

LGR6: The thinking underpinning the project



Scratching an itch

One of the most important things we tell participants in our Let's Get Real projects is to find an itch to scratch. That 'itch' relates to a hunch they may have developed through their work and that they would like to explore further (and hence scratch)! This informs the practical experiments we support participants to run within their own organisational contexts and around which they build their practical project understanding. It's really important that we practice what we preach (or 'eat our own dog food' as we've heard it more quirkily put)! So in the spirit of 'eating our own dog food' it's important to say that the starting point for our thinking behind Let's Get Real 6 was based on an itch we wanted to scratch. That itch was wanting to understand digital social purpose for museums.

Let's explain this further. Through Culture24's established work helping museums and other arts and heritage organisations respond to digital change, we are well versed with the extensive digital transformation work taking place in many museums. Separately through our connections with the wider sector we are also aware of the important discussions taking place about the social purpose of museums in today's society. Both these areas of focus are current, both explore how museums need to change, yet both appear to be taking place entirely separately, by different groups of museum professionals and responding to separate agendas within museums. Our hunch is that there must be far more that connects these two areas than at first glance, particularly as the very nature of society is changing because of digital culture and other sectors are urgently exploring the role of digital technology for social good. [This article](#) from our Research Manager, Sejul Malde, explains this background thinking in much more detail.

Revealing more than an opportunity

Connecting up these areas promises far more than just an isolated opportunity for museums. It's actually far more important than that. We believe understanding the digital social purpose of museums is critical to the sector's future existence. It goes to the very heart of the question of museum relevance. We don't meant the design orientated view of 'relevance' considered when shaping museum products or services or exhibitions or collections, to meet the needs of audiences. Nor the more funder orientated view of social relevance requiring museums to widen their offer and engage 'hard to reach' audiences. Rather it is a more existential form of *cultural relevance* that asks whether museums are really fit for purpose in a dramatically

changing society that is increasingly influenced by digital culture.

The effects of digital culture can be both positive and negative. Digital culture offers up new opportunities for creative and cultural expression, ways to connect with communities and challenge established hierarchies and gatekeepers. At the same time it exacerbates mental health issues in young people, creating filter bubbles that fuel division and providing a forum for fake news and misinformation. Given these new social parameters, it's incumbent on all museums to ask themselves whether they are still relevant for children and young people whose lives are already becoming more influenced by these digital cultural changes. If society and culture are changing so dramatically, then so must museums. The sector's understanding of digital transformation and how this relates to their social purpose becomes critical in driving this change.

Finding out more

So we've established the extent of this itch. Our challenge, in developing our thinking behind the Let's Get Real 6 project, was how do we begin to scratch it. We decided to seek out the views of interested people, particularly those working in museums, so we ran an informal consultation asking for input. This helped us learn a few important things:

1. It's not just us who are interested in this. There appears to be significant appetite across the sector to better understand the connection between these two areas.
2. There are broad ranges of views about what social purpose might mean, from everything a museum does having social value to addressing specific problems such as homelessness or dementia.
3. There are some wonderful practical examples of potential digital social purpose in action, both from within the museum sector but also from outside. These include Twitter campaigns, digital social incubators, open licensing projects and using VR in schools and hospitals. So lots of practical ideas to draw upon, depending on needs.

What this told us overall was that there is significant interest, understanding and practical experience of exploring digital social purpose out in the sector, but much of it happens out on the margins or under the guise of other agendas. It also told us that the sector not only needs ways to raise the profile of this work, it also needs a way of better defining and talking about it. The LGR6 project will therefore seek to do this. However 'digital social purpose' still feels too wide a starting point for the project. Therefore more definition around how LGR6 might consider this is needed.

Framing our thinking

Defining the exact scope of enquiry for LGR projects is a fine balancing act. It's about providing enough definition to ensure focus, clarity and helpful framing for all of us (participants included), but still allowing enough intellectual space for each participant to explore within their own contexts and collaboratively contribute to the overall project thinking (in the spirit of

collaborative research)! The key areas in this project that require some form of definition, especially if we are then to look to understand their connections, relate to how we define 'social purpose' and how we define 'digital'?

Defining 'social purpose' for LGR6

Our partnership with the Happy Museum Project, 64 Million Artists and Battersea Arts Centre on this project has helped incredibly here. Through understanding more about their work and the key principles behind it, we decided that the LGR6 view of social purpose should have the following criteria:

1. Be activist in nature
2. Relate to issues out in the world (not just in the museum's own field of vision)
3. Be grounded in areas that museums have the expertise/ability to make a difference in
4. Be derived from working with communities and having empathy for their needs.

The first two criteria mean that this project will seek to challenge the presumption that museums are inherently socially purposeful through their mere existence. This means that, for the LGR6 project, aiming to give more people access to the museum and its collections is not, in and of itself, enough to have social purpose. Something much more 'applied' is necessary. Instead we are interested in how everything that represents the museum – its space, its collections, its expertise, its people – are assets to address particular social issues, rather than socially valuable outcomes in themselves.

So what social issues should museums more actively address? Well, where do you begin? Human rights? Climate change? The growing inequality gap? The rise in mental health problems? It's hard not to want to focus on all of these and then some! Such a scattergun approach however is neither sustainable nor effective, much better to focus on areas where museums have the expertise or ability to make a difference. This is where LGR6's third criteria of social purpose comes in. We believe that there are two important social challenges that not only are relevant for all museums to speak to, they are also routes to addressing a much wider range of social problems. These challenges are the growing division in our communities and the diminishing nature of public 'space'.

We are confronted on a daily basis by evidence of divisions in our society and communities. These divisions crystallised last year in the Referendum vote and continue in the debate over the Brexit process and outcome. Meanwhile the increasing privatisation of public space, whether through the creation of privately owned public spaces or through Public Space Protection Orders (PSPOs), alongside the ongoing cuts to public services that are stripping back community infrastructure, are diminishing the very nature of public space. These two challenges have highlighted the need, now more than ever, for civic engagement to address this. This is an area of social purpose that museums can and must have a say in and feels like the right focus for LGR6.

Defining 'civic engagement' for LGR6

So what form of civic engagement is appropriate for museums today and how could the LGR6 project interpret this? Again our partners' expertise helped us inform this by providing us with concepts of **active citizenship** and **cultural democracy**. One of the Happy Museum Project's core principles is active citizenship. They point to recent studies that show that when we think of ourselves as consumers we are less likely to tackle society's biggest problems, such as climate change, while when we think of ourselves as citizens we are more likely to become active by participating, volunteering and coming together to make society stronger and more resilient. Museums could promote civic engagement by working with their communities to promote active citizenship.

For civic engagement to be effective, there needs to be an equal relationship and challenging of established hierarchies. There is a risk however that, in seeking to promote active citizenship, museums revert to traditional roles of experts and knowledge holders telling participants, either implicitly or explicitly, that they should participate more as active citizens. This is where the idea of cultural democracy comes in which is prevalent in the work of 64 Million Artists. Cultural democracy challenges the traditional view of creative potential being the responsibility of artists and established cultural organisations, instead recognising how people are involved in cultural creativity at times and in places that ostensibly have little or nothing to do with publicly funded cultural organisations. Finding ways to support the cultural capabilities of everyone is cultural democracy.

For LGR6 we could support museums to explore ways to build active citizenship by promoting the cultural capabilities of their communities. The fourth criteria of social purpose for the LGR6 project becomes relevant here, namely through working with communities and having empathy for their needs. This involves museums not only promoting active citizenship in their work but recognising their own roles and responsibilities as active citizens. It also involves museums adopting less 'show and tell' approaches in their work with communities and instead listening to them, recognising their needs and identifying ways to promote active citizenship together.

Defining 'digital' for LGR6

Being asked what we mean by 'digital' isn't a question we get asked that much by others, rather we've got into the habit of asking it of ourselves. Wider society has now got so familiar with the word, that referring to 'the digital' has become commonplace. But using it as a noun in this way is incorrect. Rather it's an adjective that only provides useful meaning when used in connection with another word. Digital tool, digital channel, digital process, digital content, digital culture.....these are all distinct types of digital things, and each have different meanings. At Culture24 we are arguably as guilty as the next organisation of short-handing 'digital' in such a way that it's hard to know what we might be referring to. We want to change that, both for us and the sector. Pointing this out is more than an exercise in pedantry. If a museum is not clear what it means when it refers to 'the digital', it leads to an unnecessary narrowing of the opportunity that digital technologies provide museums.

For example, through our work with museums we notice how many can be very inward looking in their strategic approach and lacking in internal collaborative working. Engaging with 'digital' not only as a technical system but as a culture provides for new ways of internal collaborative working, for example through adopting processes influenced by digital culture such as human centred design, data analysis and agile development, in all aspects of museum work. Recognising digital as a culture also encourages museums to develop systems thinking, not focused around technical systems but rather ecosystems, prompting museums to become more outward looking as they examine their role within a wider social ecosystem. Similarly, recognising the value of 'digital' as content allows museums not only to consider the importance of digitising their collections but rather to look at all aspects of their online content production including articles, listings, images, recordings etc. and consider how to use these as assets in building relationships with audiences.

It's therefore important that the LGR6 project takes a broad yet defined view of 'digital' so that we can support museums to open up a wider range of opportunities to overlap with social purpose. We feel that referring to 'digital' as digital culture, content and technologies allows us to do this.

Coming up with a question

All of this thinking around a somewhat amorphous term as 'digital social purpose' has led us to define a much more focused question for the LGR6 project: **how can museums use digital culture, content and technologies to foster active citizenship for and with their communities?**

We feel that this question not only adopts the ideas around active citizenship, cultural democracy, empathy and a broader view of digital culture and content, it also provides project participants with enough space to define what this means for their organisations. They can decide what active citizenship means for them, what communities to work with, how best to work with them and which aspects of digital culture, content and technologies they would like to adopt in order to effect this work. That way we can still stay true to the spirit of LGR projects and help all project participants to find their own particular itches and scratch them.