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REIMAGINING WHERE WE LIVE:

Cultural Placemaking and the Levelling Up Agenda

Evidence submitted to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee

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The following information is presented by academics from the University of Leeds and Leeds Trinity University who have collaborated on two recent studies funded through Research England. 'New Uses of Screens in Post-Lockdown Britain' (NUSPB) from the University of Leeds has investigated the impacts of the global pandemic on screen use with the UK. It has built upon data drawn from the 'British Families in Lockdown' (BFiL) study at Leeds Trinity University, which continues to collect data on British family experiences and has done so since the start of the first lockdown in March 2020. Evidence presented here is drawn from several methodologies across both studies including one nationally representative survey on current screen-usage (2022), one questionnaire on lockdown experiences (2021) and several waves of qualitative longitudinal interviews with selected participants drawn from a diverse set 60 British parents (2020-22).

Surveying the Post-Lockdown Cultural Landscape of the UK

During the coronavirus lockdowns of 2020-21, audiences have moved increasingly online, accelerating global trends that have been well documented and observed in both industry and academia concerning digitised consumer behaviour. The NUSPB national survey shows that as of January 2022, 51% of people now use screens more in their leisure time as a direct result of the pandemic. Furthermore, our interviews have shown that a substantial number of British people are consuming their arts and culture internationally through the internet. Some people have spoken about this negatively in terms of the impact upon British culture by the powerful US entertainment industry. Others have spoken of it positively in terms of being able to access high quality entertainment from around the world. Minority ethnic people have been positive about being able to access culturally specific entertainment and information, often in other languages. All people have spoken positively about the convenience, choice, accessibility, diversity and popularity of the online digital experience. 81% of British people now looking at a combination of screens for 6 hours or more a day (NUSPB). This phenomenon has increased during the global experience of the pandemic as more people around the world have been spending time online and sharing content. As the UK looks to 'level-up' and invest in the restoration of community, local pride and a sense of belonging, the insights shared in this report will help provide essential perspectives on how and why cultural placemaking must be considered.

The following is intended to help policymakers understand the current cultural landscape in the UK in light of the latest research and is focussed on answering the following questions:

- How can culture reanimate our public spaces and shopping streets?

- How can creatives contribute to local decision-making and planning of place?
- How can the Government support places without established artistic infrastructure to take full advantage of the opportunities that the levelling up agenda provides?
- How might changes to the UK's broadcasting landscape affect investment in cultural production outside the capital, and what could the consequences be for artists and communities?
- How should Government build on existing schemes, such as the UK City of Culture, to level up funding for arts and culture?

Current Screen Dependencies

1. As a result of the pandemic, 1 in 2 (50%) British adults are now 'heavily' exposed to screens for a combined total of 11 hours or more each day (NUSPB 2022). The result is that the population are increasingly spending time online.
2. 40% of British adults believe that using screens has a negative impact on their health (NUSPB 2022). 49% of British people would prefer to spend less time looking at screens (NUSPB 2022). It is important to identify why people are looking at screens and to consider if there is an alternative? This data suggests that people would be happy to look at screens less.
3. British people have often reported that they are missing physical social interaction throughout the pandemic. The experience of being in the same space as another person cannot be replicated by a screen experience.
4. Our research has indicated that one reason for people choosing to stay at home and use screens more is because they feel safe. Some are fearful of danger on the streets, some are nervous of hate crime or intimidation. Others are fearful of disease and infection. Could more be done to ensure that public spaces promote feelings of safety and accessibility to physically and emotionally vulnerable people?
5. If worries about intimidation or harassment are a partial cause for people not wanting to leave their homes (and the online world) to attend public events, then ensuring safety in public areas could be prioritised and promoted by event organisers.
6. Many British people are talking about becoming addicted to screens. This is an under-researched area that needs urgent attention but would have an impact on people's capacity to engage with arts and culture that is not screen based.
7. Our qualitative data show that screens are convenient, useful, engaging, addictive and empowering. As such, the following questions emerge: Can cultural events in public spaces and shopping streets compete with online experiences? Are people going to be drawn away from the 'world' that they can experience on a phone or computer screen? Will they find better entertainment or information on the streets of a shopping centre than they would on the internet? From a performer's perspective, will any artist with a successful act, not want to share their performance online in an attempt to increase their audience?

Cultural and Entertainment Industries

1. Some people working within the cultural industries have lost their jobs during the pandemic, there have been 10 million creative sector jobs lost worldwide as a result of the pandemic (UNESCO 2022). As the UK reconsiders the cultural industries, should public performers be publicly funded in the future, or will they be expected to draw money from audiences

attending public events in public spaces? Should UK arts and culture only exist in the domain of the commercial world? Will international arts and culture be invited to local spaces and if so, what financial impact might this have on local creatives?

2. The skills of some artists who worked with live audiences have moved online during the pandemic or ceased entirely. Mechanisms through which live performers and audiences are able to reconnect, would serve both audiences and performers. It is advised that local creatives participate in the development of such endeavours as part of the levelling up agenda.

3. It is suggested that live audiences impact the quality of creative content produced. Any decrease in live performance experiences might impact the UK's ability to create cutting edge theatre and music.

4. With British people spending more time online, Government agendas to defund the arts (such as the Office for Students plans to cut funding for art and design courses by 50% across higher education) and agendas which support and invest in digitisation (such as the DCMS *Culture is Digital* report) may exacerbate reduced participation in 'live' and 'in-person' cultural experiences.

5. As a result of digital technologies, creators can collaborate online without ever meeting. This also potentially has an impact on the artefacts created and creates a different kind of creative community that may not be locally based.

6. International companies and streaming services are considered to be powerful and relatively unregulated.

7. People enjoy the increased choice in content provided by streaming services and like the ease and convenience of being able to watch content on their phone whilst on a bus or a train. This inevitably leads to British people consuming more international content.

8. Some British people are concerned about online video content either via social media or via streaming services. There are particular concerns for children's well-being and education and the fact that they may be watching unsuitable content, often related to unregulated social media or outdated attitudes to diversity and inclusion on streaming services.

9. Locally, nationally and internationally based arts experiences all have relevance to individuals and communities. However local arts and cultural experiences are perceived to be undervalued by the public when placed within national or international contexts. Understanding the value of local arts and culture can be reinforced within public broadcasting and formal educational settings.

Future of Communities, Cultural Arts and Space

1. With half of British people (49%) wanting to use screens less (NUSPB 2022), locally based, non-digitised, in-person, live and interactive arts and cultural experiences may provide a welcome alternative to the online world?

2. From our data, financial costs associated with shopping in the city centres (particularly related to travel and car parking), have been said to dissuade visits to city centres and encourage people to shop online. Could more be done to enable visits to UK city centres to become affordable and financially accessible to all?

3. Since 40% of British people feel that screens are damaging to their health, could an absence of screens within city centres, public spaces and shopping centres become a draw for people? A movement which could be further associated with healthy lifestyles and behaviours including healthy eating and physical activity. Would the implementation of screen-free zones and unique non-digital experiences help provide

the public feelings of escapism from the 'connected' experiences of work and smartphones?

4. As a result of the increasingly globalised nature of entertainment, some non-digital, traditional, local and national cultural arts may be at risk of becoming historical in the UK. Before non-digital arts become obsolete, efforts could be made to preserve those unique British cultural assets that may be at risk.

5. Many people believe that screens have a significant impact on social connectedness which can be argued to be at the detriment of social interaction skills, particularly for children. More research is needed on the hormonal impacts of human interaction which are essential to shared physical spaces and live performances.

6. Some people have spoken positively about watching theatre online and say that this has made it accessible during the pandemic. The issue of accessibility is used as an encouragement for the digitisation of arts and culture agenda, however, could the encouragement of people to experience arts and culture through a screen and from their home also be detrimental to their health and well-being? Most British people seem to want more outdoor social experiences.

Conclusion

Insights from both studies (NUSPB and BFiL) have highlighted the complexity of the current cultural landscape. The relationship between internationally derived artforms and domestic artforms appears to be a concern. Local arts and culture are potentially under-appreciated and little considered, but may be a key to helping rebuild shared community experiences. There are further potential concerns regarding the relationship that British people have with screen use (which some described as addiction), and the implications of this on the arts, culture and community. Understanding what people get out of screen use, why they use screens, and what attracts them to screen based arts, culture and entertainment needs to be reflected upon; whilst at the same time, public concerns around digital technologies and screen use, can provide crucial insights into how individuals may wish to engage with 'live' or 'in-person' arts and culture in current times as part of the post-pandemic rebuilding of society.