

The Global Ideas Center (GIC) is a virtual think tank coordinated from Berlin, Germany. Utilizing “The Power of Comparisons,” its mission is to serve as a catalyst to address problems countries face. Its authors are practitioners from a variety of fields. Stephan-Götz Richter is the Director of the Global Ideas Center.

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Digitalization and Democratization – the Reinvention of Culture

- The longstanding and broad-based regional diversity that enriches Germany so much culturally needs a contemporary update, via a dynamically and systematically executed digital creativity initiative.
- This is the only way to preserve – and further democratize – Germany’s historically evolved cultural diversity that is almost unique worldwide.

Germany has one of the richest and most diverse set of cultural offerings in the world. Even so, and probably because of it, there is frequent talk that this cultural landscape is endangered in its existence due to pervasiveness of the ongoing Corona pandemic.

On the one hand, this statement is true. On the other hand, focusing on the pandemic reduces the scope of analysis and reflection that is warranted in view of the many challenges facing our cultural landscape, of which the pandemic is only one, although a major one.

Ultimately, we need to face up to an uncomfortable truth. In the cultural sector, we have so far paid far too little attention to the relevance and transformative power of Digitalization. Our theaters, our museums and even our world heritage sites, as well as our schools and universities believed until very recently that we could simply cling to the status quo.

What digitalization really means

Digitalization means much more than the digital reproduction of works of art. In fact, it is about the consistent inclusion of digital technologies and applications in all processes of the production, documentation and communication of culture and cultural practice.

It has long been clear that digitalization not only requires a change in tools. It demands a different way of acting and thinking. Culture is no exception here. Therefore, new cultural practices are needed.

Any attempt to cling to the “status quo ante corona” is simply irresponsible. Just consider that, as far as the communication of „classical“ culture is concerned, considerable problems have been apparent for some time now. The question of how to bring these offerings to younger people in a form that truly „attracts“ them needs a lot of thinking and trying to come up with credible answers.

Why more participation?

The situation is similar for people who, for various reasons, find it difficult to visit cultural institutions such as museums. Here, too, it is important to find new ways and formats of approach that help to break down such barriers.

This is the only way to enable more participation, a greater diversity of perspectives, as well as active involvement in creative processes, especially among younger audiences.

We need more participation because we must be serious about ensuring that cultural offerings financed from public funds, i.e., taxpayer money, benefit as many people as possible in as many different walks of life as possible.

This does not involve invoking the spirit of a „culture for all“ utopia. Rather, it is about achieving a useful “polyphony”. Culture must not become the echo chamber of a few. Otherwise, it is no longer culture, but the mutual celebration of self-referential elitism.

Social media and video portals are particularly important channels for culture to address in order to present it to audiences as broadly as possible. Above all, this means quickly accessible and audio-visually attractively-designed digital content, usually in the form of videos (which tends to be particularly successful).

„Snackable content“ is the marketing term for this. But longer video productions and live streams on the Internet are also gaining in importance and are thus competing with conventional film and TV productions.

The primacy of video orientation

Anyone who wants to inspire younger people must therefore start with their „video orientation“ and be prepared to translate „high culture“ into „snackable content.“ This requires a readiness to transform what has long been familiar in a digitally creative way and, above all, to tell new stories.

It is certainly no exaggeration to state that neither the cultural policy funding instruments nor the various cultural institutions in Germany (or their established staffing and future planning) have so far even come close to taking this essential fact into proper account.

On top of that, it is no longer just the „young“ generation that is video-oriented. In this respect, the „post-Corona crisis“ of our cultural world, properly understood – as in the school and university system – is a great opportunity to finally catch up on what has been neglected so far.

For this undertaking to succeed in an appealing form, however, what is required is a much more profound rethinking of the nature and, above all, the presentation of artistic creation and cultural content. The Digitalization of culture therefore is not a stopgap measure, a kind of visual repair store to help the cultural sector survive.

While such an approach might seem obvious in light of the pandemic challenges facing the cultural sector, limiting it to this current context would be far too short-sighted. Doing so would only evoke the next crisis in the cultural sector.

Democratizing culture

To put it bluntly, those who do not dynamically rethink and break new ground in terms of new ways of seeing, visiting, consuming and processing culture will not only be punished by history. They could very well become the gravediggers of our cultural landscape – and thus achieve precisely the opposite of what they ostensibly try to achieve.

To prevent this from happening, we need a rethink on many levels. The pandemic experience is merely the urgent occasion for this, not the cause. In fact, even before Corona, the dissemination and use of Germany’s impressive diversity in its cultural offerings was out of date.

There are great concerts, theater performances and exhibitions all over the country. But the established model – primarily reviews in newspapers with the implicit invitation

Editorial Note:

1. You can quote from this “Strategic Intervention Paper” (SIP) provided you mention the author and also refer to the Global Ideas Center.
2. We also ask that you mention that this short study, part of our “Germany in Europe” project, was funded by the Mercator Foundation.

to travel to the site of the particular performance or exhibition – seems long out of date.

Who can and should travel when reading about a new production in Karlsruhe, Leipzig or Zürich? And even if one has the time and money to do so, such a trip is not without costs from an ecological point of view.

This elitist mode of distributing cultural offerings also tends to be rather undemocratic. In many cases, it effectively denies access to interested audiences because of the live presence required.

Forever lost?

In addition, a core effect of the digital transformation – to the extent that it is underway – is increasingly transforming not exclusively younger audiences from cultural recipients to cultural producers, who accordingly expect more participation and involvement in cultural production itself.

In particular, it is painful for artists if their performance is not documented in a digitally appealing way – and thus cannot be accessed and reused either nationwide or internationally.

How often do I think, when watching the short promotional clips on YouTube that refer to an opera performance with a great cast and brilliant direction, that the performances themselves are probably lost forever, irretrievably, because they have not been digitally documented.

This loss not only affects opera enthusiasts like me, but also musicological research and the field of cultural education. There, corresponding videos could be flexibly reused and integrated into multimedia, creative educational work.

In a world of „snackable content“ videos, the opportunity is also lost to use attractively curated excerpts from a production to pave the way for initial access to this art form for a new audience that has not yet been able or willing to participate in it.

New business models

If we take the idea of the universal availability of digitally recorded cultural productions on the Internet further, we must of course also talk about money.

Is a mere video recording of a concert attractive enough on its own for the artists or production company to be able to charge a fee for its viewing according to a pay-per-view model? In other words, can culture easily keep up with Netflix, Amazon and the like?

Wouldn't it perhaps be much more appropriate to include special content curated specifically for this video as an additional stimulus? As in a farther reaching interpretation of a work, an interview with the performers or offers to participate in ongoing curatorial or dramaturgical processes?

That way, the digital product would stand out from the vast mass of free Internet videos and could justify a viewing fee. Of course, that would need concrete answers to what human and material resources would have to be expended to achieve such a curatorial „refinement“ of the video.

Conversely, we will have to ask whether one or the other conventional, analog cultural offering might not also have to be „refined“ in this sense. That mainly applies to attracting the younger generation audience. It is increasingly spoiled by the quality of professional digital productions. That makes it all the harder to get young people out of their living rooms and into museums, theaters or concert halls, all the while charging them comparatively high admission prices.

Irrespective of the pandemic, cultural institutions have to make it much clearer what the added value of the expensively purchased, physical opera visit outside the home is. For example, what kind of value-added is needed if the digital recording of the premiere can be accessed free of charge on the Internet?

In other words: Anyone who understands digitalization of culture as the digital transformation of the cultural sector must inevitably also answer the questions about the future business models and the sources of income of cultural institutions.

This is imperative not least because it is unlikely that state support and subsidies for cultural institutions will continue to rise steadily in the coming decades. At the same time, it is necessary to consider how cultural productions made possible by tax revenues can also be made available free of charge, for example, via public goods-oriented cultural platforms.

The enormity of the change

The cultural change that the entire cultural sector is facing in this respect is without question enormous. It requires a radical rethink similar to that, for example, in the newspaper sector. There, revenue models have if not completely collapsed, then increasingly collapsed in recent decades, or have been replaced by pay walls and cross-media online distribution.

In the media business, “digital” is no longer seen as an alien element to be resisted, but rightly as the basis and platform for all creative work. Just recall that, right at the beginning of the pandemic, the editorial offices of daily newspapers managed to switch their production, basically from one day to the next, to production from the home office.

That proved to be an important payoff of the digital transformation. The public administration sector as well as schools and universities still have a much harder time with this.

In any case, the cultural sector can only benefit from looking at other industries and their experiences when designing and testing digital business models. In this context, it would be interesting to see, for example, how the function and range of upscale retail stores have changed with the increase in online commerce, especially during and after the pandemic.

Either way, it seems advisable to rethink the interplay between, on the one hand, analog and virtual spaces of cultural production and presentation, and on the other hand, marketing in line with the post-digital paradigm.

Major challenges require digital creativity

The cultural sector needs digital creativity not only to attractively document, communicate and market artistic and cultural practice. The overall societal demands that are increasingly being placed on the way culture is produced today also require digital creativity. Transparency and ethics, sustainability and resilience, diversity and equality of participation opportunities particularly require creative use of digital technologies and applications.

Only in this way can the limitations of analog media and physical spaces be pierced in a relevant and culturally effective way.

Museum audits

In a modern democratic society, publicly funded cultural institutions such as museums are rightly expected to give a public account of their collections, their storage and condition, and the circumstances of their acquisition.

Up and down the country, debates are taking place – not just among experts, but in society as a whole – to explore the reappraisal of Germany’s colonial history and the handling of collection items from colonial contexts. For example, the rollout of Berlin’s Humboldt Forum impressively demonstrates this need for transparency in culture. Realistically, this can only be done digitally.

This is all the more true since permanent and special exhibitions in museums usually only show a tiny fraction of their collections. So if you really want transparency in this area, you have to be prepared to tackle the basic digital recording of millions and millions of objects – and to finance this undertaking.

If Germany were to become more of an active leader in this area, it would also lead to an immense democratization – in the sense of worldwide accessibility – of these cultural assets on a global scale.

Initiative for the digital registration of public collections

Such a national initiative for the basic digital registration of museum collections could also help compensate for the glaring omissions in taking the inventory and cataloging public collections in Germany that have accumulated over decades.

This accumulation has particularly affected institutions with usually large numbers of objects, such as natural history, archaeological, historical and ethnological collections.

At present, no one can reliably estimate the actual number of objects in publicly funded museums that have not yet been inventoried or made accessible.

This is a state of affairs that is as incomprehensible as it is untenable. Where is the cultural content in social media supposed to come from and how can transparent collection management succeed if it is unclear how much and what exactly is slumbering in the stacks of our museums?

Climate-neutral cultural production

Digital applications are also the instruments of choice for climate-neutral cultural production and crisis-proof cultural institutions. As an example, is it really necessary for dozens of objects to travel halfway around the world for so-called „blockbuster“ exhibitions? Would sometimes a high-resolution digital reproduction not suffice?

That would make a lot of sense, especially because a work of art can be conveyed and „experienced“ in a completely different way through the use of digital presentation options.

Virtual reality or augmented reality convey keener insights than would ever be possible with an original, whose presentation must adhere to rules of conservation and insurance. Using this approach more widely also offers a great opportunity to create a new, post-digital „exhibition language“ that harmoniously integrates digital and analog worlds of experience.

Important and underappreciated benefits of digital reproduction

Digital reproduction – whether two-dimensional or three-dimensional – is also an important building block in two other contexts, the high relevance of which often only becomes apparent after the occurrence of the possibly irreparable damage.

First, in the fight against cultural property crime. And second, in restoration and rehabilitation measures following natural disasters or armed conflicts.

After all, the digital model can help to identify stolen objects or restore what has been destroyed. When fighters of the so-called Islamic State blew up ancient temples in Palmyra, Syria, people quickly sang the praises of the potential of 3D models for reconstructing damaged or destroyed architecture.

And what about 3D documentation and digital modeling of the numerous UNESCO World Heritage sites, not just in Germany? Or digital reproductions of all the works of art that are considered nationally valuable and enjoy special status of protection in Germany under the Cultural Property Protection Act?

Wouldn't it be the least we could do to document at least these outstanding ensembles and objects, which have been declared cultural assets of relevance to society as a whole? It makes good sense to put ourselves at least in a position to access their digital version in the event of damage or loss. This also means finding a reliable solution for the corresponding data to be stored in a crisis-proof manner.

The aspect of emergency preparedness and cultural asset protection in particular impressively shows that the required digitalization push in culture is not a luxury. In the face of increasing social and political instability and geopolitical rivalries, it is in fact a central prerequisite for protecting our cultural heritage and preserving cultural diversity. Anyone who ignores this is acting with gross negligence.

A European project for the world?

European countries have a special role to play in this area. We are in the fortunate position of having a solidly built network of culture-preserving traditions and institutions, as well as comparatively well-funded cultural infrastructures and a strong creative economy.

Those are the best prerequisites for shaping the digital transformation of culture beyond the borders of our continent.

Last but not least, we must work to overcome global inequalities in access to and participation in digital cultural offerings and help bridge the digital divide between North and South. This should also be part of our country's foreign cultural policy, which derives from its self-image as a cultural nation.

A big update needed

However, in order to be successful with this mission and task, we need a fundamental update of the operational structures and objectives of our cultural institutions.

True diversity and a far more participatory justice in culture are closely dependent on the scope and quality of digital cultural offerings. To the extent that the mobility of people and objects is restricted, whether by conflicts, pandemics, climate-related actions or otherwise, digital content must be available without borders.

Better yet, it can be offered barrier-free and as attractive and essential key to improved education, health, equality, opportunities for social advancement, as well as readiness for democracy.

True coexistence

What is at stake is nothing less than the future of coexistence of liberal democratic societies, by no means just ours in Germany. After all, the attacks on the basic liberal democratic consensus in many countries are taking place above all in digital spaces.

In terms of the density and quality of analog cultural offerings, Germany compares very well internationally. In the coming years, the challenge will be threefold: First, to add digital formats to the breadth of these offerings across the board. Second, to develop new forms of cultural production and cultural mediation that are even more digitally supported than before. And third, to increase the digital presence of cultural institutions on the Internet and in social media.

These steps initially require the courage within the institutions to transform themselves. What is also needed, however, is cultural policy action that

- supports and accompanies digital transformation processes
- creates incentives for further institutional development
- promotes digitally supported, agile methods
- enables appropriate qualification and further training measures for employees at all levels, and promotes the production of attractive digital content on a large scale.

As with any technological revolution, however, two things are required above all: openness and creativity. These high stakes are worth it, because the beauty and diversity of our cultural landscape are at stake.



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About the Global Ideas Center (GIC)

The Global Ideas Center (GIC) is a non-profit, independent and virtual think tank. It works with a global network of practitioners and civil society actors to feature their insights into critical issues of national and international concern in a solutions- and reform-oriented manner.

The analysis provided by the Global Ideas Center often involve cross-border comparisons. The principal purpose is (1) to contribute to improving/optimizing relations between countries and (2) to highlight lessons to be considered and potentially learned from other countries for domestic implementation.

The mission of the Global Ideas Center is to act as a catalyst to help solve real problems which countries and societies face via “The Power of Comparisons”. The GIC tackles powerful interests and conventional wisdom to drive an open, honest, educated and results-oriented debate.

About the Strategic Intervention Papers (SIPs)

The aim of our “Strategic Intervention Papers” (SIPs) is to take up a specific problem existing in a nation and to trigger a broader public debate on this issue in order to bring it to a constructive solution.

About our “Germany in Europe” project

The first project of the Global Ideas Center (GIC) is focused on Germany and Europe. It primarily explores perspectives and ideas from its European partners that can help Germany solve its own political problems.

The project is funded by Stiftung Mercator.

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Markus Hilgert holds numerous honorary positions at the national and international levels, including as a member of the Board of the German Commission for UNESCO e. V., the Culture Advisory Council of the NFDI4Culture Consortium, the Foundation Board of the International Alliance for the Protection of Heritage in Conflict Areas (ALIPH), the Advisory Group of the Cultural Protection Fund of the British Council, and the Finance and Resources Committee of the International Council of Museums (ICOM).

Hilgert has held numerous visiting professorships in Germany and abroad and currently teaches as an honorary professor at the University of Heidelberg, the University of Marburg and at the Free University of Berlin.

Conclusions:

Digitalization and Democratization – Reinventing Culture

1. In the cultural sector, we have so far vastly underappreciated the relevance and transformative power of digitalization. We erroneously believed that we could cling to the status quo.
2. **Digitalization does not just require a wide-ranging change in instruments and approaches.** Digitalization demands a different way of acting and thinking.
3. We must ensure that cultural offerings financed from public funds – i.e., taxpayers' money – benefit as many people as possible from as many different walks of life as possible.
4. If we want to inspire younger people, we have to start with their „video orientation“ and be prepared to translate „high culture“ into „snackable content.“ That also means to transform what has long been familiar in a digitally creative way. Above all, it means to tell new stories.
5. Those who do not dynamically rethink and break new ground to open themselves up to new forms of viewing, visiting and consuming culture will be punished by history.
6. It is necessary to consider how cultural productions made possible by tax revenues can also be made available free of charge, for example, via cultural platforms for the common good.
7. In a modern democratic society, publicly financed cultural institutions such as museums are rightly expected to give a public account of their collections, their terms of storage, the condition of their objects and the circumstances of their acquisition.
8. Emergency precautions for the protection of cultural assets underscore that the needed digitalization push in culture is not a luxury.
9. To the extent that the mobility of people and objects is restricted – for example, by conflicts, pandemics or climate change – accessible and attractive digital content is an essential key to improved education, health, equality, opportunities for social advancement and readiness for democracy.
10. **Cultural policy action is needed to support and accompany digital transformation processes. We need incentives for further institutional development:** to promote digitally supported, agile methods, to enable appropriate qualification and further training measures for employees at all levels, and to promote the production of attractive digital content on a large scale.