Researching your audiences is essential to deliver services which provide the maximum public value.

This is a briefing paper for practitioners in the cultural sector delivering online digital services, who wish to research their audiences but may have limited resources to do so.

Why is researching digital audiences important?

In the DCMS and BERR Digital Britain report, the Government recognises that the digital world gives ‘individuals scope for a broader and richer range of public service content than ever before, that truly informs and educates as well as entertains’.

The demands and expectations of the public continue to rise, and the Digital Britain programme seeks to focus and stimulate the delivery of digital public services. Whether you are producing your own digital content or providing a gateway to other people’s, it is imperative that these services are wanted, needed and valued by the public, and that they evolve to meet changing demands.

Furthermore, funders increasingly require services to demonstrate their impact on the public. If you do not research your audiences you may not be able to demonstrate value.

The digital revolution

In the last ten years, millions of pounds of public funding has been available in the sector to investigate and experiment with digitisation and online services, as part of initiatives such as NOF Digitise, Culture Online and, more recently, as part of the Renaissance in the Regions programme.

This funding has resulted in the creation of a vast quantity of digital material, the deployment of a considerable ICT infrastructure, and the development of a significant body of expertise in the sector. This period of experimentation is now coming to an end, and digital channels are likely to form a central pillar for the delivery of cultural services in the future. Cultural organisations often excel at engaging with physical audiences and developing physical services which meet their needs, and it is now important to understand how audiences wish to consume digital cultural content.

Where can I get support from?

As well as The Guide to Researching Audiences, which this briefing paper supports, a range of other services and publications is available in the cultural sector to help you to understand your audiences, and the impact you are having on them. Much of the guidance is focused on audience research in general rather than targeted at digital audiences, but the same research principles apply.

Collections Link, a national advisory service for Collections Management managed by the Collections Trust in partnership with ICON and NPO, has a range of useful material about market research, including:

- A newcomer’s guide to market and social research
- Guidance for using an external market research agency and for doing your own research
- Information about developing a marketing strategy

The Museums, Libraries and Archives Council has a number of informative research briefings on topics such as ‘increasing attendance and participation’ and ‘attracting library non-users – what have we learned so far?’.

The Arts Council has an excellent set of publications and information sheets on audience development and participation. Also, Taking Part in the Arts provides information and guidance on how to be more community and customer focused, and the Audience Alliance provides information on existing audience development projects, case studies and examples of best practice.

Additionally, the Market Research Society (MRS) provides some best practice guidance to promote the professionalism of research on the internet. There is also a wealth of support...
available on the creation and management of digital materials
from sites such as JISC Digital Media and UKOLN Cultural
Heritage.

**Audience research in the cultural sector**

**Service development**
Understanding how audiences wish to use and interact
with digital content in the cultural sector is vital for service
development – do people wish to consume digital content
specifically, or do they wish to have a surrogate ‘cultural
experience’?

Try to think about your service as a whole – what is the purpose
of each delivery channel and how do they complement each
other? For example, research conducted by the London Hub
found that the sole interest of the ‘normal’ consumer was to
access up-to-date information which they could use to decide
whether to visit a museum, and to plan the visit (eg catering and
accessibility information).

Libraries have a wealth of information about their audience from
card reader systems – this is a good starting point, but more
information is needed to understand how your library services
should evolve in the digital age.

**Financial viability**
If you are operating under a Best Value Framework or a
Continuous Performance Assessment (CPA) Framework in
Local Authorities, audience research is useful to support the
framework of evidence required. Web traffic is an important
indicator in the framework and is tied directly to funding – if you
can use your understanding of your audience to improve the
reach of the service, this may impact on your financial viability.

**Conducting the research**
Although time and resources may be limited, even a small
audience research project is often worthwhile. If your website
is part of a local authority’s website, this may constrain the
research that you can do. Not having control of your own website
can be frustrating, but working more closely with the local
authority IT team and marketing team could be beneficial. You
may be able to reduce the timescales for making changes to your
website as well as receive web statistics.

Finding out more about audience research

The Guide to Researching Audiences, developed by the Strategic
Content Alliance, provides useful and practical information about
researching digital audiences.

The Guide sets out the key activities in the lifecycle of audience
research, which are driven by your target audience. It provides
information on topics such as deciding where to outsource your
research, and discusses various research methods such as
surveying and web analytics.

**Further reading**

**The Guide to Audience Research**
http://sca.jiscinvolve.org/2009/02/05/download-audience-
analysis-toolkit

**Digital Britain**
www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/broadcasting/5631.aspx

**Collections Link (helpline 0845 838 4000)**
www.collectionslink.org.uk

**MLA Research Briefings**
http://research.mla.gov.uk/briefings/index.php

**Arts Council publications**
http://artscouncil.org.uk/publications/information_for_
subject.php?sid=4

**Taking Part in the Arts**
www.takingpartinthearts.com

**Audience Alliance**
www.audiencealliance.org.uk

**MRS Internet Research Guidelines**
www.mrs.org.uk/standards/internet.htm

**JISC Digital Media**
www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/index-jdm.html

**UKOLN Cultural Heritage**
www.ukoln.ac.uk/cultural-heritage

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**The Strategic Content Alliance**
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This briefing paper and The Guide to Researching Audiences have been prepared
by Curtis+Cartwright Consulting Ltd on behalf of the Strategic Content Alliance. They are part of a series of
guides developed to support people in the public sector understand
their digital audiences and deliver audience-focused services.

This work is part of a wider initiative led by the Strategic Content
Alliance, which aims to support UK citizens gain best value from the
public investment that has been made in digital content.

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