense and Affinio, allow for quick, non-technical social network analysis of Twitter audiences into different segments and communities. Focus on analysing your organic audience and people engaging in the wider category or topic – not just your followers.

Ground all your digital metrics in core digital usage & behavioural data: the Ofcom Media Usage and Attitudes Survey is the UK bible, then stats from Pew Internet (US), Global Web Index and YouGov can help round out your understanding. Use this to identify which media channels can help you reach into key demographics and when new social platforms have reached sufficient break-out scale.

From here, it’s a matter of iteration. Try something new. Identify what audience this tactic reaches. Is it the one you expected? And an audience of strategic relevance to your organisation? Rinse and repeat. If not, try something new. Building a clear feedback loop of “test, measure, learn” can help make the process transparent and accountable to senior management, and gain buy-in for bolder moves. If a small agricultural museum can do it, so might you.

The ability afforded by digital technologies to take local work and make it international is vital right now.

Jay is a research and insight consultant who makes use of computational social science analytics, along with traditional research methods, to map user needs and attitudes, and make complex ‘internet culture’ dynamics legible. While working at the audience intelligence start-up Pulsar, her research was used by Twitter, Facebook, Instagram & Tumblr to understand the dynamics of their own platforms. Jay also works with global technology, media, fashion and beauty brands to help them understand today’s customer and innovate product and service offerings.
I’ve been working at the intersection of digital and the creative industries for a while now. 17 years ago I moved to Hollywood to produce movies. Then I worked at Netflix in the early days of subscription video, then Daily Motion, and then YouTube, where I was building studios for content creators, including artists that could come in and collaborate with one another but also collaborate with brands and use professional studios. Now I work with AR and VR, helping people create experiences for these emergent technologies. I’ve worked with hundreds of artists, creators and companies, and I’ve seen first-hand how the approach to audience – definition and discovery – has changed.

Once upon a time, if you were an arts organisation and you wanted to speak to the core constituency for your output, let’s say artistic work of whatever sort, you would probably do some press, get an interview, or maybe a listing in the broadsheet newspaper of your choice, and that would be it. Now, obviously, things are things are somewhat different. When thinking about how it has changed, I find it helpful to approach things from an audience-led perspective. So, the obvious thing is to think about how people are consuming information, how they like to inform themselves. For example, I wake up, I listen to the radio while I am doing my gym, and then on to my read my favourite blogs on technology, through my browser on my phone; I might listen to podcasts, on iTunes, or Spotify; I might watch the show on Netflix in the evening.

So, we all have very different uses of media and technology and ways of informing ourselves. I personally, don’t read papers, physical papers anymore, and sales figures of print media worldwide suggest I’m not anomalous. I know there are a lot of people that do that. I don’t actually watch TV channels anymore. I watch subscription services like Netflix, Amazon, and others. If you start from the Gen-Z or ‘millennial’ perspective (and it’s important to remember that millennials aren’t kids any more – at the upper limit, these people are in their late 30s, with mortgages and children and careers), these guys were born on the internet. They basically made social media because Facebook and these platforms are born from their content contributions.
How can organisations get a deeper understanding of where audiences are, what they want and how to get it to them?

Even YouTube was created through people uploading their own videos and sharing that with our friends, and then you go to Snapchat and Instagram and all these different platforms that have created longer engagement view times for these people by encouraging shareability of content and ‘stickiness’, whereby people watch more.

It’s therefore vital to think about these different personas – millennials 30somethings, GenZ, art lovers in their 50s of a certain socio-economic profile, retired audiences... it’s vital for artists and institutions to understand how they consume content, because it’s really changed drastically.

Furthermore, for arts organisations, it’s also about how they buy tickets, which is a completely different thing to informing themselves; it’s important to understand that there is a difference between driving brand awareness, selling tickets and getting bums on seats in theatres.

It’s an area in which the arts can and should learn from marketing, advertising and PR. Concepts such as ‘top of funnel’ (getting people to be aware of you and your work so as to be able to convert them into buyers later on), and ‘personas’ (carefully-crafted descriptions of the various potential audience groups for a product or service, designed to enable marketers to better-define how to reach each audience, with which messaging, in which place), may not be oft-used in conversations around digital and the arts – but when it comes to finding and engaging with new audiences, they should be. Working out who you are trying to talk to, what you want to say to them and how you want to say it (medium vs message) is part not only of the process of raising awareness around a work but also of establishing and continuing a valuable dialogue with the public which can and should serve to enrich and evolve the artist or institution’s outputs.

One of the problems with the conversation around ‘digital’ when it comes to the arts is that it is a single term which can be and is used in such wildly divergent contexts – from the form of work to its distribution to its discovery to the broader dialogue around the themes it embodies, and far beyond. People – by which I mean artists and institutions, though most often institutions – tend to run into trouble due to their inability to see the granularity of approach contained within the single term.

How can organisations get a deeper understanding of where audiences are, what they want and how to get it to them?

Of course, it’s also a truism to state that arts organisations are almost always, inevitably, cash poor, time poor, and staff poor, and the standard response to discussions about doing digital ‘properly’ or ‘well’ tends to be something along the lines of “we don’t have time, we don’t have money, we don’t have people or kit or skills – what are we meant to do?”

Where does an organisation begin defining which out of these multiplicities of channels or approaches is most important? When consumers have upwards of 10 different potential touch points in terms of media before breakfast, and given the aforementioned finite resources, etc, available to institutions, how will they potentially go about beginning to consider which of these multiple channels would make the most sense to them?
Prioritisation. It’s not possible to do everything – even global brands don’t attempt to work across all social platforms. Define what your organisational goals are. Let’s take brand awareness as an example – does the arts organisation feel happy about their brand awareness, and their audience diversity? If not, then I would definitely focus on social media as a good way to attract a younger audience, as an example, which is exactly what more traditional, older-skewing organisations like the Royal Opera House or English National Ballet do very efficiently. On Instagram, for example, they’ll do short stories backstage, they’ll give curation to one of the artists who for a day will vlog about their day-to-day experience of their art, presenting a personal, human and relatable face of the form which whilst not necessarily of interest to traditional audiences is exactly what will enable a younger demographic to connect with the work.

Put simply, it’s important, given these multiple channels, to have an understanding as an institution of the fact they’re all different ways to communicate with different people. It’s vital to have people in house who understand things like that, to have a digital director, or at least a community manager, who understands these platforms. Because otherwise, it might lead to having a Pinterest account where you’re posting photos of the plants growing outside of the venue. I’ve seen that; it’s not efficient.

You have to prioritise, of course. You don’t have to do Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Pinterest, podcasts, Spotify... I mean, it just doesn’t make sense. Not everyone needs to make video, for example. Video is complicated, and it’s hard to do well – it’s a particular skillset that not everyone possesses, and that not everything is suited to. Again, it comes back to an understanding of your ‘brand’ – a term I know is often anathema to the arts, but which is important in the context of digital communications. What is the brand message? How do you describe your brand? Simply? Because if you don’t even know that, or if you can’t explain that clearly, how do you translate that onto all these platforms? Once you know who you are, and how you best describe yourself, then you can use that as inspiration for the content you put on those social platforms.

If you asked lots of arts organisations and institutions “who would you like to be your audience?” they would say, “Well, everyone. We want everyone to love us”, which is obviously a silly and meaningless response to that question. Similarly, the universal desire to “reach a younger audience” – it’s a constant refrain, but one oughtn’t ignore the fact that it’s often older audiences that are the main drivers of sales. Again, this comes back to knowing why you are talking to which group of people; perhaps with younger audiences it’s about making them aware of an institution or medium or show, to engender consideration in the future, whereas with older audiences it’s more about directing them towards your ticket sales portal.

How can organisations go about getting a deeper understanding of where these audiences are, what they want and how to get it to them? Digital analytics, in the first place – the power of Google Analytics, and the analytics tools available through the major social platforms, should not be underestimated when it comes to telling you who is responding to what content. Once you know that, it’s possible to quickly develop relatively sophisticated audience segmentation and targeting techniques with which to address these individual groups with bespoke content, delivered to them through the channels you know they prefer – and to start to build a relationship with them. Once this would simply have been ‘marketing’ – now it’s important to see it as a vital component in institutions’ and artists’ ongoing conversations with the arts-consuming public.

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The Space is a commissioning and development organisation, established by Arts Council England and the BBC to support greater digital access to the arts. The Space is committed to supporting and facilitating the UK arts sector to realise its digital ambitions. The organisation commissions arts projects, offers online audience and digital skills development, and provides a production and distribution pipeline to ensure that these projects reach a wide and diverse range of audiences.

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