

Audience Research

A briefing paper for cultural sector practitioners

JISC Content

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

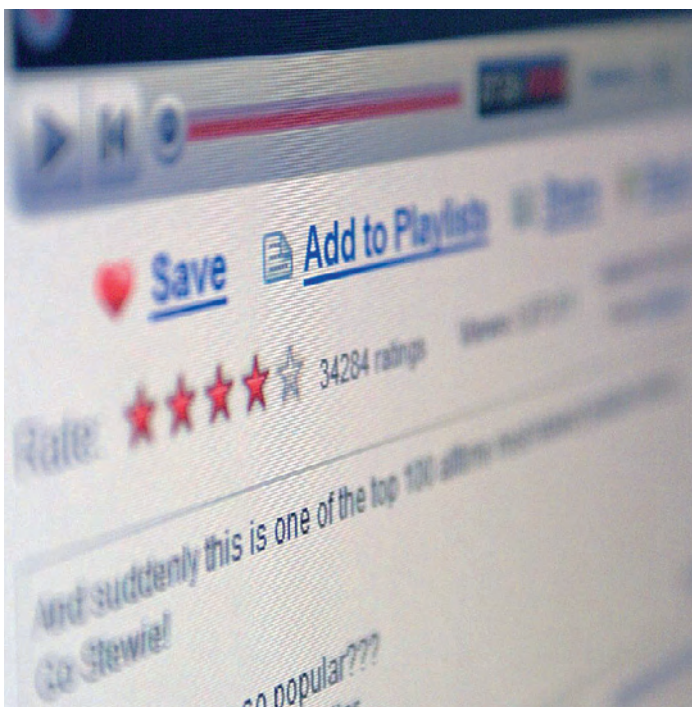
This is a briefing paper for practitioners in the cultural sector delivering online digital services, who wish to research their audiences but may have limited resources to do so.

Why is researching digital audiences important?

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

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

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



The digital revolution

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

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

Where can I get support from?

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

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

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

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

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

Additionally, the Market Research Society (MRS) provides some best practice guidance to promote the professionalism of research on the internet. There is also a wealth of support

available on the creation and management of digital materials from sites such as **JISC Digital Media** and **UKOLN Cultural Heritage**.

Audience research in the cultural sector

Service development

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

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

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

Financial viability

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

Conducting the research

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



Finding out more about audience research

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

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

Further reading

The Guide to Audience Research

<http://sca.jiscinvolve.org/2009/02/05/download-audience-analysis-toolkit>

Digital Britain

www.culture.gov.uk/what_we_do/broadcasting/5631.aspx

Collections Link (helpline 0845 838 4000)

www.collectionslink.org.uk

MLA Research Briefings

<http://research.mla.gov.uk/briefings/index.php>

Arts Council publications

http://artscouncil.org.uk/publications/information_for_subject.php?sid=4

Taking Part in the Arts

www.takingpartinthearts.com

Audience Alliance

www.audiencealliance.org.uk

MRS Internet Research Guidelines

www.mrs.org.uk/standards/internet.htm

JISC Digital Media

www.jiscdigitalmedia.ac.uk/index-jdm.html

UKOLN Cultural Heritage

www.ukoln.ac.uk/cultural-heritage

The Strategic Content Alliance

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

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

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