

# Misrepresentations of online engagement: re-examining online audiences in the UK museum sector

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Over the course of the pandemic, a narrative emerged that digital content was able to reach beyond museums' traditional audiences and engage communities underrepresented in on-site visitors (Samaroudi et al. 2020). This emphasis on museums' appeal to a broad audience, often framed as an indicator of 'impact', is a response to the long-standing pressure to justify public expenditure in the arts—an issue which has only become more acute since the outbreak of COVID-19. In 2020, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) argued for emergency funds based on the role museums play in their communities (ICOM, 2020). It follows that the larger the community they serve, the more justifiable the funding. As a result, widening audience engagement—by increasing both the number of visitors and the demographic diversity present—has become enmeshed with discussions of value.

It is in this economic context, the idea that digital adoption would revolutionise audience engagement became widespread in the museum sector (Noehrer et al. 2021). While the largest museums in Europe reported a significant increase in their online visitors during the pandemic, is this true for the sector as a whole? Common tools to measure impact—predominantly case studies and surveys—have likely reinforced the idea that online audiences have grown and diversified by inadvertently perpetuating sampling biases. The expense of conducting large-scale and representative audience research has contributed to the dominance of large institutions in studies, while self-selection bias amongst participants skews the demographic data (Walsh et al. 2020).

This paper will therefore present findings from our recent research to investigate whether online resources have truly reached new audiences and communities. The largest visitor survey in the UK to date, conducted by the Audience Agency, suggests there is little difference in the demographic makeup of online and on-site visitors (Walmsley et al. 2022). However, despite this evidence, the idea that online technologies have revolutionised audience engagement remains widespread. By utilising tools from the digi-

tal humanities and computer science, our paper contextualises the Audience Agency's research with new data, analysing the digital offering and audiences of a representative sample of 315 heritage organisations in the UK (Charlesworth et al. 2023).

We combined datasets from the Arts Council Accreditation Scheme and Mapping Museums Project with new data scraped from museum websites and social media application programming interfaces (APIs). Using an innovative methodology, the URLs of museum websites were validated using their TripAdvisor entries; small museum websites can often not be reliably found without a direct link. This approach enabled us to calculate the uptake of five social media platforms—Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and TikTok—as well as identify the 1 in 10 museums with no online presence of their own. Most importantly, by looking beyond national museums, we have been able to establish that for the vast majority of museums an increase in digital output did not correspond with a larger audience.

As financial pressures worsen and funding for museums is cut, audience engagement—or lack thereof—will come under greater scrutiny. There is therefore a pressing need to improve our understanding of online audiences and enable museums to better evaluate and develop their online offering. Through using methods and tools from the digital humanities, this paper will question how revolutionary the digital turn has been across the sector and provide a basis for re-evaluating the dominant narratives of digital engagement over the pandemic.

## Bibliography

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