COVID-19, digital exclusion + cultural institutions

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My research on digital inclusion:

- **The Australian Digital Inclusion Index (2018, 2020)**
- **Older adults and digital inclusion (McCosker et al., 2018)**
- **Cyber safety and digital inclusion in remote Indigenous communities (Rennie et al., 2016; 2018a; 2018b).**

My research on digital inclusion in creative and cultural industries:

- **Digital exclusion + remote Indigenous art centres (Holcombe-James, 2019)**
- **Digital exclusion + community museums (Holcombe-James, 2019)**
- **How digital exclusion might impact regional and remote cultural orgs in the wake of COVID-19 (Holcombe-James, 2020)**
- **How Australian cultural orgs have experienced digital exclusion in COVID-19 (Holcombe-James, forthcoming)**

Digital inclusion is critical

Digital inclusion:
The ability to **affordably access and use** digital technologies in a way that allows for **effective participation** in contemporary social, civic, and **cultural** life.

A **digitally included** person can:

- Access **digital connectivity + devices**
- Afford **devices, connectivity + data**
- Access and use the **abilities** to use these devices and connections in ways that allow them **to participate as they want and need**
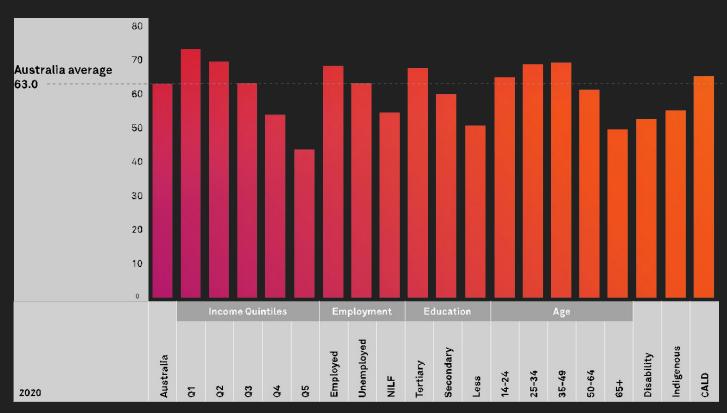
2.5 million Australians remain offline

Digital exclusion follows clear **economic,** **geographic** **and social** **contours**
(Australian Digital Inclusion Index, Thomas et al., 2020)

Those who engage with cultural institutions digitally are often also those **most likely to visit non-digitally in the first place** (Kelly, 2010; Russo, 2011).

Although digital participation has "greatly increased the volume, accessibility and diversity of cultural content", it has simultaneously "created new opportunities for cultural distinction, segmentation and, hence, inequality" (Mihelj et al., 2019, p. 1466).

Digital exclusion has **consequences** for who can **access and participate** digital cultural content

But what about the institutions?

"These divides [...] run between institutions that have **different levels of digital capacity and capabilities**, and even within institutions where staff have **differing levels of digital literacy and skills**. Crucially, digital divides are about our processes as much as systems and **about people as much as hardware**"

(Verwayen, 2020, p. np)

Methods

- semi-structured interviews + surveys

73 Australian cultural institutions

- 14 ARIs

- 21 council-run

- 13 public

- 11 state/national

- 14 university

The cultural sector experiences digital exclusion, but not all institutions are excluded in the same way. State and national institutions had far greater capacity than council-run, public, and university galleries, and ARIs.

I am four days a week and sometimes we have assistance [for digital activities] from a visitor services team member, but that has been the challenge [during COVID-19]. All our communications with our audience right now go through me, and **there's only so much I can do, and there are only so many skills I have**.
— Public Gallery F, non-capital city

Access to **connectivity alone is not enough**. Although most participating institutions reported adequate internet access, accessing appropriate devices and platforms proved difficult.

We don't have good enough video cameras to be producing good enough content. When you have institutions like [state institution], who have a great little video production team, interview[ing] someone with good lighting [...] That becomes a benchmark or a standard or something and you go, "[ours] looks really bad"
— Council-run D, capital city

[T]here are fundamental problems behind the website - it uses WIX, we're not hosting any of the video artworks because we can't work flexibly enough to get [them] up in the back end

— Council-run E, non-capital city

Creating and sharing digital cultural content requires specialised abilities that are not yet evenly distributed within, nor accessible to, all institutions.

Our registration, curatorial and conservator teams [...] **None of them**, they won't like hearing this, **were particularly digitally literate at all**. None of them.
— State or National F, capital city

From COVID, all of that changed and those resources weren't available anymore because everybody at Council suddenly needed them, and we had to, and we are still having to, do a lot of the online programming and facilitating all of that, creating all of that content and actually posting it or updating websites and so on; we're having to do it ourselves at the moment. It's been a steep learning curve for us

— Council-run D, capital city

There's a non-understanding at this point of how difficult it is to make a professional online product. It's not as simple as flipping the phone around. [...] **[I]t's a whole new skillset and it must be treated as such**
— Council-run F, non-capital city

Digital activities are now part of everyday operations and require **funding** as such.

One of the things that is of great concern to us now [...] is the expectation from funding bodies that we will continue to be able to deliver both in physical and digital form. Although we are obviously getting better and more capable of delivering [digitally], our resources were stretched before we even added that digital layer
— Public Gallery C, capital city

"We did not have the **staffing capacity**, the digital **knowledge**, digital **equipment** or the digital **budget** to adapt … that other organisations did"

(public art gallery, regional NSW, 2020)

Digital inclusion for cultural and creative orgs: the ability to affordably access and use digital technologies in a way that allows for the enabling of effective participation in contemporary social, civic, and cultural life.

A **digitally included** public gallery:

- Afford and access digital devices
- Afford and access connectivity and data
- Afford and access the skills to use these devices and connections in ways that allow the gallery and their audiences to participate as they want and need

Recommendations

1. **Digitally upskilling** the cultural sector must be made a policy priority
2. This will require **infrastructural investment**
3. **Expenditure data** on digital activities and resourcing must be collected and made publicly accessible
4. Further **research into how digital exclusion operates within and around cultural institutions** is urgently needed

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