

Reconnect: incubating cultural offers for the digital audiences

PETYA KOLEVA, MILENA BERBENKOVA¹

Abstract: Digitalisation has been a priority for the cultural and creative sectors in the EU for years. This priority became a vital one for the survival of arts, culture and creative organisations provoked by the crisis of the Covid-19 outbreak. Big institutions as well as small and micro-organisations had to accelerate their adjustment to a digital presence in view of their regular public and new digital audiences. As offers in the digital domain proliferated, competition for the attention of target audiences increased too. This was particularly influenced by newly developed dispositions, digital fatigue and higher expectations of the quality and types of online cultural participation available. The focus of the present article are the results of an incubation project that offered targeted support to three creative organisations in Bulgaria in the period of August 2020 – August 2021.

The article demonstrates the value of expert support, researching the audiences and fact-based innovation activities of CCI organisations. Incubation efforts empower organisations to improve their connection to committed and new target audiences. This claim is based on the successful impact assessment of the three pilot offers that benefited directly from the research results of the project. Intercultura Consult continues this effort in a new project empowering cultural organisations to incubate experimental offers (including the digital dimension).

Keywords: CCIs (Cultural Creative Industries), innovation, incubating cultural services, digitalisation, cultural hubs, public demand, digital access, new trends, networking CCI stakeholder, reconnect

Introduction

Amidst the challenges of the 2020 Covid-19 outbreak and the ensuing crisis, arts and culture had to accelerate their work on adjusting their digital presence to reconnect with a public becoming more and more demanding. While digitalisation in the cultural field has been a priority for the EU over the last decade, it was the 2020 pandemic that

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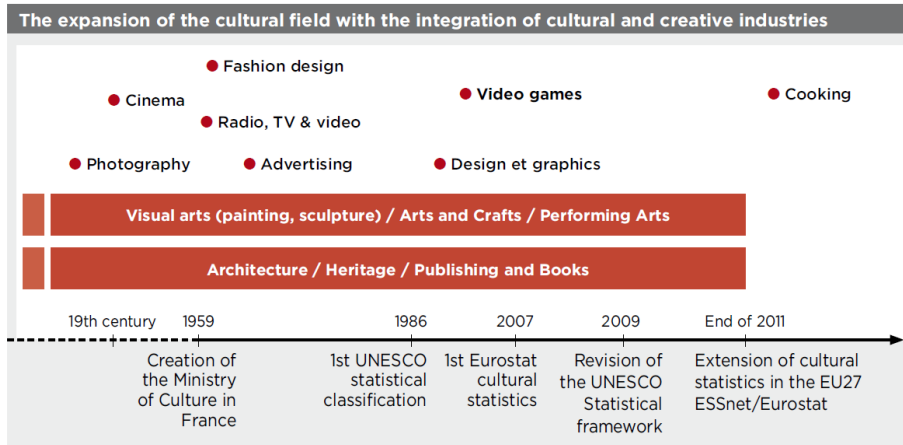


Fig. 1: The expansion of the cultural field with the integration of cultural and creative industries by Kurt Salmon (Copyright ©2011, Kurt Salmon.)

transformed the need for digitalisation into a top priority of the cultural and creative industries (CCIs).² Who are the CCI today and how can they stand out and connect effectively to relevant digital audiences?

It has been a very rapid process that has led to the expansion of the field of social and economic activities that is today considered to encompass the CCI sectors. While it is only in 2007 that the first Eurostat cultural statistics was carried out, over the last decades there are no less than eleven sub-sectors being recognized as part of the cultural economy. These include the core cultural sectors such as visual and performing arts: music, dance, theatre and more; the creative sectors such as design and architecture; the cultural industries, meaning all those companies producing music, books, films and online versions of same content; the media-based cultural content of radio, the press and numerous online media; and finally, all the associated creative industries such as advertising, multimedia and video games. However, the list is not final, it expands as new areas surface, for example, those where cultural heritage and creativity collide such as fashion, gastronomy and so on. (Fig. 1).³

The cultural and creative sectors have all been transforming their modes of creation, distribution, marketing and offers with the

2. Official Journal of the European Union, (2017/C 425/03).

3. Kurt Salmon, 2011.

advance of the digital technologies but never before have they had to adapt to the needs of their digital audiences as quickly.⁴ A ‘Convention in the Digital Environment’ was endorsed in 2017 by the Parties to UNESCO’s ‘Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions’. While this convention placed a focus on the opportunities that digitalisation reveals in view of better access, it also stressed challenges with regard to fair remuneration for artists and creators and the need for “spaces dedicated to digital creativity and innovation”.⁵

Data from the International Confederation of Societies of Authors and Composers (CISAC) indicates that «2020 saw digital collections reach EUR 2.4 bn, rising to over a quarter of all collections».⁶ However, the news of CISAC is that in 2021 «royalty collections for ... creators fell by 9.9% in 2020, with losses amounting to more than €1 billion as a result of the global pandemic».⁷ There are multiple challenges facing artists and creative professionals such as designers and architects, who engage with their audiences digitally in this new reality. Issues ranging from copyright and intellectual property to the broader focus on protecting the rights of the public too are becoming more and more urgent as creative value-chains innovate.

The European Union has placed focus on measures to support innovation in the field of cultural and creative industries, not only within the Creative Europe 2021-2027 programme but also with specific calls of the European Institute of Innovation and Technology, Horizon Europe programme, the STARTS initiative (Innovation at the nexus of Science, Technology, and the ARTS)⁸ and more, including support for the EU network of Creative Hubs.⁹

While most creative hubs today function as co-working spaces for digital creatives, the innovation focus is broader. As an example, in 2020 UNESCO has monitored the state of affairs of its 2017 convention and placed focus on the specific need to “Support creative hubs,

4. Petya Koleva, 2018.

5. UNESCO, 2017.

6. CISAC 2021.

7. CISAC 2021 *News, Paris, October 27th*.

8. European Commission, Culture and Creativity 2020.

9. European Creative Hubs Network 2021 <http://creativehubs.net/>

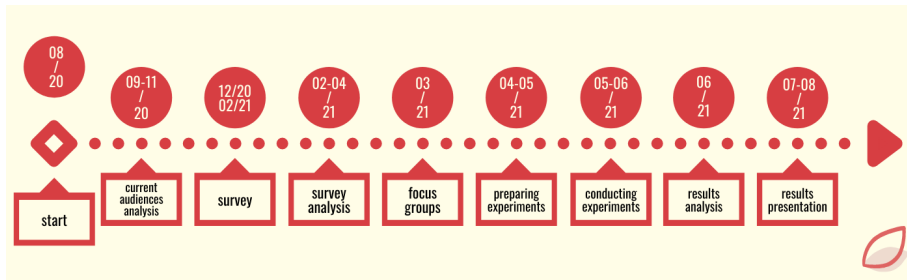


Fig. 2: *Reconnect: Audiences and Cultural Content in the Digital Environment* project timeline

incubators and clusters to promote local content creation”, meaning cultural creation.¹⁰ In Bulgaria, which is one of the few EU member states that has so far, no “official” culture-focused creative hub or cultural incubator or even a culture-creative cluster, this demand for support has been growing.

In the period since 2019, while creative processes were changing, the team of Intercultura Consult researched locally the need for small organisations to find a relatively easy access path to “new” digital environments. Many of them were left without sources of income and had not yet developed the skills needed to understand online audiences. It was at this point that Intercultura Consult (ICC) started work on a project addressing these needs.¹¹ The project “Reconnect: Audiences and Cultural Content in the Digital Environment” (August 2020-August 2021) involved with three creative organisations, in the fields of contemporary performing arts, puppet theatre, and intercultural dialogue. Its key objective was to support them in understanding the needs of their audiences and meeting those needs in the digital world.

In its first micro-incubation pilot project ICC analysed the current digital audience of the organisations; supported them in establishing a profile of their target audience and also provided them with insight into the digital needs of these target audiences. For this purpose ICC conducted a broad public survey and four dedicated focus groups. Finally, the organisations were provided with time and a budget to create an experimentation that would serve best their audiences. (Fig. 2)

10. UNESCO, 2020.

11. BERBENKOVA, KOLEVA, 2021.

A Fact-Based Approach

The survey phase of the Reconnect project focused on the audiences, their dispositions and interests related to cultural content online. It also analysed their preference and state of readiness to embrace new forms of cultural content online and new types of interaction with the creators, in terms of practices. The survey collected data and found evidence showcasing the different profiles of audiences' interests for in situ events versus online culture. It also identified the preferred forms of content (video vs. audio vs. text), the platforms most used for interaction with cultural content, and the duration of engagement. All of these findings were adjusted to and incorporated in the individual approach of each organisation for the creation of a new experimental content. Since each creative context and purpose was unique, there were three specific findings, one for each organisation, that formed the premise of the incubation experiments:

- The surveyed public showcased increased interest towards online cultural content when presented in episodes or in parts.
- The increasingly digitally available cultural and entertainment offers had led to the audiences' expectation that online presence is the new standard for cultural events.
- In regards to cultural tourism, especially when conducted through virtual walks (distinct from virtual museum tours), the digital environment is not favoured by the public.

New offers of cultural content in episodes

A major takeaway from the conducted research was the established demand and clearly expressed need of the public for cultural content that would be developed especially for digital use. Respondents in both the public survey and focus groups shared that they prefer to interact with content that is not simply adapted to the digital environment, but created with the digital environment in mind. Participants in the focus groups articulated disappointment with the most common digital offers by cultural organisations, particularly, those in the performing arts sector. In the early period of 2020, they focused on releasing archival recordings of performances in order to regain some form of contact with the public. However, such recordings were found

to lack the dynamism that the viewer craves; to be too long and often of technical quality below the already existing public expectations.

It was clear that all members of the public prefer (if possible) to attend theatre, music or similar performative events in situ, where they usually last 1.5 to 2 hours. The on-site audiences are immersed in the experience and time is often perceived to pass quickly, however, an online iteration does not provide for the same public engagement. Online, each viewer's personal environment is different and provides plenty of distractions from the cultural experience. This finding is based on the survey responses by the majority of audiences who share that they prefer online cultural content that lasts 11 to 20 minutes.¹² Additionally, respondents demonstrated increased interest in arts such as theatre, opera, ballet and *contemporary dance online provided in 'parts' or 'episodes'*. In the case of theatre, the audience's interest is almost twice as high for online events in episodes, compared to the same cultural experience being offered in full length in one release.¹³ This crucial finding was among the cornerstones that informed the approach of one of the piloted offers. The incubated product regarded the presentation of a new play by the first of the creative partners in the project described in detail further below.

New norm in audiences' expectations: cultural events to be available (also) online

The Reconnect project lasted less than 12 months and coincided with a period of rapid development of the digital cultural scene. While at the beginning of 2020 audiences were not used to attending cultural events online, by August 2020 these forms of cultural participation had become the norm of cultural life. Members of the public who were already digital quickly transformed into digital audiences and they easily adapted to the wide availability of cultural offers online, from near but most often from faraway 'scenes' of the arts and cultural world. The survey of the public captured this trend via the answers to two questions:

1. 71.60% of respondents answered positively to the statement

12. KOLEVA, BERBENKOVA, BARDUN 2021

13. Ibid.

“After the end of the state of emergency, I intend to continue participating in cultural events online”¹⁴

2. 54.98% of respondents motivated their choice to attend cultural events online with the fact that they provide an “opportunity to attend events that are not accessible in other ways”.

The data supported a hypothesis that most cultural policy makers have shared. Namely, that the public disposition is adapting quickly and one major factor in favour of online culture has been the rise of *hybrid cultural offers*. This specific finding was the cornerstone of the creative decisions informing the incubated product of another of the participating creative organisations.

The limitations of virtual interactivity

While the public survey demonstrated a predominantly positive attitude towards attending cultural events online, it also captured a clear concern of the public with the limitations of such experiences. Additionally, participants in the focus groups organised as the second step of the research in the project, shared that using digital cultural content is *a compromise* that they were willing to make when in situ experiences were otherwise unavailable. This response stands in direct relation to expressed demand for higher quality of the digital cultural offer. Specifically, the public requires more interactivity as well as attributes high value to the possibility to connect with other people and engage all six senses.

A major motivation for respondents to attend cultural experiences in situ is the socialisation factor which involves meeting with friends, family, and colleagues (42.22% of respondents) as well as meeting new people (40.11%). Online cultural offers usually create limited opportunities for interaction with and among the public, which limits the experience and makes it less desirable by potential participants. This was the problem identified by respondents who share that they would choose other activities over attending digital cultural events (12.06%) and that they find it boring to engage with cultural content alone at home (8.70%).

14. Ibid.

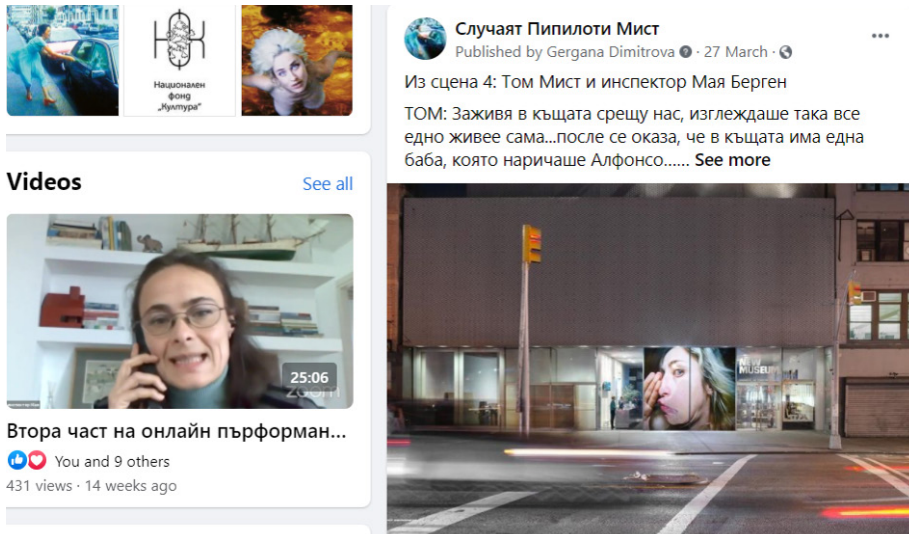


Fig. 3: Screenshot from the Facebook page of the play “The Pipilotti Mist Case” by “36 Monkeys”

The limitations of virtual/online culture were found to be a high barrier to online tourism experiences by the public. People prefer to attend offers related to cultural tours in public spaces or towns most often together with family or friends and they find them attractive because of the full sensory engagement of such experiences. Participants in the focus groups shared that virtual touristic experiences are the least attractive of the full range of existing cultural offers. They have, however, identified the potential of testing immersive technology as added value in new offers. In spite of this clear call for action, the fact is that AR, VR or other immersive technology is not easily accessible to small cultural organisations or to users who may find cultural tours appealing. This is partly due to the high price of devices and partly to the need of specific skills and resources to develop an immersive offer of high quality and make it accessible to the public.

These insights presented above were the key input informing the approach to the digitalisation of a cultural tour by the last of the three partnering organisations in the project.

Incubating (digital) cultural offers with insights of the public

While the public survey and research output of the project have delivered a number of conclusions and recommendations that are of value to CCI organisations in general, in this short article we have focused only on the three aspects that have been decisive for the incubation activities of the project.¹⁵ What else was needed before the new offers could be tested and evaluated?

The micro-incubation process embedded in the project involved an experimentation phase in which the three cultural operators integrated a digital aspect in developing a new creative work/cultural offer unique to each of the organisations but one that may be replicated and re-used later. The choice was based on research insights provided to them on individual basis and also supported via group trainings and specific individual analysis of each organisation's existing audiences (digital and non-digital) as well as their marketing strategy. The three organisations elaborated their own specific approach which is presented shortly in view of its achieved impact.

A contemporary theatre play presented in a series of videos and a video project targeting young male audiences

The contemporary alternative art and culture organisation "36 Monkeys" is an organisation that works in the field of contemporary performing arts and science-based theatre. In the frame of the micro-incubation project, it conducted *two experimentations*. Both of them were related to its authentic focus on cultural and artistic production. The first experiment presented a work in progress, the online readings of a *new play "The Pipilotti Mist Case"* (Fig. 3). The target audience for this experimentation were people who had already developed interest and taste in contemporary performance arts. The experiment was to test the finding that when theatre plays are presented in 'parts' or episodes, there would be increased engagement by the broader online audiences. This experiment was targeting specifically the interest of online audiences to engage with videos of medium duration – 18 to 25 minutes long.

The experiment was realised via presenting the play in the form

15. KOLEVA, BERBENKOVA 2021/2022.

of a 'table read' of several different *scenes pre-recorded as Zoom video meetings lasting 18 to 25 minutes*. The series of the videos were streamed on Facebook and reached more than 3400 people. This was in the higher range of reached audiences, based on available data from 2020. "36 Monkeys" promoted the play using a dedicated Facebook page and utilising a communication campaign. Among the individual posts, the ones that attracted higher interest from the potential audience members were those using video content combined with a message rather than ones consisting of only static images or simply text. The video posts not only reached more people, but also more people engaged with them. This clearly confirmed the findings of the study that video is the most preferred type of content online and it can transform the general public into direct target audience for the cultural organisations.



Fig. 4: A picture from the hybrid performance "The world of Malle-Malle" held in Sofia, Bulgaria on May 16, 2021.

The second experiment targeted young male audiences (18-25) because this group of the public had emerged as the most difficult to attract for the organisation from the data analytics performed in the preliminary research. In this iteration, the organisation used a video project that it had created previously. However, the communication channel was new and it was selected based on the conclusions of the public survey and focus groups regarding suitable platforms to communicate content by age and gender affinities. The team of “36 Monkeys” disseminated the video through Instagram twice. The first time it did so in parts and the second time in its full length. This approach was to test the findings that younger people’s top choice as a source of information and as a platform for cultural content was Instagram. The results were impressive.

In terms of content, the video project “What about Bats” is an engaging story integrating scientific facts about bats. During the distribution campaign for this video project the organisation’s Instagram profile reached 44,000 people, 99.6% of whom were reached through promotion and advertising related to the incubation experiment. Since the organisation’s Instagram profile was not well developed before this experiment, data from the platform was not available to establish a clear comparison with previous reach. Instead, the impact assessment was based on data of the well-developed Facebook presence of the organisation. During the campaign period on Instagram, the organisation reached the age group 25-34 the most while the age group 18-24, who were the main target group of the experiment came fourth. Although the specific target audience was not the most involved, the numbers indicated a visible “rejuvenation” of the dominant audience of the organisation when compared to data available from the preliminary research.

Most importantly, there was also a higher presence of men in the audience of the experimental release who were 40.3% of the reached audiences compared to the Facebook audience analysed at the beginning of the project where men formed only 29%. In this aspect, the pilot offer was a great success in reaching the target audience by gender.

A hybrid puppet theatre event for the youngest audiences

Puppet theatre “Malle-Malle” works mainly with young children and family audiences. They organise puppet theatre and other cultural events and have had a stable public for several years, successfully building up some trademark shows. All of this changed in

the early months of the pandemic when the team had to re-strategize. As a result, they developed a digital puppet show which was streamed free of charge to the public on Facebook and YouTube and managed to keep them connected and visible although without any financial income in the period. For the incubation experiment they decided to test a *hybrid form of puppet theatre performance* (Fig. 4). Malle-Malle developed the concept and gathered the technical resources for an in-situ event which was simultaneously streamed as an online event directed to their online audiences. This choice of a piloted offer was prompted by the survey findings that people prefer theatre events in situ, but are willing to engage in online events when the opportunity to visit such in person is not available. It was also motivated by the evident growth of interest among the public in attending hybrid events which was manifested in the focus groups and in the spring months of 2021 in Bulgaria. Also internationally more and more CCI offers became available this way, from conference events to performances.

The target audience for this experiment were families: parents and children aged 4 to 12 years old. The most suitable channel for digital communication established by the data analytics and focus group discussions for this target was Facebook. This is why the organisation focused its efforts there. The event was produced as an on-site event with paid tickets and it was offered for free as online attendance. The audience that the event reached online is on par with the target audience of the organisation: 63% women, 40.3% in the age group 25-34, and 33.4% in the age group 35-44. This is aligned with the ages of parents of young children in Bulgaria. Additionally, in both the survey and focus groups women have been identified as the 'manager' of family cultural activities and this was confirmed in the hybrid event too.

In situ, the event was attended by 80 people, 30 children and their parents were physically hosted in an open-air space. The audience consisted to a large extent of "fans" of the online show "The World of Malle-Malle" which demonstrated the impact of such hybrid offers to transform digital into physical, paying visitors. In addition, there were also some families attending an event of "Malle-Malle" for the first time. Even though the event started late due to some technical issues that had to be resolved on the spot, everyone present was engaged with its content and stayed until the end, even purchasing fan merchandise which was relatively expensive by Bulgarian standards of living. In

addition to the positive reviews on the spot, the audience also provided several praising comments on the ticket sales site for the event.

The above-mentioned technical difficulties of the hybrid pilot launch did cause a delayed online start. This clearly resulted in a drop-out of the initial online audiences. The livestream was seen by 192 people in the first 3 seconds, 48 watched up to a minute of it, and the full duration of the livestream was attended by even fewer audience members. However, they were engaging with the stream by reacting to it and writing comments. The advantage of the hybrid release is that after the livestream its video can be accessed and by the time of the impact analysis it had already reached 846 people, a number that grows over time. The drop in audience engagement with the course of the video is also to be explained with its duration. The hybrid event was produced as a regular theatre event, lasting around 1 hour and 20 minutes. By contrast, the online audience would react most actively to video length of 20 or so minutes duration, as the study had already established to be most preferred by the public.

This experiment was challenging for the organisation, as it required specific technical equipment and skills, as well as additional human resources. It provided “Malle-Malle” with valuable insights for future digital experiences. It also confirmed that hybrid events should be punctual and cannot delay their start the way in situ performances are permitted some tolerance while people can socialise. Another crucial finding is that the engagement with online releases can be high if there are additional resources invested in interaction with the public online. This is likely to keep the audience engaged even for longer periods of time.

A blended cultural tour experience

The “*Meeting Points*” foundation has the mission to connect people of diverse backgrounds and to create opportunities for mutual understanding. In the frame of the incubation project, they worked on digitising one of their established and successful services – The Food and Spices Walking Tour. It introduces visitors to a Sofia neighbourhood in which the majority of businesses and homes are owned by immigrants from the Middle East, who have become Bulgarian residents already.

The selected target group for the organisation were people in the age group 30-40, mainly women, locals, visitors and immigrants to Bulgaria. For this reason, the tour content was adapted for a pilot offer to include a digital aspect in both Bulgarian and English. The experiment

focused on designing a partially digitalised walk along the path of the original tour. This concept was based on findings from the survey and the focus groups. Based on both survey data and feedback from the participants in the discussion, people demonstrate little to no interest in fully digital walking tours. This is why the experiment focused on *blending the experience*, by providing a self-guided walking tour in the actual environment. The tour asked visitors to use an established scavenger hunt app *Actionbound* on their personal smart phones (Fig. 5).

The goal of the experiment was to provide an opportunity for the tourists to meet the local people from the designated neighbourhood while observing a social distancing friendly approach. Instead of doing this in a group of 10-15 people, they would be able to experience the tour on their own or in a small group of friends (2-3 people), which would be more in line with the need for social distancing imposed by COVID-19.

The self-guided tour was promoted by paid ads on Facebook and Instagram, which according to the analysis of the project team were the most appropriate channels for reaching the target audience. The majority of the reached and interested audiences were women (77% of the reached people and 84% of those clicking 'interested'). Most of



Fig. 5: Food and Spices Challenge Tour: a screenshot from the app and a picture from a participant.

them were the perfect fit with the target audience age range.

The final result was that 20 users had registered to test the tour, many of them indicating that they were doing the tour as a group effort using 1 account to access the digital app enhancing the experience. On this basis it is estimated that at least 40 people have participated in the actual tour. The registered participants reflect the main target audience of the organisation. The majority of the participants who provided feedback have shared that the experience was positive for them and that they are interested in more experiences like this. The organisation also found the blended form relevant during the early months of 2021 in the context of pandemic restrictions. Although indeed resource consuming in its first piloted launch, the organisation has expressed interest in offering their services in this blended format in the future.

Conclusions

The final assessment of the project regarding this phase of three digital experiments implemented based on informed choices, using data as well as expert guidance to CCIs, is that it was a great success.

Upon concluding the experiments and all the phases of the project, the three organisations testified that their digital audiences have increased with up to 60% since the beginning of the project. Working on the experiments with mitigated risk factors (i.e. losing money) provided them with new perspectives and ideas for future development. They also shared increased interest in working on developing digital cultural content and valued highly the networked approach of the project in which organisations learn how to work together.

This was the first project of this type in Bulgaria. Besides the individual success stories of the piloted offers, all three organisations have shared that the process of growing in this digitalisation process together was of great benefit. The fact they were different and yet addressing the same, need to connect again with the public, additionally made each organisation aware of tactics and converging areas of creative businesses.

While the COVID-19 pandemic has proven to be challenging for cultural operators, it provided opportunities for new creative processes and opened channels for sharing cultural content and values. This process was easier for organisations with some experience in the field and larger budgets. The above shared experience showcases that smaller

cultural organisation can also benefit from the opportunities if they are offered support. Under such conditions, an incubation approach that provides expertise and financial support can help speed up the process and provide a safe space for creation.

The network approach is also of value as it combines the expertise of different professionals, in the case of this project the artistic expertise of the creative partners was combined with the data analytics skills and audience engagement strategies support provided by cultural managers and digital content experts. Networking for innovation provides an environment of growth and expands creativity. The fact-based approach, which is not yet fully adopted in the cultural field in Bulgaria, provides structure and security to the process while setting up the experiment for measurable success.

The information shared above testifies to the advantages of incubation for the cultural and creative sectors. The interdisciplinary approach it offers to research and innovation, allows for cultural goods and services to evolve sustainably, and for the CCI organisations and creative professionals to stay abreast with the audience's expectations which will define more strongly which cultural offer captures their interest.

An environment where incubation for the cultural and creative sectors is readily available, requires investment in activities that would activate the sector and the willingness of its actors to cooperate. Also it demands support from policy makers and financing institutions.

In the period 2021-2022 Intercultura Consult is leading a follow up project for a select group of cultural organisations working in smaller settlements in Bulgaria. These organisations are seen as an important driver of local development in their communities. They are exploring creative collaborations beyond current practices in order to establish a lasting connection with their audience – on site and online. Group work and exchange of experience is taking place with support from mentors and experts assisting the cultural organisation to develop new mechanisms assessing the impact of cultural activities on the public. In order to improve communication with the audience, new creative services/products will be prototyped and the results will be assessed in view of the added value for the public.¹⁶

16. Time Perspectives: Long-term Benefits from the Culture – Audience Relationship, a proj-

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