



Museums and Online Public Programming

The dramatic increase in museums offering digital programming over the course of the pandemic is easy to understand. The format was relatively easy to translate into online versions and keeping museums' presence in front of visitors when nobody could come and visit museum buildings was seen as vital to survival. What many museums undertook as a short-term coping mechanism "until things return to normal" though, is set to become a core part of the new reality.

Our concept of “museum visitor” now includes people who may never come to our facilities, and the popularity of online programming and the extended reach that these digital programs provide will continue to drive audience interest in, and support of museums. Ellen Busch, the Director of Historic Sites Operations at the Texas Historical Commission, summed up the role that online audiences have to play,

“Not everybody is going to be able to visit our historic sites, but we need their buy-in on their continued preservation. There are so many cultural sites in this world that need people’s advocacy and support for their continued existence. And what better way to do that than through the internet and through building our digital assets?”

To capitalize on that, we need to understand how to meet the needs and interests of these unseen, unknown visitors. This will require new approaches to programming. So this month, we’re looking at online programming, and what we’re learning about what successful programming looks like.

The whys and hows of online programming

You can’t always use old know-how to solve a new problem. The skills and strategies we all learned in pre-COVID times don’t necessarily hold true in the face of the massive disruption the pandemic has caused. People’s habits and practices have changed, and what you knew about how people behaved online in 2019 doesn’t really help you understand how to plan for 2021 and 2022. In [a survey of art museum directors conducted by Ithaka S+R in early 2020](#) right before the pandemic, “educational programming” was rated as the highest priority service that museums needed to provide, surpassing even displaying and studying objects. Once the shutdowns happened, online programming in most museums went into overdrive. But what worked? Nine months into the pandemic, Cuseum conducted a survey of over 500 cultural professionals on the kinds of online programming they produced. Their report, [“The Impact of Virtual Programs on Revenue Generation for Cultural Organizations”](#), though focused on monetizing digital programs, gives a great, easy to digest breakdown of the kinds of programming organizations are offering and their relative popularity. Not surprisingly, K-12 programs and classes & events are the most popular virtual initiatives offered across all types and sizes of cultural organizations.

Expanding reach beyond the museum’s website and social feeds

One of the Cuseum survey respondents summed up the potential of online programming this way, *“Digital programming has worked well for us. We’re reaching more people than when we do the events inside the museum. We’re also finding that we’re getting a bigger audience nationally and internationally. I’m very hopeful that we’re bringing in new people who were not aware of us who would want to visit us too.”*

Sounds great, right? Buy how to reach more than your existing audiences? One model is to invest in partnerships with organizations that offer new audiences, platforms or capacities. Over 2000

museums that have partnered with [Google Arts and Culture](#) to digitize and present their works under a single searchable, linkable site. The Metropolitan Museum of Art has partnered with [Wikipedia](#) many times over the past decade, and has continued that collaboration during the pandemic. Their latest project, [The Met x Wikipedia Virtual Edit Meet-up: Women's History Month](#), is a great example of a single program that occurs on several platforms including YouTube, Facebook, and Wikipedia. Other museums, like the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in New York have partnered with online learning platforms like [Coursera](#) to offer courses designed by their curatorial staff.

Serving educational content and communication needs

There isn't room to get into the challenges facing formal education this year, but one thing that is clear is that museums have identified the school audience as a primary one for online programming, especially in the face of another possible year of no school field trips. Initiatives like [Museums for Digital Learning](#) (MDL) have aimed to fill some of that gap by offering K-12 educators online classroom resources that bring museum education into the classroom or a home-based study program. This IMLS-funded project uses digital collections-based content that is curated by the partner museums and is free to use and share. As one of their users said, *"The MDL project puts the power of authentic learning directly in the hands of teachers and students by allowing digital access to engaging resources that elevate learning through interactive and thoughtful critical thinking activities. These resources make teaching come alive in a time when many museums and collections are inaccessible to our most vulnerable students."*

MDL is an interesting model for ways museums can both partner up and flex their own internal educational muscles online. It doesn't have to be an either-or proposition. And the school audience, unlike the rest of the museum-going public, both online and off, have clear standards for what they're looking for—connection to state and/or Federal curriculum standards. This can be a huge leg up in deciding what kind of content to prioritize putting online.

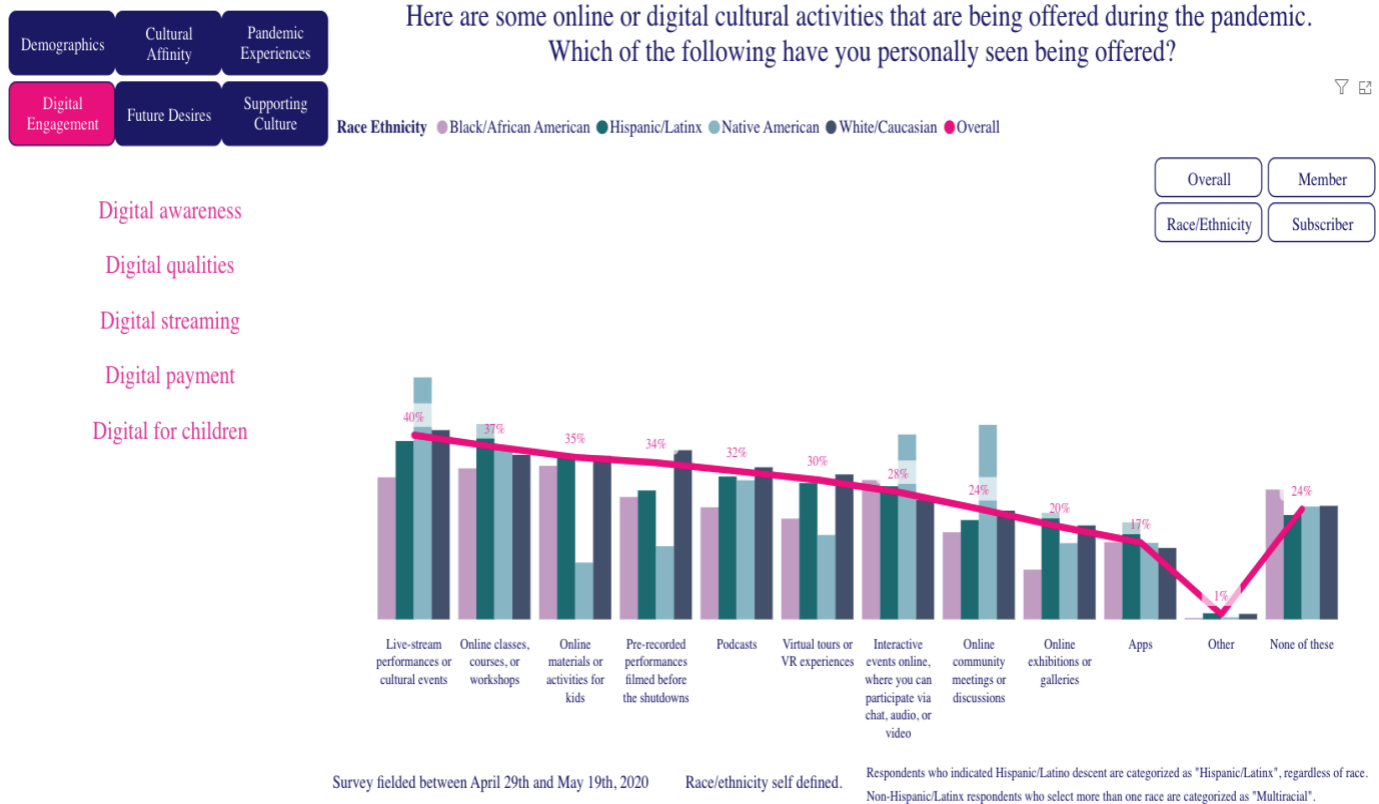
Where to go for more

Finding information that is relevant to the current situation can be daunting, but there are many groups and organizations studying the impacts of the pandemic on cultural organizations. Here are just a couple of the ones we look to for pertinent information.

CultureTrack

This initiative, sponsored by La Placa Cohen, has for the past decade been conducting surveys about cultural organizations and their audiences. Their latest report, [Culture + Community in a Time of Crisis: A Special Edition of Culture Track](#), is a national research and strategy initiative to support the cultural sector and help strengthen communities around the U.S. during and after the COVID-19 crisis. Organizations of all sizes and disciplines across the country sent survey invitations to their audiences, resulting in over 120,000 survey responses from all 50 states, Washington D.C., Puerto Rico, and two Canadian Provinces. If you're looking for information about how the pandemic is shaping the field, this is a great place to get up-to-date information. They also have [an interactive tool](#)

that lets you dig into the data yourself and focus on the audiences or questions that are most relevant to you.



[caption:A sample CultureTrack database query]

AAM's Center for the Future of Museums

The Center for the Future of Museums, an initiative of AAM, works to monitor cultural, technological, political and economic trends that matter to museums. Their yearly [Trendswatch](#) report is a goldmine of information of what American museums have had to contend with over the past year. The 2021 edition: [TrendsWatch: Navigating a Disrupted Future](#) lists "Digital Awakening: Essential technologies for pandemic survival and future success" as one of the four largest trends facing the field. As director Elizabeth Merritt says, *"The field faces a long hard slog before the pandemic fades and attendance income rebounds. Smart investments in digital practice may help sustain museums during the hard times to come and position them to rebound as the pandemic passes... How can museums make wise choices about adopting or maintaining digital technology that will help them survive in the short term and thrive in the coming decade?"*

IMPACTS Experience

Coleen Dillenschneider of IMPACTS Experience recently published results of their [National Awareness, Attitudes, and Usage Study](#) which tracked differences in how audiences were interacting with organizations before the pandemic and during. Their key finding? More people did engage with cultural organizations online during the pandemic than they did the year before. One of the best parts

of their work is that you can easily look at [all their COVID-19 reports](#) in one place, putting all the most recent information and data in your hands.

Coming up next

So, that's all for now! I look forward to reading your comments, questions, and ideas! Next month, we'll be looking at digital operational capacity and continuity, the factors influencing it, what it means, and how to maximize your ability to sustain your museum!

Until then!

Ed

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