LEARNING FROM THE 2020 EDINBURGH FESTIVAL FRINGE

Recommendations for Festivals and Performing Arts in Navigating Covid-19 and New Digital Contexts

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FOREWORD

When you do the job we do it can be easy to forget the magic of the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and its unique and unexplainable chemistry. None of us could have expected 2020, yet watching the hard work, passion and commitment of the artists and venues who make the Fringe, working through the crisis and responding as they did, make it impossible to ever take it for granted again.

Reading this report reminds me of how little we all knew in April 2020, and how much we've all learned. The learning curve was steep, almost impossible for some, but it came with a sense of purpose to push up the hill. We didn't know then that we'd find ourselves, here in 2021, offering a range of digital services and presentation methods not just in response to Covid-19 but for the long-term future of the Fringe. We didn't know then that we'd accelerate key areas of work to make the Fringe more accessible, to reduce travel, to have more urgent and direct conversations with artists and makers, to keep alive key conversations to support artists to make a living. We didn't know then that the experiments, the failures, the stresses and the triumphs would be informing our strategies for recovery. We were all just trying to keep alive the thing we love.

The research team have expertly captured here the magic, frustration, and wonder of the Fringe in 2020, in all its baretruth. If you're interested in how digital performance can be a positive part of how your event or festival presents work then I hope this helps - we didn't get it all right, but we kept trying none the less, which seems a fitting tribute to our amazing festival and the people who make it happen – as the author says, *"being without a stage is more than just the economic or professional disappointment of being without a way to make a living"*; for the Fringe family, it's part of who we are.

Lyndsey Jackson
Deputy Chief Executive
Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

When it happened, the announcement that the Edinburgh Festivals would not go ahead due to an emerging pandemic was both predictable and shocking. Cruelly, so many aspects of what makes the Edinburgh Festival Fringe unique, appeared suddenly impossible and unpalatable. How could this festival work remotely? What would happen, when the Fringe doesn't happen? As researchers on Creative Informatics - a project to explore data-driven innovation in the Creative Industries - we wanted to record these remarkable circumstances and study the role(s) of digital technologies in response. In particular we sought to reflect on the pivots artists, venues and festivals would be required to make, and perhaps identify longer term shifts in the performing arts sector.

We planned two studies. The first endeavoured to document a broad public response to whatever did (or did not) happen; the second sought to gather the experiences of intended Fringe 2020 participants whose shows had been cancelled or reworked for an online audience. If nothing else, we hope this report serves as a testament to the difficulties, perseverance and ingenuity of artists and performers who have endured and continued creating work during this time.

Our findings aim to offer both a broad description of what and how performances took place in 2020, while also developing some of the specific challenges that performers faced. Our interviews with performers were both hopeful, inspiring and sombre. Some artists we spoke to had been unable to do their work, had put projects into deep freeze, and had grave financial concerns for their companies and colleagues. On a personal level, being able to create new work, and to perform with live audiences is also utterly bound up in many performers' identity and daily practices; in this respect, being without a stage is more than just the economic or professional disappointment of being without a way to make a living. However, ironically perhaps, it is this same desire to be creating and performing that drove many of our participants to find new ways to perform and connect with audiences. In turning to and investing in digital approaches to record and share live performance, considerable investments have been made in new technologies, skills and collaborations. These have expanded viewpoints, and challenged assumptions, pushing performers and audiences towards new experiences that will change practices and expectations. In particular, the lack of a stage has encouraged performers to look again and highlight much of the hidden work that goes into a show, and to find ways to engage and transact with audiences beyond a single live performance.

Furthermore, performers are suddenly in competition with Netflix, broadcasts of Broadway shows, and TikTok trends as performance becomes digital 'content', subject to the logics and economies of digital media. There are certainly opportunities here for some performers, but understanding and preserving the unique values of live performance in digital contexts is a considerable outstanding challenge.

To this end, we have developed three broad areas of recommendations; for performers; for festivals and venues; and finally for researchers and designers. Though derived from the context of the Edinburgh Fringe - a unique event – we hope that they may be of service across the sector. We summarise these very briefly on the following pages.

Summary Recommendations: For Performers

Developing Digital Stagecraft

We were fortunate to speak to a number of performers who had successfully brought their acts onto a digital stage, and honed their stagecraft in this new space. There are some specific common elements to their successes that we can highlight as recommendations:

- **Develop formats that bring audiences and artists closer together**
- **Seek original and international collaborations**
- **Take care in managing audience coming and goings**
- **Recognise and develop new creative and technical skills for online performance**

Value of Live and Social Events

Overwhelmingly, participants sought ways to make a performance an 'event' that was distinctive from other online content. Some specific approaches included:

- **Creating a sense of exclusivity**
- **Supporting audiences in performing traditional show rituals**
- **Engaging audiences with a sense of being 'there'**

Strategic Uses of Recorded Content

The importance and value of recorded content had become evident to several of our participants, however there remained considerable tensions and challenges in finding ways to record performance that did not diminish the quality of the work, with a limited budget. We highlight some of the more successful approaches participants described to us:

- **Embrace new kinds of recorded performance**
- **Curate and package shorter recordings to promote and build interest in live show**
- **Create events around recorded work**

Approaches to Ticketing and Monetisation

Our participants were experimenting with a range of approaches to ticketing and monetising their work. There's much more still to learn here, but some steps towards a more sustainable model for online performances include:

- **Seek to create pathways towards more paid and ticketed events**
- **Develop donation and 'pay what you want' models with longer-term value**
- **Explore and combine multiple fundraising approaches**

Recognising the Benefits of Digital Performances

Undoubtedly this has been an extremely challenging time for those working in performing arts, and especially for those working in a genre that relies more heavily on audience interaction. However, there are also a number of benefits to online performance, both now, and for the future that we wish to highlight:

- **Supporting discovery of new work / artists**
- **Consider opportunities for accessibility & inclusion**
- **More sustainable touring, auditions and rehearsals**

Summary Recommendations: For Festivals and Venues

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is a truly unique festival; however we offer a number of recommendations that we hope can serve arts festivals more broadly in navigating and supporting artists in online contexts.

Clarifying and Preparing for New Roles and Responsibilities

Shifting to digital platforms will often implicitly shift the division of traditional roles and labour between performers, venues, festivals and audiences. For example, performers and their teams themselves may be taking on more of a hosting role as audiences enter a show; or they may become more responsible for their tech set-up. Performers may have quite different levels of experience, and expectations of how festival or venue staff can support them in digital spaces. Furthermore, it may be less clear who is really responsible, and who can fix things when something goes wrong. We suggest festivals and venues:

- ☒ **Audit any changes to roles and responsibilities**
- ☒ **Recognise and seek to mitigate digital divides**
- ☒ **Moderate and manage audience expectations**

Support Navigating Online Content

Just as navigating and choosing which shows to see is a challenge for any large festival, similar challenges exist for audiences to navigate and discover content online. We suggest festival and venues:

- ☒ **Be clear about the distinctions between performances that are live, recorded, online and in-person**
- ☒ **Consider how show listings can offer a consistent audience journey**
- ☒ **Explore ways to make navigation of this content fun and exploratory**
- ☒ **Support the discovery of new and emerging work**

Supporting Diverse Forms of Performance and Content
It was abundantly clear from our interviews that performers have responded creatively to the limitations of working online, and experiment to find the best form and medium for their work. We recommend that festivals and venues consider how to embrace and support this diversity. In practice this means:

- **Aim to be flexible with artists on performing through different digital platforms, while working to simplify the offering for audiences**

- **Prepare to support a range of digital content - not only live video streaming, but recorded work, audio-only work, XR and other hybrid formats**

- **Be prepared to support varying levels of audience engagement, from anonymous viewing, through to active participation**

Supporting and Valuing Recorded Work
As artists seek to record more of their work, and use it strategically, we encourage venues and festivals to consider how to support performers in doing so. This may include:

- **Supporting recording of shows in physical venues**

- **Developing guides, exemplars and best practice in more strategic uses of recording**

- **Creating spaces for sharing recorded content with industry producers and promoters**

Programming, Ticketing and Value
Clearly, festivals and venues have had to considerably rethink how they program festivals and events. Our conversations with performers raised questions around how often shows are performed, at what times, and the extent to which a show remains 'available' after a performance. We offer some general considerations for venues and festivals in navigating these questions:

- **Preserving the value of live events**

- **Offering a consistent ticketing experience**

- **Helping artists capitalise from the audiences they attract**

Developing Accessible and Sustainable Online Festivals
Participants were enthusiastic about how performing online could improve the accessibility and sustainability of festivals. Specifically, festivals and venues could consider:

- **Supporting first-time festival or theatre goers**
- **Serving isolated and remote audiences**
- **Supporting more sustainable international touring**

Supporting Artist Peer Networking
Several participants were enthusiastic about the Virtual Fringe Central Hub, remarking that it allowed them to engage more than they might have been able to during a regular Fringe. We encourage venues and festivals to extend such approaches, and curate online spaces where artists and performers can connect with their peers, especially for those who cannot physically attend a festival every year. Important functions include:

- **Being able to see each other's work, and being part of a scene**
- **Creating opportunities for fortuitous and unusual collaborations**
- **Finding like-minded individuals and potential mentors**
- **Sharing skills and best practices**
- **Peer support with the pragmatic and mental challenges of freelancing**
- **Access to promoters and producers who may support their work**

Summary Considerations: For Future Research and Innovation

Finally, we conclude with areas we see for future research and innovation as festivals and performing arts more broadly recover from the pandemic:

- **Catering for hybrid audiences who are split between a live venue and online**
- **Understanding remote experiences of 'liveness'**
- **Exploring geo-location, site-specific work, and other ways to embed and root online content to place, like the City of Edinburgh**
- **New ticketing and payment services embedded into content delivery and video conferencing**
- **Understanding the implications of recorded and online performance as 'content'**
- **Critical attention to the online roles of current major venues (e.g. Assembly, Underbelly), as well as emerging online intermediaries (e.g. Eventbrite, Dice.fm, Zoom, Twitch etc.)**
- **Supporting more sustainable, equitable and accessible performing arts**

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01

INTRODUCTION

> **For the first time in over 70 years, the five festivals that transform Edinburgh into the world's leading cultural destination every August are not going ahead this year due to concerns around the Covid-19 pandemic.**

Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society News, April 2020

On April 1st 2020, this announcement was made on behalf of the five August festivals: Edinburgh Art Festival, Edinburgh Festival Fringe, Edinburgh International Book Festival, Edinburgh International Festival and the Royal Edinburgh Military Tattoo. Although shows at the Fringe were not formally cancelled, any purchased tickets and participation fees were refunded, while remaining open to the possibility that some form of festivity may have been possible in August, online, or in-person in a very limited way.

Curiously, at the beginning of August 2020, Scotland had reached its lowest number of Covid-19 cases, and the most relaxed restrictions since April. It was possible to visit others indoors; hospitality was operating with Covid-secure measures in place; there were no travel restrictions in place; Edinburgh Castle was briefly re-opened. However, most performance venues and theatres remained closed, and large gatherings were not permitted.

Figure 1: A closed up Fringe Shop, normally the site of long queues at the beginning of August. [Credit: kaysgeog via Flickr]

In this context, and throughout August 2020, we undertook this research to document and record the unique circumstances of Fringe 2020. With a particular focus on the use of digital technologies to perform and connect with audiences online, we wanted to understand how Fringe participants had responded and adapted to working online, and hoped to identify emerging and best practices. As researchers in interaction design, we hoped to probe new opportunities for technological innovation, as well as considering the potential longer-term implications of more prominent online and digital spaces at future Edinburgh festivals.

This report describes our methodological approach, including the gathering online audience responses, and in-depth interviews with 20 individuals who had planned shows for Fringe 2020. We provide a snapshot of the range of activities that did take place in one form or another, before reflecting on specific challenges for performers working in online contexts - ranging from developing digital stagecraft, through to strategies around monetising and ticketing shows. Finally, we reflect on these findings to offer recommendations for performers, festivals and researchers as we look to the futures of performance and festivals online.

02

RESEARCH APPROACH & METHODS

Our research was initiated through an existing research partnership between Creative Informatics and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society. Given the unique circumstances of this festival season, we planned two distinct research projects to understand audience and performer perspectives, to document this unique festival season. First, we collected audience responses and commentary from Twitter posts, press articles and commentary. Secondly, we undertook an interview and probe study with 20 Fringe 2020 participants whose shows could not take place as planned. Our work was supported through close engagement with the Fringe Participant Services Team, who in particular supported recruitment for the interview study through the Fringe Central Virtual Hub and participant mailing list. Creative Informatics had previously received and documented ethical approval to allow us to respond quickly to do this research. We describe both approaches in detail below.

2.1. Analysing Audience Responses to Fringe 2020

2.1.1 Data Collection and Analysis

The data collection on audience response was undertaken from the last week of July 2020 to the second week of September 2020. It consists of the analysis of the use of 12 hashtags, some of which were chosen as they were the official hashtags used by the Edinburgh Fringe Festival Twitter account and some were chosen as they had keywords such as "Edi", "Fringe", "2020":

#makeyourfringe
623 tweets

#fringepicknmix
169 tweets

#fringeonfriday
563 tweets

#fringemakers
3018 tweets

#fortheloveofAJbellfringe
31 tweets

#AJBellFringe
12 tweets

#EdinburghFringe
548 tweets

#EdFests
299 tweets

#edfringe
9291 tweets

#edfringe20
29 tweets

#edfringe2020
601 tweets

#virtualfringe
148 tweets

These hashtags were used in a total of 15332 posts. The analysis of these hashtags was done using the program TAGS v6.1.9.1 with the goal to check the locations from which users were tweeting as well as to have a broad base for the qualitative analysis of the Twitter Post contents.

For the main data collection, Nvivo software was used. We analysed the content of the posts on Twitter that used the hashtags we were following and saved them with the Nvivo Ncapture function, according to their common themes/topics. Along with this, some Google Alerts based on keywords were also set up to check what was being posted online:

Edinburgh Festival City
Edinburgh Fringe 2020
Future Fringe

Edinburgh International Festival
Edinburgh Virtual Fringe Festival
Make your Fringe

Online Fringe Festival
Edinburgh Art Festival
Edinburgh Book Festival

This, together with Google Search and links found in the Twitter Posts, generated a collection of 217 articles. The press analysed was: All Edinburgh Theatre; BBC News; Bella Caledonia; Beyond the Joke; Broadway World; Chortle; Easy Voyage; Edinburgh Evening News; Edinburgh Live; ES.; Forbes; i; ITV News; London Evening Standard; Morning Updates; New York Theatre; STV News; Techthelead; The Courier; The Edinburgh Reporter; The Focus; The Guardian; The Impact Magazine; The Independent; The Journal.ie; The List; The National; The New York Times; The Press and Journals; The Scotsman; The Skinny; The Spectator; The Stage; The Star; The Upcoming; Time Out; Times. The Guardian comments section was also saved on Nvivo.

For reporting this study we have chosen to leave Twitter users anonymous. The program TAGS v6.1.9.1 provides a complete set of information regarding the Twitter posts using the chosen hashtag (date, time, location, username, URL to the post, etc). As Fiesler and Proferes (2018) points out that, despite Twitter users knowing that their profile is open and public, they might not have the expectation of these tweets being analysed for academic research and we see no advantage to identifying individual users in this case. Twitter User and Guardian comment will hence be used to refer to any quotes taken from a Twitter Post or a Guardian Comment.

2.1.2 Limitations

Twitter data collection presented a series of limitations that are briefly outlined here. The first challenge of working with Twitter is scale. Some hashtags appear to be widely used, but in the end, the content was not as rich as it first seemed. In fact, there was a group of users that would tweet and retweet the same words in a very short period of time. This would make the hashtags appear prolific, but for the purpose of this research, it offers little (Stewart, 2016).

Secondly, Twitter provides only a limited picture of an audiences' views. Twitter users should not be seen either as a representation of the whole Fringe audience or as representatives of Internet users. The dataset gathered through the Twitter API is limited and researching other social media (e.g., for example Facebook groups) or having follow-up interviews with members of the audience would have provided a more complete insight.

Thirdly, by using Twitter's public API, the access to historical tweets is extremely limited. Depending on how broad your filter is, the API may not return all tweets and Twitter may sample or otherwise not provide a complete set of tweets in searches (Didier, 2021). Furthermore, APIs facilitate the gathering and analyses of certain activities but do not permit researchers to access other types of data or to use other techniques. For example, mentions or hashtags are relatively easy to analyse, while the nuances of discursive utterances are more complicated and thus often side-lined (Moats & Borra, 2019). During the research, there was the awareness that some tweets might be lost in the collection. We chose a range of hashtags in order to capture as many relevant tweets as possible.

On a last note, the reliability of users' accounts should also be considered. People can potentially create as many profiles as they want, the location chosen can be inaccurate or invented and the content of the tweet might not match with the users' personal views (Buchel & Pennington, 2016; Stewart, 2016). However, bearing these limitations in mind, an analysis of a variety of Tweets can help contextualise a range of audience views around a topic and offer a useful backdrop to our more in-depth studies with performers themselves.

2.2. Understanding Fringe Performers & Participants Experiences

2.2.1 Recruitment

In this exploratory study, we sought to understand the experiences and practices of those who had planned Fringe shows for 2020 that were subsequently cancelled. We aimed to speak to Fringe participants with a range of experience and roles, involved in shows of various genres. We recruited participants online through several networks. Primarily, we advertised through the Virtual Fringe Central Hub, a space for artists to attend online talks and events provided by the Fringe. We also invited participation through university mailing lists and social media posts, including an active Fringe performer Facebook group.

Table 1 (p24) details our participants pseudonymously.

While most participants had a background or involvement in theatre or comedy, these participants reflect the tremendous breadth of work performed at the Fringe, with quite diverse technical and physical requirements. Our participants spanned many different roles in bringing a show to the Fringe, and many had experience of playing multiple roles in a stage show. We spoke to 13 women, and 7 men, (reflected in their pseudonyms): for some, 2020 would have been their first Fringe performance; others had performed at the Fringe for more than 30 years.

Table 1.

Participant	Genre	Primary Role	First Fringe Performance
Martha	Theatre	Writer	2020
Kelly	Theatre	Director	2009
Pam	Children's Music/Clowning	Producer	1985
Jake	improv Comedy	Performer	2018
Cerys	Performance Art	Producer	1986
Alice	Theatre	Performer	2014
Carlos	Theatre	Writer / Producer	2020
Arthur	Theatre	Director / Producer	2018
Anton	Comedy	Performer / Producer	2012
Kat	Theatre	Producer / Marketer	2007
Paul	Comedy Theatre	Writer/Performer/Producer	2010
Aiden	Theatre	Writer	2010
Abigail	Theatre	Writer / Production Manager	2011
Caitlin	Theatre and Improv	Performer	1989
Simone	Theatre	Producer	2014
Kyle	Comedy	Writer, performer, producer	2001
Emma	Theatre	Performer, Writer, Director, Stage Manager.	2011
Holly	Theatre	Performer, Writer, Production Assistant	2015
Catherine	Theatre	Producer & Creative Lead	2004
Yvette	Theatre and Dance	Producer	2016

2.2.2 Study Protocol and Analysis

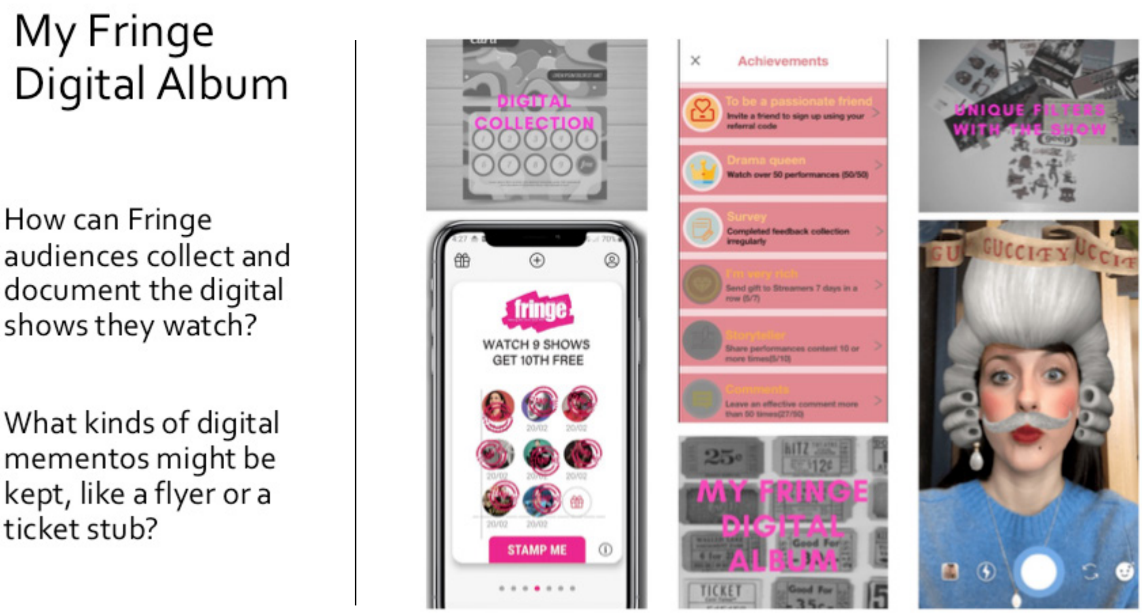
All interviews took place over Zoom at a convenient time for participants, throughout August & September 2020, and were led by Dr. Elsden. Participants were provided with an information sheet and a consent form prior to the interview in order to provide informed consent to the interview being video and audio recorded directly through Zoom. Interviews lasted between 50 and 75 minutes, and took place in two parts.

The first-part was a semi-structured interview about their practice and experiences in 2020. The interviews began by asking about their performance practice, the kind of work they do, their past experiences of the Edinburgh Fringe Festival, and the show(s) they had planned to be involved with for Fringe 2020. Participants were then asked how they were engaging with Fringe 2020, if at all, and the challenges they had faced in taking their own performances online or presenting work in digital formats. These discussions included both the pragmatics of how to perform online, as well as broader questions about the value and future of doing so.

To conclude the interview we shared a series of 'Questionable Concept' (Vines et al., 2012) ideas about the future online landscape of the Fringe. These were offered as a conversation starter; they were an opportunity to critique or 'wave a magic wand' and imagine online alternatives. Prior to the interviews, we developed 12 separate concepts related to three core topics: 1) connecting to remote audiences; 2) networking and collaborating online; 3) online support, promotion, fundraising and rewards. The concepts were presented as 'mood boards', through a powerpoint deck that could easily be shared remotely (see images on p26). In each interview, we chose 3-5 of the concepts to discuss that seemed most relevant to the participants based on the interview thus far.

Full transcripts were produced from each interview. This report reflects an analysis, which is the result of reading each transcript and highlighting salient sections, before sharing initial impressions, examples and thoughts within the research team, and finally discussing these with the Fringe Participant Services team. We used these to produce a series of candidate themes and topics that summarise common points of discussion.

Figure 2: Examples of two 'Questionable Concepts' shared with participants during interviews. These combined descriptive and provocative statements, with found imagery assembled in a mood board.



03

FINDINGS

3.1. What was missing from Fringe 2020?

We begin with what was absent. Physical venues were closed, many shows were cancelled entirely, Fringe hubs and all the additional infrastructure to support a festival (catering, bars, toilets, signage, tents etc.) were not built, the streets were far quieter than usual. In response, some shows moved online, Fringe Central presented an online 'Virtual Hub', and artists and audiences found new ways to connect. Before examining specifically how Fringe performers and audiences responded and experienced digital performances and spaces, we first reflect what they felt and understood to be missing in this anomalous year.

Clearly audiences and performers lamented the loss of a festival atmosphere, and specifically the hustle and bustle of the city at this time. For example, on Twitter, audiences shared how they would ordinarily try to see as many shows as possible, running from one show to the other one in the rain, trying their luck with performers they have never heard of and trying to get the last ticket to sold-out shows.

"The running in the rain, in between shows, to make sure you arrive on time to the next great piece of theatre; getting a good seat and as you catch your breath, the lights start going down, and you whisper "worth it"."

Twitter User

Figure 3: Edinburgh's Royal Mile, looking unusually sedate in August 2020. [Credit: 'london road' on Flickr]

Many missed the city itself, and the spontaneity and unpredictability of the festival. For several audience members, Fringe on Friday offered a taste of the festival experience, and an opportunity for nostalgia and reminiscence.

#FringeonFriday!! It was so lovely to have a little piece of @edfringe in my flat.
Twitter User

Alongside nostalgia, audiences also played out and shared images of their efforts to recreate a Fringe spirit and rituals at home. Alcohol, warm stuffy venues, and uncomfortable seating all play a part. Others mention that they will watch each show changing rooms as if they are going from venue to venue.

Buy a ticket, grab a plastic pint glass, add some beer, perch on a fold up chair, wear three coats and try and remove them while holding the pint, listen to the rain hammering on your window, enjoy every second of tonight's Fringe on Friday. Repeat next Friday. #FringeonFriday
Twitter User

We're sitting on a mini-sofa and an office chair in my uncle's spare room, watching @edfringe's final #FringeonFriday on a tiny Ipad screen as a shower loudly runs in the adjacent room and it's STILL not the worst venue we've enjoyed a show from. Oh, how I miss the Fringe!
Twitter User

Performers too encouraged a theatre atmosphere from their audiences:

One of the things we were doing when we were releasing our pre-recorded stuff of hey, this is our show, here's some archive footage of that show, we were saying to people dim the lights to house light level, grab a G and T from the bar, make sure you've got your ticket from the box... A lot of the language we were using on social media as we were saying settle down, the show's about to start, was that kind of make your space nice.
Emma, Theatre Maker

Importantly, this spirit of the Fringe also offers a sympathetic excuse for technical problems experienced during the Fringe on Friday show.

> **The mix of #FringeOnFriday performances captures the @edfringe experience: funny, touching, technical problems, blah, lovely, electrifying. Next Friday I will pour myself a beer to make it even more authentic.**
> Twitter User

Many experienced Fringe participants also spoke fondly of missing Edinburgh, missing performing on stage, and the broader festival atmosphere. Others lamented missing catching up with old friends and the opportunity to make new connections. As one Fringe veteran put it:

> **Most of my friends in the world gather in Edinburgh in August.**
> Catherine, Theatre Maker

For many, coming to Edinburgh is part of an annual cycle, and a unique opportunity to engage with and be inspired by other performers - much like other industry or academic conferences, being able to immerse themselves in a far greater range of work than they ordinarily would. And similarly, a unique opportunity to promote a show, and to be picked up for future tours and collaborations.

> **It's probably just that August itch, I think, you get to August and it's, like, you can't have Edinburgh without a theatre, that's awful. We're all quite passionate about the arts, I don't think we'd be in Scotland in August if we weren't.**
>
> Holly, Amateur Perfomer

3.2. A Snapshot of Fringe 2020

However, despite all that was missing, numerous programmes and events that were planned did in fact take place, one way or another. The Edinburgh Fringe Festival Society (EFFS) ran the following programmes:

Crowdfunder and the Fringe Society: FringeMakers Fundraising Campaign

A collaboration between the Fringe Society and Crowdfunder, for artists and venues to run crowdfunding campaigns, with no fees and promotion from the Fringe. As well as general crowdfunding, artists could sell tickets to the 'Fringe on Friday' livestream to raise additional funds.

Fringe on Friday Livestreamed Shows

Fringe on Friday was a 60-minute live-streamed variety show on a bespoke platform with four unique shows each Friday in August. The stream was ticketed, and could be viewed on demand until the following Monday, with tickets only available to purchase via the FringeMakers' crowdfunding campaign, which went directly to the artists themselves.

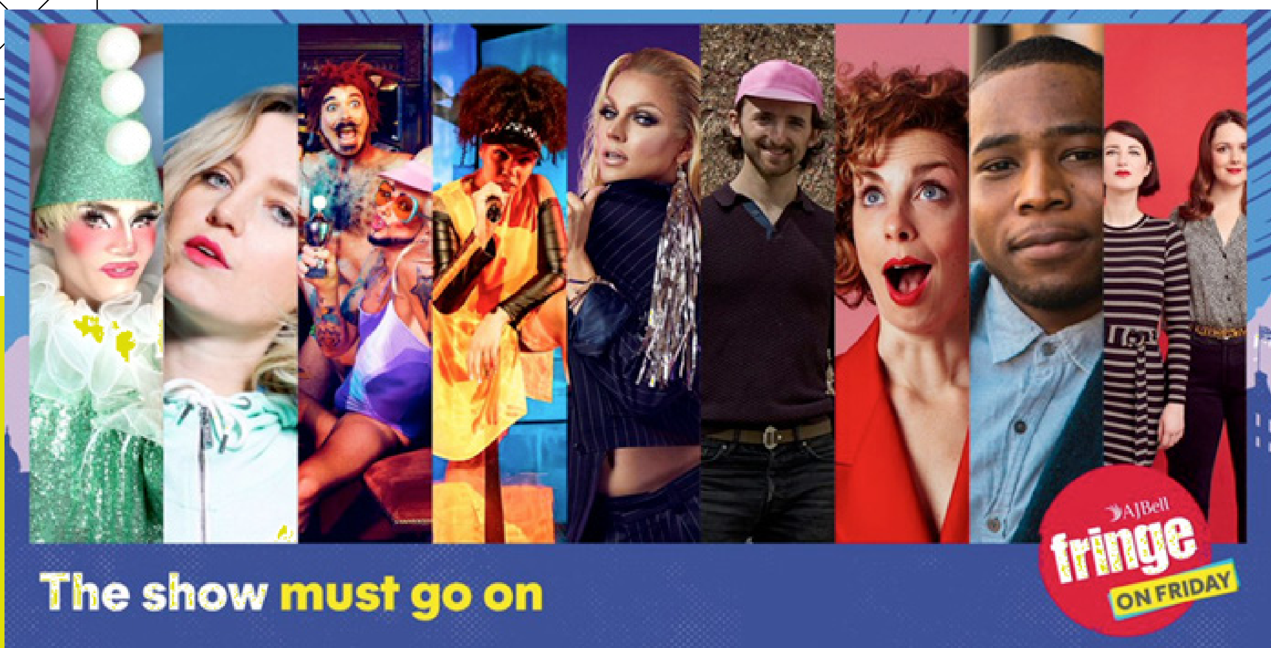


Figure 4: Advert for 'Fringe on Friday' live show, hosted by the Fringe Society.
[Credit: Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, 2020]

[The Fringe Pick n Mix Short Video Platform](#)

Based on the EFFS's 'Inspiration Machine', this video platform allowed artists to upload 60-second films from 'what would have been 2020 shows to snappy set pieces staged in the shed". Deliberately open-ended and experimental, this captured the diversity of the Fringe, and audiences could view clips at random or seek out particular artists. It also offered links to donate to an artist and venue survival fund, and follow artists on social media.

[2020 Fringe Artwork and Merchandise](#)

With no 2020 Fringe Programme, the Fringe Society produced unique merchandise, showcasing the planned illustrations for the 2020 campaign through limited-edition merch including a 'fake' programme for those who collect them.

[Events for Artists via Our Virtual Fringe Central](#)

The Fringe Virtual Hub normally provides a physical meeting place and wealth of support and professional development opportunities for Fringe participants. In 2020, the Fringe Society offered a virtual online hub, with numerous digital events and talks, as well as opportunities to meet other artists and members of the Fringe Society team

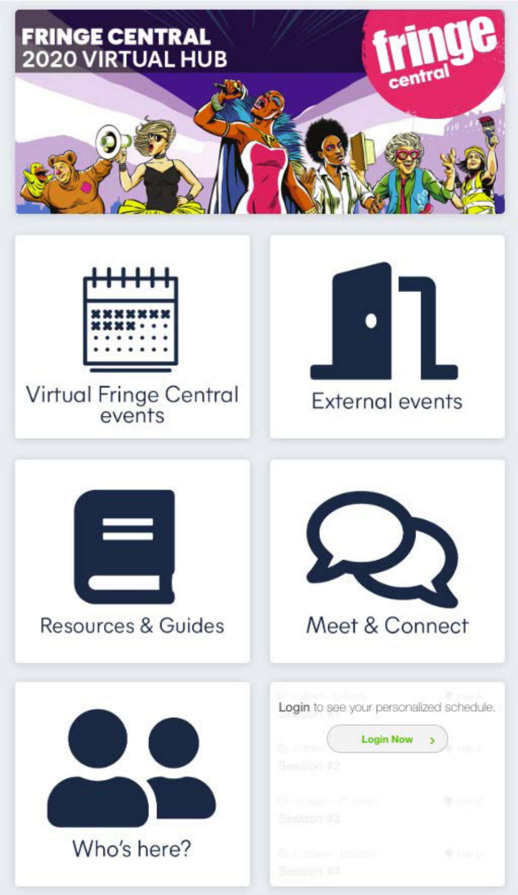


Figure 5: Screenshot of key features in the Virtual Fringe Central platform.
[Credit: Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, 2020]

Fringe Marketplace, a Platform for Arts Producers, Commissioners and Buyers

This marketplace offered "a dedicated showcase platform to connect arts industry delegates all over the world with tour-ready artists", in an effort to create and develop new opportunities for struggling artists.

Penguin Random House Audiobook, Edinburgh Unlocked

This collaboration with Penguin Random House released Edinburgh Unlocked a multi-genre comedy festival in audiobook festival, with a host of well-known comedians.

Emerging Stand-up Showcase from Comedy Central

Partnering with Comedy Central this programme spotlighted 10 up and coming comedians through a series of seven-minute stand-up episodes across their social media channels, and in a final 22-minute show aired on Comedy Central UK.

Working with Communities Across Edinburgh

In partnership with Edinburgh Art Festival the EFFS sent out 456 art packs to more than a dozen of our Fringe Days Out community partners; held a series of digital Fringe in Communities workshops in West Edinburgh where young people worked with a Fringe artist to create a digital cabaret extravaganza; and worked with partners, North Edinburgh Arts, to pilot a socially distanced performance.

Finally, EFFS hosted a listings page, with over 300 digital shows, described as: "Everything from throwback Fringe shows to brand-new lockdown-inspired creations on offer, including a one-person show about an opera queen, a virtual disco for babies, a (socially distanced) improvised musical, an online dance-a-thon, a soundscape of a Stirlingshire sheep farm and plenty of Zoom-based comedy, theatre and dance." This was a central place to see how artists had responded to produce some version of their shows, including live online performances, social distanced performances in Edinburgh, and recorded content.

In addition, numerous other venues and organisations independent to EFFS ran festival events in August 2020. The list below provides links and a brief description of some notable events as an example of the diversity of what did take place, but is surely not exhaustive.

Shedinburgh
https://shedinburgh.com/

Shedinburgh provided an online festival presented from sheds around the country. Primarily ticketed shows.

Gilded Balloon
gildedballoon.co.uk

Developed a new On Demand platform - Gilded Balloon Offstage. Presented livestreamed comedy shows.

PBH's Free Fringe
freefringe.org.uk

The Free Fringe is an entirely voluntary organisation that stages free shows mainly during the Edinburgh Fringe. Staged The Voodoo Rooms Live Fringe 2020 Gala Variety Show, recording available on YouTube.

Thornhill Theatre Space
facebook.com/ThornhillTheatreSpace

Presented a Virtual Worldwide Fringe Festival. Theatre companies from around the world will presented their work in a digital format, including live streams, zoom performance and podcast.

Stand on Demand
ondemand.thestand.co.uk

Live stream broadcasts from The Stand Comedy Club in Edinburgh during the Fringe. Recordings available to rent afterwards for a fee.

Just Festivals
just-festival.org/programme-2020

Presented drop-in performance installation with limited numbers, and online broadcasts on Zoom. Videos of events recorded for viewing on YouTube.

Improvbot.AI
improvbot.ai

ImprovBot was originally conceived as a live show for the 2020 Edinburgh Festival Fringe with the Improverts, based on AI generated show titles. Instead, titles were tweeted out, and a limited number of live-streamed improv shows were broadcast. (Twitter).

Fringe of Colour
fringeofcolour.co.uk

Fringe of Colour Films was created in response to a huge number of artists losing their income and opportunities due to the necessary shutting-down of a number of summer festivals in Edinburgh as a result of Covid-19.

The Scottish Arts Club
scottishartsclub.com

Re-imagined ClubFest 2020 presented five free concerts, broadcast and available on Vimeo.excerpts from films, novels and poetry to create a fully immersive experience.

Funny Women
funnywomen.com

Comedy courses for teenagers and kids; charity events for women on zoom.

Seabright Production
seabrights.com

Online events, including three live events, four Watch Parties and an exclusive piece of new digital content for Edinburgh Festival Fringe 2020. Using Zoom.

Live Witness Theatre
livewitnesstheatre.com

pillowtalk was a recorded theatre and multimedia event made entirely in lock down through the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic. It utilised the new world of online performance, and included podcasts, playlists, articles, handwritten letters, excerpts from films, novels and poetry to create a fully immersive experience.

ZooTV
zoovenues.co.uk/zootv

In 2020, ZOO Venues developed a digital programme, ZOO TV, which had over 30,000 viewers from all over the world during a two-week programme of over thirty shows.

BBC at the Edinburgh Festivals
bbc.co.uk/events/e85gfx

Various radio and podcast broadcasts, drawing on archive material.

The Bristol Suspensions
bristolsuspensions.co.uk

Music group that created an online playlist on Facebook of their previous work, throughout August as an online Fringe Fest.

3.3. Shifting Roles in Hosting an Online Festival

For many years, various aspects of the Fringe experience have become digitally mediated through online platforms and services: for example, promoting shows, booking tickets, finding places to eat and stay, as well as navigating the city and the festival programme can all be facilitated online. However, this was the first time that many of the shows themselves took place and were hosted online. This shifts the very nature of a 'venue' at the Fringe, and led to a variety of responses around shifting roles and responsibilities of hosting shows, and curating a festival in online contexts.

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is a complex ecosystem, sitting alongside many other Edinburgh festivals that typically run concurrently in August - most notably the [Edinburgh International Festival.]() For casual observers, it is often unclear the variety of intermediary roles that the Fringe Society does, and does not, play. Most importantly, the Edinburgh Fringe is an uncurated festival – that is, anyone can perform at the Edinburgh Fringe, as long as they pay the registration fee, and have a venue to support them. Further, all of these shows are listed equally in the EFFS digital and physical programmes, with tickets available through a central box office and ticketing system. Of course, some venues or production companies will often play a curatorial role, promoting certain kinds of work or artists, developing marketing and ticketing strategies, alongside physical infrastructure such as beer gardens and food vendors to develop their own brands (e.g. Pleasance, Assembly, FreeFringe, theSpace, Summerhall etc.) under the Fringe umbrella. But how are these arrangements, and the division of roles and responsibilities challenged and shifted in online contexts?

What became clear from audience responses and our interviews, was that without the physical entities of venues, where venue work is more evident, it is more difficult for audiences to understand the different roles, responsibilities between artists, promoters, venues and the Fringe as a whole.

For example, when online shows had technical difficulties, it was not clear who was responsible for this: the artist, the technology provider, the curator and 'venue', or the Fringe itself? While initially quite accepting of technical hiccups, audiences became less tolerant of these issues. In other cases, some audience members explicitly took the performers' side and perceived that the Fringe itself was not doing enough to support artists.

> **Please @AJBell #Fringeonfriday pre-record your compères because it's not the fault of artists that not everyone has a fast internet connection.**
> Twitter User

> **It's not a fair representation of all the hard work everyone puts in.**
> Twitter User

Performers and producers we spoke to had a variety of arrangements to take shows online - sometimes entirely independent, other times relying on a range of support, some of which from traditional 'venues' who curated

Figure 6: 'My Light Shines On' – a campaign to highlight numerous events and venue staff challenged through the pandemic acknowledging that the Edinburgh Festivals were not taking place.
[Credit: Magnus Hagdorn, Flickr]

and advertised an online programme. Part of the charm of the Fringe as a community is the unusual closeness and intimacy of the audience with everyone involved in making a show happen, from bar staff and runners, to technical staff setting up a venue.

> **To the people working behind the scenes to tight deadlines and turnarounds, the techs, the street staff, box office, ushers, bar staff, food vendors, programmers, everyone who helps make #edfringe work. #edfringe2020 #makeyourfringe #throwback**

Twitter User

This work is altogether less visible online. Some responsibilities are subsumed by a platform – there's no need for an usher to check tickets or show audience members to a seat; others, like serving a drink, or lifting a curtain are now taken on by performers or audience members themselves.

Furthermore, performing online brings new challenges for moderating and managing offensive content. In live venues, it is much easier to be explicit about offence, to enforce and negotiate age limits. Often an understanding is built between performers and their audiences in vivo. Some performers we spoke to described challenges in knowing who was watching, with offensive or adult content being recorded or available at odd hours rather than after a watershed. It also raises questions about how responsible a venue is for any offence caused. At the Fringe, in general performers speak freely and independently of a venue. Online, it seems the venue hosting the show are potentially more responsible for what is said.

However, several participants described positive relationships with venues, who had invited and supported them in bringing their shows online.

I actually began talking with [comedy venue] pretty early on, I think maybe in May or June, [the manager] was like, how can we do this, can we keep [the venue] going and what kind of stuff can we do. And I think between him and me and a few other [venue] people it was kind of determined that, yeah, we're going to do this during August, pay what you can, like it is in the real place, a box office split, which is not what they usually do, but seems important.
Paul, Performance Artist

Clearly the creative, logistic and curatorial roles that venues play in the Fringe ecosystem will remain valuable, even beyond the footprint of a physical building. Indeed, some performers speculated about how the value and benefits of a 'multi-tenanted venue' could be leveraged online.

What Netflix gives you is a one stop shop. It gives you a venue and it gives you the place you know you need to go to. That is also what happens in Edinburgh with the comedy programme that the big five venues put together, so that they dominate but also so that they simplify things for the viewer.

Kyle, Puppeteer

3.4. Developing New Performance and Audience Practices

Evidently, many Fringe participants experimented with new ways to bring a performance to online audiences. We first introduce broadly various kinds of online 'performances' that were offered to audiences, before reflecting in more detail on the kinds of skills and practices performers required to achieve this.

3.4.1. New Performance Mediums

Live

Many performers undertook some kind of live performances. Many of these used videoconferencing software such as Zoom, while several others broadcast shows on Youtube, Twitch and other online-streaming venues, and engaged various intermediary streaming software (e.g. Open Broadcasting Studio). Live performances described by our participants included theatre, comedy, improv, puppetry, quizzes, conversations with other artists, children's shows and other more physical performance arts (although clearly these were more challenging to perform at home). Some broadcast with a co-located cast from empty, or limited audience venues and studios, while many managed to conduct shows with a distributed cast and support team all working from home. A small number of outdoor shows, with a live audience were however able to take place. Working as a distributed cast allowed novel and international collaborations that may not have otherwise been possible. Determining which platforms to use and how to broadcast depended upon many factors, however key considerations besides the technical robustness of the stream included whether live performances were an open broadcast, ticketed, or had a limited audience capacity. Some live shows which included any audience engagement benefited from smaller audiences who could be 'participants' while others were broadcast to many hundreds or thousands of inactive viewers.

Pre-Recorded Shows

Several shows were pre-recorded, and then distributed 'on-demand', sometimes through a particular venue, and often for a limited duration. For example, the Traverse Theatre and Fringe of Colour showcased short films, rooted in theatrical performance, that were accessed through a paid pass. These included short theatrical films, often home-made, trailers for longer form future work, and whole recorded 'live' performances in a venue, where they were available and of sufficient quality to distribute. Several artists described looking at trying more audio work and podcasts. Others worked towards developing content that could be easily shared on social media – often clipped from previous performances, or to advertise a future show. In some cases, live streams were also subsequently released as a recording for on-demand viewing, within a limited time-period.

For many within the industry, how to describe this content remains an ongoing debate.

> **So we were able to remake [our play] into a specific digital production. It's not theatre, it's not theatre to film... but we were able to use the soundtrack of the live performance and the AV that is used throughout the live performance in a very different way. Thereby making a show that was just easier to watch on a screen than just taking the live piece.**
> Yvette, Producer

> **I've watched quite a lot of stuff that's been out over the COVID time and, yes, you can do a monologue, but it's like watching TV. It's not live theatre, it's not the same feeling as being in the room with the audience. And I think the number of things that you can do at the moment is kind of quite limited, unless you're setting up a video studio where you've got two or three different cameras that you're actually filming, and then that becomes a film, that's not live theatre. So it's trying to get a balance between what can be done to a wider audience online, because I fully appreciate the benefit of having a wider audience online, but it's whether or not we can keep the idea that it's live theatre going.**
> Abigail, Writer / Production Manager

These brief examples highlight that the sustaining 'idea' of live theatre through digital production is both a technical accomplishment, but also depends on the social and temporal context of the show.

Figure 7: Traverse Theatre's 'online venue' showing primarily recorded work during Fringe 2020. [Credit: Mihaela Bodlovic, 2020]

Hybrid

Finally, there were many examples of shows that relied upon a mix of live and recorded content. These included 'Zoom Theatre' which was primarily a live experience, but made use of prerecorded sections and effects. 'Watch Parties' involved performers introducing and then discussing recorded versions of current and past shows with an audience. Elsewhere, curated variety shows and discussions could involve pre-recorded content from contributors as part of a live show. As audiences are able to enter theatres again, at least partially, we expect various forms of these hybrid experience to continue, to engage both live and remote audiences.

3.4.2 Screen Managing and Digital Stagecraft

Working across these formats required performers and producers to develop a range of new skills and technical expertise. Many participants described the anxiety to do 'something' - to remain relevant, keep up a profile, and express their identity and work in a new way, as well as having a desire to be able to continue to work, even while live venues were closed.

> **I mean, the main aim is profile and to continue to be a presence at the Fringe to support what the Fringe are trying to do by having a digital offer, to try and keep the artist profile up a bit, you know, not least just to generate something to talk about on social media and something to talk to audiences about 'cause you've got something happening.**
>
> Kat, Producer & Marketer

There were clear digital divides on display, based on access to high quality equipment and expertise to use it to produce high quality digital content. Many also lamented not having previously invested in recording their work that could be shared publicly, whereas big budget productions could draw on their archives.

We've never invested in anything digital prior to lockdown, and I think this is a normal thing. And, lockdown happened and all of a sudden, you're seeing the one per cent of producers who did invest £6,000 in getting a good recording, you know, putting out their work that they'd filmed two years ago, professionally onto digital distribution.

Simone, Producer

Participants described developing digital forms of 'stagecraft' to address limitations of online performances, such as managing lag and lacking direct audience feedback. Particular new practices included learning where to look and how to work with cameras; how to make lo-fi props and introduce these in and out of shot; how to time responsive dialogue; and how to engage audiences and develop some sense of intimacy and live, social interaction. Those most successful with online shows described ensuring they follow many of the same practices they would for a theatre show – working closely with a director, rehearsing heavily, having preview shows to iron out any issues, and relying upon digital 'screen managers' and a 'Zoom technician'. This new role takes on aspects of a stage manager, managing what and who audiences see, preparing actors to go on screen, and working to overcome any issues that arise during the show. One participant with experience of these new roles articulated the scope, necessity and diversity of the role of a Zoom technician particularly clearly:

> A Zoom technician/stage manager might be responsible for any or all of the below. Streaming the show to YouTube, Facebook Live or Vimeo or another platform. Monitoring the stream from the audience's side to make sure everything's working as it should. Monitoring the audience comments if live chat functions are enabled to make sure that there's nothing problematic going on there. And then there's also following along with the script and making sure the right people are on stage, not muted and not frozen. Spotting before their cues whether they're frozen. Cuing understudies if an actor's internet connection fails, and working with the actor to get them back into the scene if and when the connection improves. Stopping actors' cameras for some exits. If they exit a scene fighting or something like that and it's not practical for them to kill their own camera, stopping that for them, or just stopping it if they forget to switch off their camera when they leave a scene. Operating sound cues. I've said, some productions assign the stream audience monitoring side to one person and performer, show, understudy stuff to another person, but in small cast shows it'd normally be done by one person. During the rehearsal process your Zoom technician stage manager might also offer your performers technical support and offer creative advice about camera angles, how to achieve certain effects over Zoom.
>
> Emma, Theatre Maker & Performer

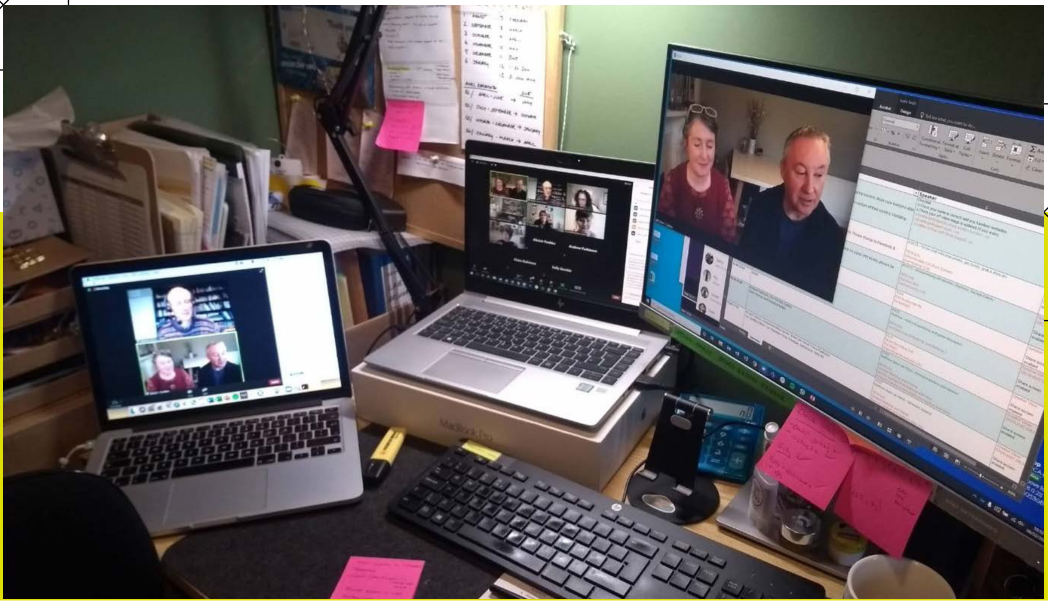


Figure 8: Backstage setup for 'screen managing' for a Zoom show at a Scottish Society of Art History event.
[Credit: Kam Chan, Creative Informatics, 2021]

3.4.3. Managing Digital Audiences

Digital shows also bring some broader challenges in managing an audience as the way they are watching and accessing the show has changed. The audience is remote, distributed, and may be entirely anonymous. Not only may performers not see their audience, but an audience often cannot see and respond to each other. Some platforms, such as Youtube and Twitch, display a number of live viewers, but if shows are being streamed on different platforms an exact number may be unknown.

While building excitement and anticipation about how the show will unfold, it's important audiences know what to expect, how to join and leave, any settings they might need to have enabled (such as a muted mic, camera etc.) and any part they might be expected to play. Whereas the norms and cultures about how to be in an audience at a live venue are well-established, this is not yet the case for digital contexts. There may be no audience interaction at all, or managed use of 'chat' functions, sharing cameras and written messages, or potentially direct involvement. It's also far easier to leave or disconnect from a show digitally, whereas previously politeness would lead one to stay seated until the end of a show.

One Twitter post compared leaving a digital show and a street performance, when you go away before they ask you for money.

> **#edfringe #fringeonfriday been watching some the online fringe stuff. It's just like the real thing. I watched some street performers for 20 minutes and sneakily logged off just before their Just Giving page popped up.**
> Twitter User

This was a concern for performers too, and especially for work at the Fringe, which was often experimental, or challenging audiences, requiring them to make an effort to engage with unconventional work.

So, I think it's much easier to disengage if you're watching through a screen and it hasn't grabbed you in the first couple of minutes. You're not as inclined to persevere, I think. Whereas I'd sit and do anything in person in the Fringe, even if I wasn't particularly enjoying it. I would never walk out of something, but I would turn...I would switch something off quite happily at home.
Caitlin, Improv Performer

In addition, for shows that were on-demand, or would be available to view as a recording, mean audiences may not need to stay or watch a whole show at once. With Fringe on Friday, the link for the shows was available till Monday and Twitter users described catching up with shows another day, or seeking structure and direction to how and when they could engage.

Similarly, some were concerned that the convenience and ease of digital access, detracts from the opportunity to view live performance.

Now I've done a few poetry slams and that online, and it's been hell of an easy...you just log in at seven o'clock and you listen to all the poetry and you log out again, and then you put on the kettle, you're there. I'm conscious that I think thank God I don't have to go and get a taxi or I don't have to go out and go and wait for a bus or whatever. I would hate to think that digital becomes the way forward, the default, and that live performance becomes the unusual thing, not the norm.
Abigail, Writer/Production Manager

3.4.4. Barriers to Performing Online

However, despite the ingenuity and creativity of so many performers, it's also important to note that several performers we spoke to had not been able to find satisfactory ways to perform online. Some lacked the technology or expertise; but many simply felt that for their act, especially where it depended on spontaneous audience interaction, it could not work.

> **In terms of live performance and improv, yeah, I always find it a bit awkward. I haven't seen really many...anything that I've thought oh yes that's really successful. I've seen things that I've thought oh that's interesting and good on you and that have had brilliant things about them, like really funny lines or really well-done little sections. But nothing where I've got to the end and thought yeah that format really, really worked.**
> Caitlin, Improv Performer

> **So, it's that same problem over and over again, it's that constant problem of even if it is the same comedian with the same quality of set, people don't want to watch it on a grainy webcam screen because he was recorded on some HD cameras by the Beeb.**
>
> Anton, Stand-Up Comic

> **We have kids come up on stage in the show. They sing with us, they dance, they do actions, when you're doing a magic trick, the kid is holding something and then you're doing it with them. We cannot be interactive. I don't care how much you'd say about Zoom being interactive, it's not. It's not the same experience for that kid who is on stage and every...you don't even see the parents face, you just see their iPhone because their kid is up on stage as a star. You can't offer that same experience when you're talking about online.**
> Pam, Clown / Producer

No, we did think about it and I would have liked to have had something online. The difficulty we found with doing online is a lot of our shows involve audience participation in some form or another. And that intimate reaction with the audience is very important and you don't get that on a Zoom call.
Abigail, Writer / Production Manager

These brief quotes highlight some of performers primary concerns: that online shows lack genuine intimate audience connections, and especially when recorded at home, compare poorly with so much other digital content available. It's clear that there are particular 'acts', 'routines' and activities which, though honed with a live in-person audience, translate especially poorly. These acts may have been developed over a lifetime of experience, and for some, is simply not something that can be adapted overnight for a new medium.

Some however do suggest that they have been able to adapt routines to overcome an otherwise jarring experience, and even play on the problems of the Zoom format as a gag.

Well, with Zoom it's different. We've left in the interactive parts of our show, which is call and response, it's asking people for suggestions which we'll do improv from. And we've had to tailor those based on the fact that if everybody responds at once, it's gibberish, it's a cacophony. And when you do hear certain things, you can't be sure what the audience has heard. But responding to it, we've been learning to work out what people have most likely heard, learning what jokes to make based on that, and so on. And so we've developed our Zoom technique and it has been working. And these three shows, which of course were three different hours of material but using the same Zoom techniques, have got better and better every time.
Kyle, Puppeteer

Finally, it is of course the case that whether it would be technically or artistically possible to perform online, many have simply not had the financial support, motivation, or time to do so. Many artists therefore had to compromise in what they would present, or which parts of their creative companies and practices they could realistically maintain, and of course how to perform safely and responsibly.

“ **Yeah, I mean, we’ve sort of stepped back anyway, just because we’ve had to work fulltime through lockdown because we’ve got to pay the bills. So we thought, yeah, we didn’t want to necessarily... Because we can’t afford to sort of sit and do a lot of online free stuff, it’s just a bit tricky. So yeah, it was a thing of sort of wanting to be able to still create stuff but in the timeframe that we had, if that makes sense.** ”

Arthur, Producer / Director

“ **I know as well from the guys that run comedy clubs in the UK that I’ve spoken to have said that after about three weeks, just, like, the sales dipped to a place where they were not, like, it was not worth it, it wasn’t worth running a lot of these events.** ”

Anton, Stand-up Comic

“ **And every time an opportunity comes up, every time I get an email saying oh, you do theatre that can adapt into any space, why don’t you come to this venue, we’re just starting to open up again. Every time I’m like oh, that would help the financial situation of the company and its people, but it’s not the time. So that’s been tough, because we don’t want our company to crash and burn, but I also don’t want the pandemic to continue for any longer than it has to.** ”

Emma, Theatre Maker

These concerns remind us that even where several acts have been able to make digital productions work during this time, that many more remain excluded or unable to engage with their audiences in satisfactory or sustainable ways.

3.5. Making Shows a (Social) Event

Clearly, many audiences made an event of watching shows at a particular time. Twitter posts highlighted audiences recreating traditional Fringe rituals and traditions, enjoying particular food and drink, getting dressed up, and attempting to connect with an online Fringe community. Social media posts were used by some to demonstrate that they were there, and often included reference to where and with whom they are watching the show.

> **Watching #FringeOnFriday from Southampton with my Fringe buddies in Glasgow on Zoom who I would have been Fringeing with RIGHT NOW TODAY without coronavirus. Absolutely loved @RachelFairburn**
> Twitter User

> **I never knew how much I needed to see @LeGateauChoc perform in their bathroom till now. Wonderful thanks @edfringe #FringeOnFriday**
> Twitter User

Several performers were concerned with how to distinguish performances and shows as an 'event', and a social experience, not just more online content, competing with other streaming services, in contrast to the more individual, on-demand consumption of other digital content. There were several ways to achieve this.

First, shows could be limited to a specific time and place, and of limited availability (even if online capacity may be much higher). By limiting audience numbers, especially through sold tickets, those who did attend may feel more committed and attentive to the performance. For some shows where there was a prospect of audience interaction, limited numbers could help a performer see and engage with a significant portion of the audience. In other ways, performances could be marked out as unique experiences, that would not be recorded, or available in other ways.

> **I never recorded any of them. Because I feel like our job as artists is to bring audiences together in real time.**
> Paul, Performance Artist

These events could be made more social through fostering audience engagement through typed chat comments, social media engagement and acknowledging audiences' comments, or live roles and means for audience to direct or control the show. All of these engagements help reinforce the live and unique possibilities of a performance, and create a fundamentally different remote experience to passively watching recorded performance or film. As social events, these both rely upon, and contribute to, creating a community around an audience and performer.

> **After we've been doing our Zoom shows, I offer to stick around in the bar afterwards basically. I go away for a little gap, five-minute gap, basically to the fridge to get a drink. And then I come back as me instead of a puppet. And usually 20 to 30 people have been staying behind and we all have a drink and a chat.**
> Kyle, Puppeteer / Comedian

These social engagements, if repeated over several shows or performances, also offer the opportunity to build a sustainable audience for the work, and a community that persists beyond the show itself.

> **We've maintained an audience, but we've also grown it. We perform on Zoom, live stream through to YouTube, and there's the live chat that goes alongside that, and you see the same names popping up each week... There's a fascinatingly keen audience following it each week.**
> Emma, Theatre Maker

3.6. Opportunities and Advantages of Digital Shows

While many conversations concerned the challenges of bringing shows online, audiences and performers also recognised potential advantages and future uses for online and recorded content. Online shows and social media were perceived as a good way for audiences to gain a taster or trailer of a show, and to encourage the discovery of new work and artists who they might see live in the future. Some platforms would allow audiences to quickly switch from one show to another, whenever they want or according to how much they like the performance. Likewise, EFFS promoted their 'Pick 'n Mix' - which played random clips of shows uploaded by Fringe participants. Several Twitter users described how they had seen the poster of a show in the previous years, but never managed to see it. Now having viewed the show online, they want to go and see them live at a future Fringe festival. Clearly for some artists too, periods of lockdown have been an opportunity to reach new audiences like this.

> **We just thought, okay, let's put on one clip at that point in time, just to see how it worked, whether it got people interested, whether it got people talking, whether it built up, so people would see one clip, tell their friends, oh yeah, I saw this, how much people would actually be, I suppose, still looking for timed entertainment, how much of an event you could create around something, and how much that generated word of mouth for when the next event was.**
> Aiden, Writer

Artists and audiences also recognised that digital content could make elements of the Fringe more accessible and inclusive. Far-flung audiences who could not have travelled to Edinburgh before could now engage with these performances; or they could take in more than they might manage in a short trip to the city. Some artists perceived the possibility of remote or recorded performances providing a more environmentally sustainable alternative to touring. Likewise, remote auditions seemed a much more sustainable and affordable approach, in contrast to long train journeys for a quick rejection. Others more explicitly highlighted how efforts to produce digital content could make Fringe performances more accessible:

> **This is a great idea but it's disappointing that it's only happening because of the pandemic. Thereare so many disabled/chronically ill people who are housebound, unable to attend events and would love to have had this opportunity previously, so it's frustrating that this was only created because it benefits non-disabled people. (...). I hope that this experience (the pandemic) will change things for good and open up and make accessible the arts for everybody.**
> Guardian comment, 2020

Digital formats and remote participation also allowed for new, unusual and international collaborations that may not otherwise be possible. One improv performer described how it had been possible to get well-known guest comics to take part in live-streamed shows that would not have happened otherwise, and allowed them to share and gain from each other's audiences.

> **The whole reason why I'm pushing for us to [stream live shows] more than anything else, is, it's allowed us to perform with guests that we never thought we would ever get to perform with. Which is, once again, that thing I was talking about that there are no borders any more.**
> Jake, Improv

Likewise, several performers were excited to be able to connect audiences across geography and timezones. While collaboration often takes place during the Fringe to performers' mutual advantage, digital contexts encourage this year-round, while not uniquely co-located in Edinburgh.

Finally, making shows online was also seen by many as an opportunity to invest in their online presence longer-term, and develop content and ideas that can be re-used and repurposed in the future, especially as recording is by default embedded into the distribution of the show.

> **...it's allowed us to perform with guests that we never thought we would ever get to perform with.**
>
> Jake, Improv

3.7. Strategic Uses of Recorded Content

A key shift throughout lockdown facilitated by performing remotely and digitally has been to record and distribute previously recorded performances with audiences. As above, this creates a profound challenge to the essence of live performance. However, many participants described very strategic approaches to what, how and why they recorded their performances.

> **Yes, I started recording everything, because I've realised how important it was, I don't know why I wasn't doing it before, like, it's really opened my eyes in building a presence or a bigger presence online.**
> Anton, Stand-up Comic

A general consensus, especially for stage shows, was that simply recording a live show as it would be in a venue, was usually inferior to the live experience, or required a huge budget to be done well. Indeed, many recognised very quickly that access to high quality filming equipment was an important factor, and represented another potential source of inequality.

> **I spent a good half an hour on Pick N Mix this morning and it is really obvious who has the decent recording equipment and who doesn't, and it instantly marks the quality of a piece and it may not be reflected in the content, but you instantly judge a piece when the recording is not of a good quality.**
> Kelly, Director

Performers also acknowledged that such recordings, especially of longer shows risked putting themselves in competition with the vast libraries and budgets of tv shows, and films available through streaming services. In particular, several performers expressed concerns around the free distribution of NTLive in April 2020. If this content, representing the very best of recorded theatre in the UK was to be given away for free, then how could a much smaller, lower budget production convince audiences this was something worth paying for?

> **It's a constant struggle... how do we as Fringe artists and Fringe creators produce something that is as the same standard as a Netflix special with 1,000 times less the budget?**
>
> Anton, Standup Comic

Others noted trends for short form content in social media spaces, and needing to think about how their work should be adapted for this space. While for some social media offers a marketing opportunity; others felt unable to compete and engage with audiences so effectively in these formats.

> **Each day we released a new bit of content in regards to the project that we're going to be taking up. So, for example, on Monday, we spoke a little bit about the show and its story, and then Tuesday, we did a little bit about the inspiration behind it [...] It was a kind of 50/50 of celebration, but also cheeky marketing.**
> Arthur, Theatre Producer

> **What I have spent an entire career building up is an hour in my presence and I can't put that online in 60 seconds.**
> Anton, Stand-Up Comic

Artists we spoke to were looking to find ways of making work that explicitly suits or benefits from being shown in a digital medium, rather than seeing digital as a compromise. It was important to find an artistic rationale for distributing recorded performance, within a manageable budget.

> **We wanted to find a third way that would sit alongside the live show and the film so that you could watch all three and have a different experience. That was authentically artistic in its own right, with the same great production values that were brought to the live shows, and do it on a budget.**
> Yvette, Producer

Others described how technical limitations, such as using a mobile phone for recording, poor audio or lighting could be worked into a storyline and undertaken as an artistic choice.

> **The only way round it is to set it up so it doesn't matter that the technology is not as good as something else. To set it up…that…you're filming at home, you know, I don't know, but it's a horror interactive, so you set it up that someone is filming it on their phone.**
>
> Kelly, Director

Many performers also described looking back at archives and recordings they already had, or indeed regretted not investing or prioritising recording of their work before. While many had recorded elements of their work before – for example to share with others in the industry - these recordings were rarely intended or suitable for wider audience consumption.

> **…obviously, anytime you make a show you make a film of it, like you just, you know, video the thing so that if a presenter can't come and see it at Edinburgh or Dublin or wherever else you can at least send them something but… It's not… Like they're a good representation for somebody who really knows the artform, or they know what else they're missing and they can sort of make that leap. But for an ordinary audience member it's not great.**
>
> Yvette, Producer

However, while most performers were planning and investing in recording much more of their work, we heard many examples of a more strategic approach to create and develop a value of recorded performance, while maintaining the value of seeing the work live. Several described licensing content to a venue or festival with time-limited availability, or only showing recorded content in specific contexts, such as in areas they couldn't tour, or where audiences couldn't access a live show (such as care homes and hospitals). Others saw the value of short clips on social media as promotion, teasers and trailers.

> **I don't want to give too much of it away. So I take sketches and I take songs, and I put them up on YouTube. And a good 15 to 20 minutes of material has been going up on YouTube in three to five-minute, 10-minute chunks from each of the shows we've done.**
> Kyle, Puppeteer

The opportunity to produce exclusive 'extras' or 'backstage' recordings to be given to paying supporters online also speaks to a viewing of recorded performance as valuable 'digital content' (Elsden, 2021).

> **We can't pull out of the vault that professional grade ready for distribution content, but what we do have is trailers, what we do have is fly on the wall bits and bobs of behind the scenes that we might have captured. We do have a bit of archive recording that we would never want to put out professionally as a distribution but you can, sort of, intersperse as B Role.**
> Simone, Producer

Examples such as this show how theatre makers in particular aimed to be adaptable, creative and strategic with content they already had, or which could serve multiple purposes for them. Despite many acting strategically like this, some performers were actively refusing to record, in order to preserve value of their live work, or because they felt their work was so deeply diminished by not being experienced live.

3.8. Money and Ticketing

Creating and presenting work online presents fundamental and challenging questions for performers and audiences about the value of their work, and how it should be paid for. This is something we discussed extensively with performers, especially at a time when other revenues, from careers within or outside of the performing arts sector are also diminished.

Many performers gave examples of fundraising, for charitable causes, the NHS, or for artists and venues themselves. However, despite the successes of charitable shows, it is much less clear how online performance should be paid for and supported on a sustainable economic basis in the long term.

Figure 9: Fringe Society crowdfunding campaign 'Fringe Makers'.
[Credit: Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society, 2020.]

3.8.1. Approaches to Payment

At the time of the Fringe itself, regular Fringe audiences appeared keen to show their support, financially or otherwise. Fringe on Friday was a ticketed show, priced at £9 per stream, with ticket prices contributing to artist crowdfunding pages. This approach wraps up a charitable donation, with a ticket, raising awareness for the challenges for those working in the sector. In many Twitter posts, audiences remarked that despite the tech issues, they are taking part in the show to support the artists.

> **#Fringeonfriday was a technical disaster but happy to support artists in difficult times.**
>
> Twitter User

More broadly, we encountered many different approaches to accessing and pricing online performances, live or recorded. These included:

Free (Broadcast / Livestream):
Allowing as wide an audience as possible, potentially accessible through multiple platforms at once (e.g., Facebook, YouTube & Zoom). Primarily for fundraising, or promoting and growing an audience that may later be financially supportive. For example:

PBH's Free Festival Fringe
Edinburgh University Theatre Company
The Space UK
The Bristol Suspensions

Free (with registration):
Allows more control and visibility of an audience. Sometimes limited spaces. Opportunity for follow-up engagement. For example:

Just Festival
The Scottish Arts Club
Army @ the Virtual Fringe

Charitable Fundraiser:
Shows with explicit charitable aims. Either free, with strong donation drives, or ticketed with funds donated to charity or crowdfunding campaign. For example:

Shedinburgh
Thornhill Theatre Space
Gilded Balloon

Pay what you want / can:
Freely accessible content, with opportunities and encouragement of audiences to pay what they can or want; either before, during or after performance. Sometimes with 'suggested' ticket prices which audiences can change. For example:

Zoo Venues
Free Festival

Tips / Donations:
Supplementing fundraising and pay-what-you-want options, some performers have embraced tipping models such as Ko-Fi where supporters can give a small amount. These features are also embedded in some live-streaming platforms such as Twitch and YouTube.

Ticketed (Pay-per-view/device):
A number of live shows were ticketed with a traditional up-front price, usually for less than an in-person show. Some ticketed through existing box-office infrastructures, others relied on digital intermediaries such as Eventbrite. Ticket price usually charged per device or for a Zoom link, which a whole household might watch. For example:

Seabright Production
Disko Duk Duk
AJ Bell on Friday

On-demand passes:
Some venues, such as Stand on Demand, Traverse Theatre, and Fringe of Colour hosted collections of digital content charged a one-off or monthly fee for access to a range of recorded content and live shows. This approach made it possible to curate a range of content or voices, and supplement emerging artists, with more established performers.

Subscriptions and Memberships:
Traditional organisations and venues maintained membership and supporter schemes, however smaller companies and artists have explored the use of 'crowdpatronage' platforms such as Patreon where supporters pay a monthly subscription in exchange for additional access or content from performers.

Throughout interviews, artists described a range of challenges, dilemmas and uncertainty with how to engage audiences in supporting and paying for their work. Overwhelmingly participants described 'experimenting' to find out what would work for their content and their audiences. Many felt that audiences would have less of an experience than a traditional visit to a venue, and questioned themselves the value of an online show. However, in looking anew at how to engage audiences beyond the stage, several participants found new value in aspects of their practice that might otherwise have been overlooked. Others recognise that many of their audiences may also be in the performing arts sector, and hence struggling financially.

However, in addition to financial concerns, there was an awareness that practices and precedents adopted now could shape audience expectations and diminish the value of online performance in the longer term:

> **It's hard enough to sell tickets, I think there is a lot of paranoia that putting this work out straight away onto the internet, or training audiences to get used to being able to access it on the internet via whatever channel means it's going to get even harder to sell tickets. And, that's a real fear that I think we're very cautious of.**
> Simone, Producer

There is a difficult balance to be struck here: for performers to feel that they are providing something of genuine value to an audience; to value themselves and their colleagues appropriately and communicate this to audiences; all the while attracting, growing and building audiences who themselves are unfamiliar with consuming online performance, overwhelmed from sitting at a screen, and potentially financially constrained themselves.

3.8.2. Ticketed Approaches

Beyond this, at Fringe 2020, performers and venues were clearly relying on a patchwork of ticketing and financial infrastructure. Whereas the Fringe Box Office would normally be a trusted, central and familiar checkout experience for audiences, each show might use a different combination of platforms to advertise, register, show and collect payment. While EFFS did have a centralised listing of shows with online performances that were originally registered for Fringe 2020, these would lead to independent sites or listings and were not curated or filtered, which some participants described as challenging to navigate. Some performers relied on their original venue (such as The Space, or Gilded Balloon) to list and ticket their shows, while others went it alone and relied on their own marketing, ticketing and hosting to reach audiences.

Several performers remarked that even if paid tickets resulted in a smaller audience, those who had already paid for a show, were much more likely to actually log on to watch for the duration of the show. This was a much more committed audience. Pragmatically, performers described challenges in managing a 'link' that allowed audiences to access a show, and it was difficult for them to present audience members sharing the link with others who had not paid.

Others remarked that unlike a Fringe run, where one could attract a new audience every night, online audiences may be many of the same individuals, and may therefore mean fewer shows, or making those shows more limited and unique.

> **That means that we give the audience a breather. Because it's quite possible we've got the same 60 people buying tickets every time and there is a law of diminishing returns there. But I don't know, hopefully we'll build up more people. But once a month is all I think we can hope for from them at the moment paying, you know, nine quid a pop.**
> Kyle, Puppeteer

However, while ticket prices were lower, and shows less frequent, there are of course reduced costs to performing at home, and the artist or company may potentially keep the majority of their sales, rather than splitting with a venue.

3.8.3. Donations, Tips, and Subscriptions

For unticketed shows, relying on donations, tips or 'pay what you want', it was problematic that payments were often quite separate from where audiences would actually view the show. In recent years, it has been customary for 'free' Fringe shows to conclude with a 'bucket speech' where performers thank audiences, and invite, or indeed compel audiences to make a contribution after the show. Performers and their team would normally stand directly at a narrow exit to a theatre and present audience members with a clear choice about if and how much they would contribute.

> **When I've stood in the door of a venue and I've given you an hour of my time, it's very hard for you to look me in the eye and give me nothing, because I'm really good at selling my work. When I'm online, it's so easy to shut your laptop screen and you never hear from me again.**
> Anton, Stand-up Comic

In online spaces, particularly through Zoom, options to pay are not so easily embedded in the fabric of the venue and the performance, making it harder for performers to construct a successful ask at the end of a show. Clearly, there are new practices, techniques and platforms that performers need to learn to make a financial ask of audiences. While many had persistent crowdfunding or patronage pages they could direct audiences to, a 'pay what you want' ticket was therefore more often asked for before the show, though this undermined the premise that audiences could watch a show and decide afterwards how much it was worth.

While artists were keen for their work to be accessible, many were concerned about the sustainability of payment models based solely on donations or tipping that risked facing 'diminishing returns' (Aiden, Writer) – especially if audiences have already pledged support for several other shows and causes.

Subscription and membership models take crowdfunding and donations a step further. While still explicitly constructed as a way to support artists, there are much clearer expectations that 'patrons' will gain some tangible benefits in exchange for their support. Some performers felt unable to meet a monthly demand like this.

I worry with Patreon that there is such an expectation that you are going to be constantly putting stuff out. I tend to write one show a year, I don't want to have to write half a show a month for my Patreon subscribers.
Anton, Stand-up Comic

Some theatre companies were experimenting explicitly with how a subscription model could provide a revenue for new kinds of digital content that might sit alongside or supplement the development of a show.

Why Patreon? We liked the idea of being this monthly rolling thing, and also, we found that this whole promise of it being content, you know, we'll put content up if you join as a member, and actually that meant there was a motivation for us to continue making that content, as well. And, it also felt more like an artist's community rather than, like, a crowd funder or anything like that, if that makes sense.
Simone, Producer

There's clearly a sense that while donations might be a one-off, with no remaining obligations on performers or audiences, subscriptions propose a longer-term engagement, that comes with expectation, but also the opportunity to build a community. Producing content for Patreon was viable for this theatre company, as they already had a sizeable following, and several paid staff. However, it's notable that despite the initial success, this revenue stream alone is a long way from "making a dent" in the budget required to support a small business, in contrast to an individual creator.

Clearly, businesses and individual performers will therefore have to rely on increasingly diverse income streams; both in terms of what new content and services they offer to supporters, as well as how audiences are able to pay and engage. Many of our participants had turned to teaching and running workshops as a new source of income for example; others were finding ways to create value from content that shared their creative process. While ensuring that it is easy for audiences to navigate, participants described an increasingly mixed economy, with more than one way to show support, acknowledging the diverse financial positions of their audiences. show support, acknowledging the diverse financial positions of their audiences.

04

REFLECTIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research was an exploratory study, of a unique dislocation in the performing arts sector in Edinburgh. Our ambition is that this offers an overview and starting point for much further consideration of many of the opportunities and future challenges facing the sector as we look to adaptation and recovery post-pandemic. While we have specifically studied experiences at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe, unique for its size, scope and history, we wish to offer practical recommendations that may serve the sector as a whole, as well as the festivals, venues and performers in Edinburgh in online contexts.

4.1. Practical Recommendations: For Performers

4.1.1. Developing Digital Stagecraft

We were fortunate to speak to a number of performers who had successfully brought their acts onto a digital stage, and honed their stagecraft in this new space. There are some specific common elements to their successes that we can highlight as recommendations:

- **Developing formats that bring audiences and artists closer together.**

Seek online formats that can bring audiences and artists closer together in new ways, in particular to share the work and process behind a performance.

- **Seeking original and international collaborations.**

Digital spaces can support collaborations and engagements with other artists and audiences that might not otherwise be possible at a physical festival.

- **Taking care in managing audience coming and goings.**

In physical venues, the entrance and exit of audiences and performers are carefully managed by a venue, with clear cultural practices and expectations from past experience. Much of this is lost in digital spaces, from the way audiences 'enter' a stream, to managing the way audiences can disconnect and rejoin a stream, to the conclusion of a show, which can be abrupt or awkward.

- ☒ **Recognising and developing new creative and technical skills for online performance**

Several performers described the additional efforts they went to rehearse, experiment, and develop new technical and creative skills for performing online, emphasising that online work required as much rehearsal as they would do for an in-person performance. In particular this extends to the technical and stage managing roles, exemplified by a 'Zoom Technician'.

4.1.2. Value of Live and Social Events

Overwhelmingly, participants sought ways to make a performance an 'event' that was distinctive from other online content. Some specific approaches included:

- ☒ **Creating a sense of exclusivity**

Despite potentially unlimited online audiences, several performers gave shows a sense of exclusivity by limiting the number of tickets sold for each night of a show, or embracing other exclusive digital spaces and communities to connect with audiences.

- ☒ **Supporting audiences in performing traditional show rituals**

The sense of event was encouraged by many performers ahead of their show, suggesting audiences at home recreate a night at the theatre, dress up and enjoy a drink during the show. Audiences clearly took this on themselves, sharing their experiences online.

- ☒ **Engaging audiences with a sense of being 'there'**

In addition with smaller audiences, facilitating with some level of audience with and between audiences, even through text chat, can contribute to a feeling of being 'there' - not just a remote or passive observer.

4.1.3. Strategic Uses of Recorded Content

The importance and value of recorded content had become evident to several of our participants, however there remained considerable tensions and challenges in finding ways to record performance that did not diminish the quality of the work, with a limited budget. We highlight some of the more successful approaches participants described to us.

☒ **Embracing new kinds of recorded performance**

Steering a path between live recording, or film-making, seek opportunities to develop unique content that can complement a live performance, or highlight specific aspects, such as a soundtrack, or a specific character.

☒ **Curating and packaging shorter recordings to promote and build interest in live show**

Consider how shorter clips, recordings and behind the scenes can be curated and packaged to promote and build interest in a future live show. For example, teasing a narrative or developing a character by releasing clips over several days.

☒ **Creating events around recorded work**

Find ways to construct one-off live events around the release of recorded work, for example, through 'watch parties' or opportunities to engage with artists and performers.

4.1.4. Approaches to Ticketing and Monetisation

Our participants were experimenting with a range of approaches to ticketing and monetising their work. There's much more still to learn here, but some steps towards a more sustainable model for online performances include:

- ☒ **Seeking to create pathways towards more paid and ticketed events**

Clearly there are benefits to performing in shows that are free to access and available to a broad audience. However the most successful acts we spoke to had been able to preserve the value of a 'live' performance, and develop a paid, ticketed offering to see the best of their work. An additional benefit noted was that paid audiences were much more likely to show up and engage with the performance.

- ☒ **Developing donation and 'pay what you want' models with longer-term value**

Donation based and 'pay what you want' models, common at a physical festival, appeared to be challenging to do well online, unless specifically fundraising for charity. Beyond a one-off ask which can be easy to overlook, consider how to construct longer term relationships with audiences where there is additional value in small payments or donations.

- ☒ **Exploring and combining multiple fundraising approaches**

Relatedly, most performers we spoke to attempted and combined several approaches to fundraising and building sustainable revenue streams. Some platforms, such as Patreon, are more suited to providing a regular monthly output, others, such as Ko-fi are based more in gratitude and acknowledgement. A specific project or goal may be more suitable for a one-off crowdfunding campaign. However, these should be viewed as part of a wider strategy to develop a revenue from online audiences.

4.1.5. Recognising the Benefits of Digital Performances

Undoubtedly this has been an extremely challenging time for those working in performing arts, and especially for those working in a genre that relies more heavily on audience interaction. However, there are also a number of benefits to online performance, both now, and for the future that we wish to highlight:

☒ **Supporting discovery of new work / artists**

Digital spaces can offer audiences new ways to discover new work and artists, or to try out and experience new genres of performance they might not otherwise encounter.

☒ **Considering opportunities for accessibility & inclusion**

Online Fringe performances allowed some audience members to attend the Edinburgh Fringe for the first time in their life. While there is much more to be done to make digital performances themselves more accessible, there are clearly opportunities for shows and smaller productions to reach audiences unable to physically attend shows in Edinburgh.

☒ **More sustainable touring, auditions and rehearsals**

Relatedly, several participants acknowledged how working online and recording more of their work could allow for more sustainable approaches to touring work internationally. Likewise, many rehearsals and auditions that may have involved expensive and time-consuming travel could take place remotely, at least in the early stages of a project.

4.2. Practical Recommendations: For Festivals and Venues

The Edinburgh Festival Fringe is a truly unique festival, however we offer a number of recommendations that we hope can serve arts festivals more broadly in navigating and supporting artists in online contexts.

4.2.1. Clarifying and Preparing for New Roles and Responsibilities

Shifting to digital platforms will often implicitly shift the division of traditional roles and labour between performers, venues, festivals and audiences.
For example, performers and their teams themselves may be taking on more of a hosting role as audiences enter a show; or they may become more responsible for their tech set-up. Performers may have quite different levels of experience, and expectations of how festival or venue staff can support them in digital spaces. Furthermore, it may be less clear who is really responsible, and who can fix things when something goes wrong.

☒ **Auditing any changes to roles and responsibilities**

When adopting new digital platforms or hosting performances online we recommend that venues and festivals audit key roles and responsibilities in these new spaces. From ticketing and audience access, through to the staging and audience engagement, responsibilities should be clarified, and additional labour or services acknowledged. Over time, new technical and creative roles may need to be accounted for to address these changes.

☒ **Recognising digital divides**

Festivals and venues should look to be proactive in addressing digital divides that exist between performers and audiences with access to high-end technology, and those without. While aiming for the highest quality content and audience experiences, festivals should account for how dependence on particular digital technologies (e.g. VR headsets) and high-speed connectivity may exclude some performers or audiences.

Technical support and funding offered to artists could be targeted to address these divides and ensure broad opportunities for participation.

- **Moderating and managing audiences**

In person, venues are often responsible for managing any inconsiderate or abusive audience members, as well as managing age restrictions and audience's expectations around the offensiveness or triggering nature of a show. These issues are often magnified online, where audiences can be more anonymous, or less aware of their expected behaviour. Venues should take care to manage these responsibilities in online spaces.

4.2.2. Support Navigating Online Content

Just as navigating and choosing which shows to see is a challenge for any large festival, similar challenges exist for audiences to navigate and discover content online. We suggest festival and venues:

- **Be clear about the distinctions between performances that are live, recorded, online and in-person**

As it becomes possible to experience multiple possible versions of a show, it should be clear to audiences what kind of performances are available to them – when, where and how. In addition, festivals and venues could explore how various versions and instantiations of a show may be related and joined together for audiences as a broader service.

- **Consider how show listings can offer a consistent audience journey**

Relatedly, centralised show listings should offer audiences a clear path, from browsing, to ticketing, to accessing and viewing the show. Equally, these listings should integrate well with social media and other platforms where the work will be promoted and shared with audiences.

- **Explore ways to make navigation of this content fun and exploratory**

Navigating a festival in person is often a fun, exciting, serendipitous and exploratory experience. Festivals and venues should look to emulate these experiences for audiences seeking online shows, in particular to help these events stand out from an overwhelming milieu of online content and media.

- **Support the discovery of new and emerging work**

Participants described to us how online work was a way to attract new audiences who might not necessarily commit to viewing a show in person. Building on this, festivals should consider in particular how online spaces might support audiences in discovery and trying out new and emerging work. For example, festivals could consider prizes or awards that showcase the best and most pioneering digital work.

4.2.3. Supporting Diverse Forms of Performance and Content

It was abundantly clear from our interviews that performers have responded creatively to the limitations of working online, and experiment to find the best form and medium for their work. We recommend that festivals and venues consider how to embrace and support this diversity. In practice this means:

- **Aim to be flexible with artists on performing through different digital platforms, while working to simplify the offering for audiences**

- **Prepare to support a range of digital content. Not only live video streaming, but recorded work, audio-only work, XR and other hybrid formats**

- **Be prepared to support varying levels of audience engagement, from anonymous viewing, through to active participation**

4.2.4. Supporting and Valuing Recorded Work

As artists seek to record more of their work, and use it strategically, we encourage venues and festivals to consider how to support performers in doing so. This may include:

☒ **Supporting recording of shows in physical venues**

As far as budgets allow, working creatively and equitably with artists on recording more work in venues, with clear aims for its future use - to the benefit of artists and venues themselves. This may also extend to supporting the future distribution of recorded work.

☒ **Developing guides, exemplars and best practice in more strategic uses of recording**

Festivals and venues could support artists to learn what and how they can record their work for longer-term uses. While many have developed new skills and practices during this time, others will remain under-served and unprepared in how to creatively record and share aspects of their work.

☒ **Creating spaces for sharing recorded content with industry producers and promoters**

Performers and producers we spoke to saw recordings of their work as an opportunity to engage larger industry promoters and producers who could not attend the show in person. Festivals and venues could consider how to facilitate and showcase industry networking and visibility via recorded content.

4.2.5. Programming, Ticketing and Value

Clearly, festivals and venues have had to considerably rethink how they program festival and events. Our conversations with performers raised questions around how often shows are performed, at what times, and the extent to which a show remains 'accessible' after a performance.

☒ **Preserving the value of live events**

Our participants overwhelmingly wanted to preserve and recapture the value of a 'live event'. Specifically, limited, exclusive and unique engagements in contrast to yet more on-demand content. It may be valuable to limit audience numbers to online events in some cases to build a sense of exclusivity and intimacy, with a commitment from audiences to attend. Where there is accompanying on-demand, or recorded content, consider carefully how these work in service of the live show, rather than competing with or undermining it.

☒ **Offering consistent ticketing experiences**

Participants we spoke to were relying upon a patchwork of platforms and intermediaries to advertise, ticket and perform shows, which many felt could be confusing or off-putting for audiences. While seeking flexibility in the kinds of ticketing and payment options they could present to audiences, festivals and venues are best placed to mediate a reliable and consistent pathway for audiences to find, pay for and access a show.

☒ **Helping artists capitalise from the audiences they attract**

In addition to ticketing, festivals and venues should consider how they can support artists more broadly in building and retaining online audiences who will follow and ultimately pay for their work. In physical venues, performers may often be quite disconnected from data about their audiences. However online, performers have increasingly turned to platforms such as Patreon, Discord or Twitch to directly engage with their fans and gain financial support. How can audiences of live shows be connected into these growing online communities?

4.2.6. Developing Accessible and Sustainable Online Festivals

Participants were enthusiastic about how performing online could improve the accessibility and sustainability of festivals. Specifically, festivals and venues could consider:

☒ **Supporting first-time festival or theatre goers**

Online platforms, accessible anywhere in the world, offer audiences a chance to engage with performance in ways they might never have been able to before. Consider how these experiences can be a gateway to discovering new passions and artists, and longer-term support of the performing arts by new audiences.

☒ **Serving isolated and remote audiences**

While a touring show can often bring other benefits to the communities they visit, there are clearly opportunities for performers to engage with audiences who are otherwise often left behind as they are too remote or isolated.

☒ **Supporting more sustainable international touring**

By developing and carefully managing new forms of recorded work, several participants considered that working online they may be able to ‘tour’ and show their work internationally, in partnership with overseas venues, while minimising their travel, and in particular the considerable costs and footprint of taking a whole physical show abroad.

4.2.7. Supporting Artist Peer Networking

Several participants were enthusiastic about the Virtual Fringe Central Hub, remarking that it allowed them to engage more than they might have able to during a regular Fringe. We encourage venues and festivals to extend such approaches, and curate online spaces where artists and performers can connect with their peers, especially for those who cannot physically attend a festival every year. Important functions include:

- **Being able to see each others work, and being part of a scene**
- **Creating opportunities for fortuitous and unusual collaborations**
- **Finding like-minded individuals and potential mentors**
- **Sharing skills and best practices**
- **Peer support with the pragmatic and mental challenges of freelancing**
- **Access to promoters and producers who may support their work**

4.3. Considerations for Future Research and Innovation

Finally, we conclude with areas we see for future research and innovation as festivals and performing arts more broadly recover from the pandemic.

- **Catering for hybrid audiences who are split between a live venue and online**

As venues look to open again, it remains unclear what capacities will be possible, and seems likely that many potential audiences will remain remote. In contrast to performing only online, or only in person, there is clearly more research and practice to be developed in delivering compelling hybrid experiences, where audiences are split between in person and remote viewing. How could both audiences supplement each other's experiences, and how can performers meaningfully engage with both during the same show?

- **Understanding remote experiences of 'liveness'**

Relatedly, while not a new research topic, clearly experiences in the past 12 months raise questions about how remote audiences can experience, recognise and value the unique qualities of 'liveness' through digital intermediaries. This is about more than technical fidelity and connection speeds, but also the staging and engagement facilitated by performers.

- **Exploring geo-location, site-specific work, and other ways to embed and root online content to place, like the City of Edinburgh.**

As it stands, much online performance remains placeless - produced and consumed between anonymous living rooms. By contrast, the City of Edinburgh itself lends a unique character to the shows taking place during the festivals. How could online performance be more strongly rooted to specific places? How can a purely online performance really be a part of the Edinburgh Fringe, whose primary definition and requirement for artists, is based on location? Research and creative practice could explore how location-based technologies, and site-specific performances could be fused to create unique online performances, rooted in place.

- **New ticketing and payment services embedded into content delivery and video conferencing**

This period has forced artists, venues and festivals to experiment with a whole range of ticketing and payment models for their work, often defaulting to repurposing existing ticketing platforms, or relying on a patchwork of digital intermediaries to solicit donations and payments. Much further research and evaluation is required to understand the best ways to encourage diverse audiences to pay for an increasingly diverse range of experiences and content. This should look to extend existing box office practices, and recognise changing audience expectations around online payments, and the 'creator economy'. In particular, we anticipate the need to develop payment and ticketing services that are embedded within the sites and video-conferencing tools through which audiences are engaging with a performance.

- **Understanding the implications of recorded and online performance as 'content'**

Our findings and recommendations have recognised performers finding strategic ways to generate value from recorded performance. Taking a broader view however, this is part of a shift where live performance is produced, rendered and consumed as digital 'content', becoming subject to the logics and economics of contemporary digital platforms. Performance thus becomes and generates data, competes for attention, is measured in terms of engagement, and surveilled (Zuboff, 2015). There may be benefits for some artists who find ways to engage new audiences, or monetise their content as part of a 'creator economy'. However, from looking at the radical changes to the musical industry as recorded music has become digital content (see Eriksson et al., 2019), this is an area that will require sustained critical attention.

- **Critical attention to the online roles of current major venues (e.g. Assembly, Underbelly), as well as emerging online intermediaries (e.g. Eventbrite, Dice.fm, Zoom, Twitch etc.)**

As the sector adjusts and recalibrates to a post-pandemic world, likely with a mix of in-person and remote experiences of performances, researchers should look critically to the roles that major venues and production companies (such as Underbelly, or Assembly) look to play online – and identify the growth, practices and business models of powerful new digital intermediaries. Increasingly digital practices and an increased market for online performances may radically change the costs, revenues, contracts, services and business models of companies and artists across the cultural sector. Acknowledging longstanding precarity within the cultural and creative industries (Brook, O'Brien & Taylor, 2020), researchers should be attentive and critical to the fairness and sustainability of these changes.

Supporting more sustainable, equitable and accessible performing arts

Research and practice should continue to study the extent to which online performance allows the performing arts to become more accessible. Indeed, while online performances may reach many new and non-traditional audiences, many online shows have a poor record in terms of accessibility for visually or aurally impaired audiences, or lack the technology and skills to do this well. Careful research is required to help determine best practices, requirements and opportunities to reach diverse audiences through digital performances.

FINAL THOUGHTS

This research project set out to document the remarkable circumstances of a virtual Edinburgh Fringe in 2020. As well as adding to documentation of what did actually happen, we have also endeavoured to extrapolate from these unique and extreme circumstances to discuss the longer term implications of more digitally mediated performance.

Our recommendations offer a starting point for performers, and artists and festivals, but it's important to acknowledge how remarkably and successfully many individuals and organisations have responded and innovated already. There is a growing wealth of expertise, resources and reflections on how to perform online and even as venues re-open to audiences we anticipate a continued place for online performance, as performers look to maintain and grow further the digital audiences they have engaged in this strange time.

Importantly too, it will require individual performers, venues, festivals and digital intermediaries to work together to ensure that working online remains a fair, accessible and rewarding endeavour, that creates new opportunities for performing arts, rather than undercutting traditional live performance. To this end, we look forward to further critical research and collaboration to illuminate the best of digital technologies in the performing arts.

> **"There is a growing wealth of expertise, resources and reflections on how to perform online and even as venues re-open to audiences we anticipate a continued place for online performance, as performers look to maintain and grow further the digital audiences they have engaged in this strange time."**

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