

EXPLORING THE POST-PANDEMIC LANDSCAPE OF SCOTTISH LITERARY FESTIVALS: WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Lee Randall

"Literary festivals are among our last remaining democratic spaces and we need them for our sanity, we need culture and art to have nuanced conversations, nurture empathy, feed knowledge and turn good words into good action." — *Elif Shafak at The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival 2020*

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INTRODUCTION

“I saw first-hand how a literary festival is put together — the conceptual aspect, the business aspect, the fundraising aspect, the piles and piles of books read, authors selected, publicists pitched— and you’d think proximity to such literary sausage-making would be triggering, but it wasn’t, maybe because it all seemed to come from a place that was clear-eyed and practical, but also weirdly pure: everyone involved just loved books.

Their lives had been changed by books. They got excited about books. They wanted, genuinely, to bring something good and nourishing and inclusive and necessary to everyone else. They wanted it to matter, not as some effete rarefied enterprise, but as a relevant contribution to an urgent conversation.” — Susan Rivecca, in If I Have to Die on a Zoom Call I’d Rather Be Talking About Books (Lithub.com, 27/3/20)

This report was commissioned by Creative Scotland, who asked me to explore what tools, mentoring opportunities, alliances and best practice strategies would strengthen Scottish Book Festivals as we move into a post-pandemic world, where the expectation is that digital events will co-exist with live events in blended festivals delivered both locally and internationally.

I have worked in this and related sectors for decades in a variety of roles. This report includes my opinions and observations. It relies heavily on ideas gathered by reading around the subject, attending (and delivering) digital events during the pandemic, and interviewing a range of people involved in programming and delivering events, primarily (but not exclusively) through festivals. It incorporates — and expands upon — ideas broached in my essay for the Wigtown Book Festival [blog](#), published on 23 April 2020.

This research is not — cannot be — exhaustive. Circumstances are constantly changing as the pandemic continues to throw the best laid plans into disarray. How long will current circumstances persist and what will the landscape look like post-pandemic? Nobody knows.

Among the Scottish festivals, I spoke to: Wigtown Book Festival, Islay Book Festival, The Ballie Gifford Borders Book Festival, Edinburgh International Book Festival, StAnza, Scotland’s International Poetry Festival, Colonsay Book Festival, CYMERA, Ullapool Book Festival, The Stay-at-Home International Literature Festival, Paisley Book Festival, Glasgow Life (which oversees Aye Write), Bloody Scotland, Boswell Book Festival and Cove and Kilcreggan Book Festival.

Other festivals consulted were: Reading is Magic (a collaboration among festivals providing children’s events, managed through Bath Festivals), North Cornwall Book Festival, The Times and Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival, Appledore Book Festival, Hay Festivals, The Margate Bookie and Toronto International Festival of Authors.

I spoke to Peggy Hughes, Programme Director at the National Centre for Writing, in Norwich, who has first-hand knowledge of the Scottish festival

scene. I spoke to Philippa Cochrane, Head of Reading Communities Programmes at Scottish Book Trust, whose remit includes Book Week Scotland, an annual nationwide programme of events. Joseph Vaughan told me about his work as Digital Production Liaison for Edinburgh International Book Festival, and his own industry-centred festival, Publicate.

The authors I spoke to were Ever Dundas, Vivian French, Ian Rankin, and Gavin Francis. Within the industry, I had conversations with publicists Drew Jerrison (Viper) and Alison Barrow (Penguin, Random House), and with Georgina Moore (formerly of Headline, now Director of Books and Publishing at Midas PR).

My aim is to highlight what we have achieved and the brilliant ways in which the book community have responded to this crisis thus far. I will look at the opportunities ahead, and propose questions we can ask about how to improve outreach to audiences that are slipping between the gaps. I'll suggest opportunities to support festival staff, and ask how festivals might support one another.

This is a first step towards developing a long-range strategy to further professional development, the delivery of quality programming, and offer practical assistance from seasoned professionals.

None of this is meant to be presumptuous or prescriptive. It *is* meant to be the springboard for future communication and collaboration within the new Scottish Book Festivals Network (name TBC). There are more questions here than answers.

As others have noted, this a marathon not a sprint — across terrain that's perpetually changing. Quick-fixes that served us in the short-term may need to be refined or reimaged. If the future of book festivals is a hybrid model, this is an ideal time to ask ourselves *why* we do what we do, and in re-examining our goals, join forces to make those ambitions real.

WHAT IS A BOOK FESTIVAL?

- An agora for ideas
- A meeting place for writers, industry insiders, and story lovers
- A place for education and celebration
- A place where commerce and art intersect
- A nexus for cultural tourism

Perhaps a more pertinent question is:

WHAT COULD A BOOK FESTIVAL BE. . . ?

HOW HAS OUR SECTOR RESPONDED TO COVID-19?

“In a time of crisis especially, but, at any time, an artist’s responsibility is to participate in the telling of stories that reflect the human condition back to humanity.” — Actor Thomas Sadoski, talking to Al Jazeera

In the beginning. . .

The COVID-19 pandemic and ensuing nationwide lockdown (Part I) sent publishing and book festivals into a spin. Yet at the start of the year, despite rumblings about what was happening around the world, some festivals were able to go ahead as normal. The Paisley Book Festival took place about three weeks before lockdown. The festival I programme, Granite Noir, happened in February and was, at every level, our biggest and best yet.

Things changed rapidly. In March, Aye Write wisely and conscientiously pulled the plug after one day to ensure everyone’s safety.

The world saw a sharp pivot to digital and overnight Zoom and Zooming took their places beside Google and Googling in everyday speech. (Other platforms and search engines are available, but these dominate.)

On 18 March, CYMERA, of which I am a trustee, decided to go digital for its June festival, announcing that decision two weeks later. On 1 April Edinburgh International Book Festival, along with all the Edinburgh festivals, announced it had cancelled its 2020 programme. On 11 June the good news came that they would go digital, and on 31 July, they unveiled their programme, *Keep the Conversation Going*.

Scottish festivals that made the tough decision to pull the plug on their 2020 plans included The Boswell Book Festival, Ullapool Book Festival, and Colonsay Book Festival. Boswell Book Festival later took part in the Reading is Magic festival in the autumn.

As I noted in April, there are persuasive arguments in favour of digital festivals. For one thing, no germs! They are planet-friendly, since no travel is required, energy use is low, and a festival’s carbon footprint drops sharply. From a programming standpoint, a virtual festival levels the playing field for smaller outfits with tighter budgets, since there’s no need to pay for airline tickets or accommodation. And digital events make conversations about books available to new audiences around the world.

First Responders

One of the first out of the gate was The Stay-at-Home Literary festival (27.3.20 – 11.4.20), organised by author and educator Carolyn Jess-Cooke. It began as an idea mooted on Twitter on 13 March 2020. In record time Jess-Cooke organised a wide-ranging programme featuring 145 events led by 220 authors writing across every genre.

Paper Nations joined as partners, including the festival in their “The Great Margin” project, dedicated to giving voice to marginalised writers. The festival was entirely pro bono. Forum Books, in Northumberland, functioned as the bookseller. Jess-Cooke used Zoom as a platform.

The festival was a roaring success, engendering tremendous good will, especially among writers who said they haven’t always felt represented at mainstream book festivals. There was a lively “we’re all in this together” atmosphere, and the overall feel was professional, no doubt thanks to Jess-Cooke’s experience in teaching distance learning.

She said, “In terms of how the festival went, I felt I could take risks, in that expectations were low. We were all stuck at home in this horrible, weird moment. I didn’t feel I had to make it all bright and shiny. As long as people could access live literature, that was the main thing.”

The only negative that cropped up was Zoom bombing by trolls, which was quickly sorted. The lesson learned was never share your access link on social media and always monitor events.

Among the big, long-established festivals, Hay’s Wales programme ran 22-31 May, encompassing around 70 events, mostly live-streamed, offered free on the day of transmission and by subscription thereafter. A Hay Player subscription costs £10 per year, allowing unlimited access to their audio and film archives. The festival had a tremendous response, with hundreds of thousands tuning in.

May saw the arrival of the Big Book Weekend (8-10 May), spearheaded by authors Kit de Waal and Molly Flatt. It was transmitted via MyVLF, and supported by the BBC and Arts Council England. They built the programme by asking cancelled UK festivals to pitch a couple of their best events for consideration. Among the Scottish festivals, Aye Write, Ballie Gifford Borders Book Festival, and CYMERA each won a slot, but with only 28 spots in total, many more festivals were disappointed. (Presumably “cancelled” referred to live events, as some participating festivals were able to pivot to digital.)

It was a lively and diverse weekend, and there are plans to mount a second Big Book Weekend in 2021.

Another newcomer to the scene was the Lockdown Litfest, co-founded by Paul Blezard (literary broadcaster and commentator), Wai Mun Yoon (tech entrepreneur), and Palash Davé (cultural strategist and former VP of Hay Festivals). All involved are doing it pro bono alongside their “real” jobs, and I recall hearing Blezard at a webinar saying authors had been promised fees down the road, when festival finances improve. They have banked an impressive number of events featuring an international roster of high-profile names. Their ambition is to go the distance as a global hub for literature post-pandemic.

What We Did Next

NB: This section provides an overview of some of the things that happened. Additional information about specific aspects of different festivals appears throughout the report.

CYMERERA, Baillie Gifford Borders Book Festival, Bloody Scotland, Edinburgh International Book Festival, Wigtown Book Festival, and Cove and Kilcreggan Book Festival all moved to digital, and we welcomed Way Words, mounted by students and faculty at Aberdeen University, to the digital realm.

The festivals rejigged their programmes to meet the challenge of getting up to speed with new technology and new expectations on the part of the book community and festival audiences.

For CYMERERA, mounting their second ever festival with limited funds and no time to lose ahead of its early June dates, the work had to be tackled in-house by founder and director Ann Landmann and some festival stalwarts.

She explained: “At that point we’d seen how Zoom was working, and I had seen what I *didn’t* want our events to look like, which was a whole lot of people visible on screen. We sent a questionnaire to all our booked participants to find out what kind of digital event they’d be happy to do, if any. Part of that questionnaire discussed how we would pay them. We knew we weren’t going to be able to pay what authors had received in 2019, since our money this year was coming from ticket sales. Most authors said, ‘Thank god you’re going ahead, don’t worry about the money.’”

Landmann rebuilt her programme with relative ease thanks to this enthusiastic response. At CYMERERA events were able to run simultaneously, rather than one after another, which they accomplished by having both live- and pre-recorded streams. Eighteen events were pre-recorded during the fortnight

before the festival and stored on YouTube ahead of their air dates. Another fifteen were live.

Audience members were asked to book for all events, even the pre-records, because 100% of the ticket money went straight to the authors. Tickets were priced free, £3.50 and £5.50. Therefore author's remuneration varied. "We sold 967 tickets in 388 transactions. That figure includes workshops, which were not free, but priced at £3.50 and £5.50, and some bookings for our Goldilocks launch," said Landmann.

"Of the tickets sold, 67% went out free, 10% were sold at the concession rate of £3.50, and 24% paid the higher rate. As expected, we sold more tickets for the live events than for the recordings."

All appearing authors had agreed to the fee arrangement in advance, but it's also true that their final remuneration fell below industry standards. Excluding workshop leaders, 12 authors earned under £20; 20 earned between £20-30; 16 earned between £30-40; 7 earned between £40-50; two earned between £50-60, and two earned over £70. The five workshop leaders received the income from tickets (sessions were capped at 20 attendees) plus an additional £20 per session, funded out of a £100 donation from Writegear.

The festival had a separate donate button, and held back 10% of the donations it received to cover its costs. It paid chairs £50, regardless of how many tickets an event had sold.

Case Study: Digital's Not for Everyone

The Colonsay Book Festival takes place over a weekend in April, when six authors are invited to the island whose resident population numbers around 120. Event capacity is 80-100 people. Visiting authors become part of the local community for two days, taking lunch with audience members in the village hall and raising pints with them in the pub at night, making for a blended experience for all concerned.

With the announcement of lockdown, the festival organisers — "an anarcho-syndicalist commune that makes decisions by a 75% majority" — cancelled their 2020 festival. At the time of writing no decision had been announced about 2021, but festival spokesperson Richard Irvine said that they are unlikely to go digital.

"I'm not sure if I believe that book festivals are the right activities to promote online. There are so many existing channels that do all that already. If you want to sit in your pants and listen to Martin Amis talk, you can do that on his YouTube channel, you don't need the mechanism of a book festival for that.

"To me, book festivals are about the face-to-face personal experience. On Colonsay, because we are so remote, the festival experience is intimately tied up with the island experience. We get a reasonable number of locals coming to the events. Generally speaking,

they wouldn't travel off the island to spend three days going to the Edinburgh Book Festival. Our festival is the only chance they'll ever get to meet an Ian Rankin or Sandy McCall Smith. For us it's about enhancing the reader experience for those on the island.

"And, if I'm being honest, it is also partly about tourism, to encourage people to come and discover the island. We don't have the resources, nor, I think, the skills or the interest in developing anything online. There are other people far better fitted to do that. It's a very simple thing we do here and we have no great desire to expand upon it.

"We've been back in touch with the [2020] authors and they've all confirmed that they would be happy to do [2021], dependent on circumstances. It will absolutely depend on what we're able to do. We make no money whatsoever and are very precarious in terms of the economics of running the thing. If we can't sell a minimum of 60 tickets for the weekend, we can't run it. That means if we use the village hall and can only safely put 40 people inside, we can't do it. [Safety] is always going to be an issue on the island because about 40% of the population is over the age of 70. We have a very vulnerable community here."

In addition to author talks, the festival hosts a "infamous drunken literary quiz" on the Saturday night, and there is usually an industry event featuring an agent or visiting publisher describing how the business works.

Irvine said, "It is conceivable that it will be two or three years before we will be able to have these kinds of gatherings again. Of course, book festivals didn't exist until about 1982. I'm still amazed that authors are prepared to do it, and rather saddened, it has to be said, that you can only get mainstream published if you're prepared to put yourself through this mill.

"It's conceivable that this could sound the death knell of the literary festival if so much moves over onto digital platforms. In the future this might be seen as a staging post, an historical anomaly. In 50 years' time people may look back and say, 'Yes, there was that patch when writers used to get together with other writers, but now they've all got their own channels, or their avatars appear for them.'"

While most festivals stuck to their traditional time slots, others investigated moving lock stock and barrel to different dates. Boswell Book Festival contemplated several autumn scenarios, including a drive-in book festival, not unlike the one held at Appledore, in Devon. (See the Case Study.) Ultimately that wasn't possible, due to circumstances outside their control.

After contemplating a couple of date shifts, The Baillie Gifford Borders Book Festival — which was poised to announce its line-up in April — decided to reconfigure, spreading events out over the summer and into autumn. They winnowed the 120 events that would have constituted a weekend in June down to 30-40, making tough choices based around their determination to retain the sense of the festival's personality and character.

Seeing what other festivals were doing was a big consideration, explained Director Paula Ogilvie:

“As we all know, there's a real danger of cannibalisation. That's one of the reasons why we spread our programme out so much. Because our festival ran for so long, we were coinciding with Edinburgh, and Wigtown, as well. We knew that certain names that would crop up in their programmes that mirrored ours, and vice versa. You have to try not to have too many of those names, and when you're doing it, to think differently about who might chair the event. The challenge for us, and for everybody going forward if we are still stuck in this digital world, will be how do you manage to produce something different?”

“There were a number of reasons for spreading our events out, but another big decider was that it was essential to us to hang on to some of our sponsors. Sponsorship benefits are many and varied, but a large amount of them relate to being in a physical space, hospitality, physical signage, and so on. We felt if we could offer this long exposure period, rather than just one weekend in June, then they could see benefits. This was a steady heartbeat of engagement with our audiences and sponsors, and we thought that was going to be our best possible chance of hanging on to those who could afford to do it. We did not want to have to rely on donations and possible book sales, which we thought were great unknowns. We needed as much assurance as possible that we weren't going to dig ourselves into an even deeper hole by investing in this digital programme. That was another compelling reason to spin it out.”

August saw Edinburgh International Book Festival unveil two studios, a green room, and a special signing room set up within the Assembly Rooms. I chaired two events for them and saw their set up in action. It was slick, and felt safe, with social distancing and hygiene protocols carefully monitored. Nevertheless, it was somewhat surreal not running into my book community friends, as events were carefully scheduled to avoid overlap and unnecessary interactions.

Their digital model saw various combinations: both authors beaming in remotely, events where authors and the chair were all in the studio, and events such as mine, where one person was in the studio, and another beamed in via Zoom. Events were sound- and vision-mixed. If a BSL interpreter was present, they worked against a green screen, and were filmed by a different set of cameras. Viewers also had the option to enable a subtitle function when watching from home.

Festival Director Nick Barley explained: “There were three parts to our online operation. The first part was getting the images into the system to the recording devices. There were cameras in the studio or on people's laptops. When they came into our studio they were vision- and sound-mixed by our team. A traditional Zoom call has two boxes, and the only thing that moves is the yellow box around whichever person is speaking. With our vision mixer, if the author was speaking, the studio manager would have made them big on the screen and the chair small on one edge, and vice versa. If the author was doing a reading he removed the chair from the picture. While this was going on the sound team would be balancing the sound.

“Capturing this and mixing the VT, films, and other elements, was done at one bank of screens in our studios. We had an intermediary company called GloCast, who are a live streaming company. They would take that material and feed it through the different platforms on which we were broadcasting. We had a book festival platform, which most people would have watched, and where we could see the number of people watching. Simultaneously, we were broadcasting straight to YouTube, and there was a Vimeo channel. The BSL interpreter was on a fourth channel, and the live captions were on a fifth channel.”

Offscreen, staff members monitored the chat functions, dealt with tech issues audience members might be having, and curated questions which were fed to chairs to pick and choose from.

Attendance was free. Audience members could sign up in advance, or arrive as the event began without signing up. More info about this option, and about how they finessed personalised book signings, appears later in this report.

Come September, Bloody Scotland’s digital festival went live, featuring an impressive roster of international crime writers. Programmer Bob McDevitt said, “We had hoped to go ahead using social distancing. Then we thought about supplementing live with digital. At one point we talked about a completely Scottish Bloody Scotland, because international travel looked like it would be impossible. As the summer went on it was clear we wouldn’t be able to use our venues, so Craig Robertson and I each went to Stirling and did a little filming, which we used as a trailer to open the events. We wanted to retain a sense of place, even though we weren’t physically in Stirling.

“What really opened up for Bloody Scotland was the amount of international authors we could have, and we used them differently. People who,

in a physical festival, would probably have filled a venue, such as Tess Gerritsen or Linwood Barclay, it was interesting putting them on panels, instead. If you can offer unique panels where there are people speaking in a fresh combination, or on a topic they haven't covered at another festival, that's great. The danger of having too many big name people doing digital events is that it becomes the same; they're talking about the same books and the same characters."

The Wigtown Book Festival, which began building momentum at the start of lockdown with its Wigtown Wednesdays programme, and by increasing content on its website, also built a studio where they filmed events. They augmented author events with short films featuring, among other things, the booksellers of Scotland's Book Town, and they reconfigured the length of events to include short Tea With Words readings and half-hour lunchtime sessions alongside traditional hour-long interviews. (For more about how they broadcast, see Case Study: A View from the Tech Desk.)

Events were a combination of livestream and pre-recorded, with people beaming in from around the world. I chaired one event with the author physically in the room, but the rest found me ensconced with the tech team, talking down a camera lens, looking at my author on a projector screen. The festival team monitored chat boxes and fed chairs a curated selection of questions to pose to authors.

Events were free and accessible via the festival's YouTube page or website. The Big Wig children's and YA events were streamed via Facebook. You could pre-register for an event or turn up on the day.

In England, The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival became a blended festival, offering a glimpse of how the future might look. Lyndsey Fineran, Programme and Commissioned Manager, talked me through their operation:

"Because we were further ahead in the year we wanted to do some live events because we knew how saturated the digital market was, and how bored audiences were. When Hay kicked off early in the year it was unique. Fast forward a few months and everyone's done it. We started to ask whether we could do a festival that had decent physical presence and footprint and deliver that in a safe way, but also amplify all the content digitally?"

Their blended festival was considerably smaller than normal. "In an average year we'll sell around 140,000 tickets to paid events around seven

venues ranging in size from an 80-seater up to 1500. We also have an external venue we can rent which is 2200. Once we knew we weren't going to build a big tented village we started exploring fixed venues in the town and ended up using the Town Hall, which at full capacity seats 1000. With social distancing it was around 240 seats. We had a smaller room within the Town Hall that usually seats 180, which was down to about 45, and an external theatre that's around a 600-seater, which sat 180, socially distanced and made safe.

“We used a combination of one-way systems, seating people in household bubbles with appropriate distance in-between, and asking audiences and speakers to wear masks when they were moving around the building. We didn't do any public book signings. Pre-signings were carefully managed by Waterstones with a fully sanitised setup. Authors would arrive early and do their pre sign and sound check — but even that, having to get a mike fitted, had to be done safely, so everything took longer. We had to ask guests to arrive early, too. We sent out a lot of comms in advance talking through the process, because for a lot of authors it was the first time they were doing anything live since February or March.”

They were keen to allay fears authors might have while ensuring that no one was excluded. “That's why we also had everything amplified digitally. The contingency, if government guidelines were changed and we couldn't have live audiences, was that we'd still ask the authors to travel and treat the venues as studio sets, to give the festival a sense of occasion. Worst case scenario would have been total lockdown, when we'd have switched to the fully digital model. Our plans had a few tiers.”

They did a series of eight filmed events with writers across the world, sometimes in collaboration with an international festival, such as the Sydney Writers Festival. “They had cancelled, so we said we'd love to offer some support, please nominate an Australian writer that you think we should be talking to.”

Those attending in person paid for tickets. For anyone watching at home events were free at the point of air. The cost to view the whole festival on catch up until the end of this calendar year was £20. For two of their big name authors, they used the book-with-ticket model with their physical audiences. Though both events sold out, Fineran said, “It's a model we try and resist. It's fine if you're doing a one-off event. In a festival model, where people are buying 10 to 15 tickets over the course of a week, suddenly adding a £30 ticket in is problematic.”

Looking to the future, the trick, she said, “will be making the model sustainable, working out what elements we would keep for future and what bits we let fall by the wayside. What is it they say, never waste a good crisis?”

Another undertaking brightening things up this autumn was Reading is Magic, created in response to the cancellation of the Bath Children’s Literature Festival. Realising that digital offered the potential to open things up, they invited other festivals to contribute elements of the programme. The ensuing partnership comprised Bath Festivals, Bradford Literature Festival, Borders Book Festival, Boswell Book Festival, Brooklyn Book Festival, Henley Literary Festival, North Cornwall Book Festival, Wigtown Book Festival, and Toronto International Festival of Authors.

A discussion about some of the nuts and bolts of pulling this together appears later. All the events were school-centric, designed for, and in consultation with educators, and offered back up material for use in the virtual (or real) classroom.

Programme Consultant Janet Smyth said, “We were conscious that come autumn, there would be a crunch point with festivals with geographically specific audiences and strong children’s programmes. For the publishing world it’s perfect, because you set your author off on the tour and they go around the circuit, effectively delivering kind of the same content over and over again. We wondered what we could do that was going to be any different, and that an author would want to be a part of.

“We felt we could identify key people and events that we wanted to do, understand who else wanted to do that same event, and bring the festivals together, so that we shared it. We decided to create Reading is Magic as a completely separate brand, and everyone had their own identity within this umbrella brand.

“Bath made a strategic decision to be the lead partner, so we took on the production side. Everyone paid for their own author and chairperson, if it was that kind of event. They supported in kind, in terms of the marketing and organising their own book sales channels. This was quite important for the North American festivals, whose sales channels were very specific to their geography and their audiences.”

While all this took place, digital content poured out, and continues to pour out, from a range of sources, including Penguin At Home, FANE productions, MyVLF, At Home with 4 Indies, and a host of other bookshops. For instance, Portobello Bookshop mounted safe in-store events which they

livestreamed for public consumption. Similarly, indie publisher Orenda Books now holds its book launches in the digital realm, alerting its fans via social media, asking them to email in order to receive an invite.

Case Study: Britain's First Drive-In Book Festival

<https://www.appledorebookfestival.co.uk>

A popular holiday destination, the fishing village of Appledore sits on the North Devon coast. The festival began in 2006, when author Nick Arnold wanted to raise funds to save the village library. Primarily run by volunteers, it relies heavily on supporters, patrons, friends, ticket buyers, and the local business community. The 2019 festival consisted of 73 events, which were a mix of Fringe events and author engagement. A Schools Week delivered more than 120 events to 50 schools and four libraries.

Ann Juby joined the team as artistic director in January 2020. As pandemic restrictions tightened, many of her plans were scrapped in favour of mounting the UK's first Drive-In book festival, consisting of 25 events delivered over five days.

Here's what she said about the experience:

"Throughout March I was optimistic and carried on organising the festival as we thought it would be. In early April we made a contingency plan. Would we postpone? Cancel? Go digital? Go ahead with social distancing provisions? Putting together a timeline for that really does focus the mind. As more festivals cancelled or went digital it was obvious we'd have to look at something different.

"At the start of May I still had a nine-day festival in mind, though it was totally understandable that some of our proposed authors did not feel comfortable travelling, whether because of their health, or their age.

"Around that time I read about a drive-in cinema, and it was a lightbulb moment. I made enquiries, found a company to work with, local to Devon, and we put together a plan to create a safe, socially distanced, drive-in book festival. We had to change the whole format and start afresh with a 5-day festival. I hadn't realised we would be the first one in the UK.

"Our trustees had faith in us. As part of our contingency plan we set a cut-off of mid-July for making a decision. By then I'd costed everything and had a sense from publishers and authors about their feelings, and we put a robust Covid safe plan in place to guarantee safety. On 13th July our trustees made the brave decision to let me run with it. We had an amazing response in terms of writers saying I hope it works for you.

"It was more costly than our normal festival because the infrastructure was more complicated, including getting an 8 metre wide screen, a big stage, a license to transmit through FM radio, and an outside team. We had to buy in generators and fuel. We were used to running the festival in the village community hall, churches, and the local school's theatre, for larger audiences. This year we had to rent a field! We found a fantastic local venue attached to an activity centre, giving us access access to rooms we could use.

“Historically we’ve used a yurt as our green room. We took that to the field, and managed it so we could still socially distance hospitality for the author and chair, and also create a space where authors could sign books. There was a second green room in the building. Between each author the yurt or rooms were sanitised.

“We managed book signings without human interaction. Authors pre-signed all the books, they went into a bag immediately, and that was brought to the Waterstones drive-thru bookstore at the exit for collection. People were recommended to keep the book in the bag for up to 72 hours because they’d been handled. We let everyone know what had been touched and what hadn’t been. We wanted people to feel safe.”

“Each car was parked inside a designated socially distanced square. Groups had to remain inside their squares. They were able to bring deck chairs to sit in front of car within the designated box. We had no provisions for walk-ins.

“Of course none of us know what the weather’s going to be like. In the end, we were lucky and only had some rain on the last day. But we noticed that even on the nice days, a large number of people didn’t get out of their cars.

“We charged a per car fee, for a maximum of five people. Festival Friends had priority booking a week before tickets went on general sale. (We also do special Friends’ events, and they get a discount off at the bookstore. An annual Friends’ membership is £20.) Tickets cost £20 or £30, depending on the event.

“We looked at the possibility of selling tickets per person, but to facilitate movement, getting cars in and out through the entrance and exit, we decided a per car ticket was the answer. Cars had their motors off during events. We were very clear about that, and posted instructions on the screen about how to listen through the car’s radio.”

“We are hoping for small profit, but it was never about that. We did not want to tickets to be unaffordable, and wanted people to feel it was good value for money. Even with only two in a car, that’s £10 a head per event. We had to balance that with trying to break even, and knew there was a possibility we might take a hit. We felt it was more about keeping the festival alive, helping reignite the local community, and connecting people again.”

“In terms of our sponsors, some of those who were historically sponsors were not in a position to do so. We found sponsors for each of the events, but main sponsors were hard to come by. That wasn’t ideal, but we understood. And the community understood. Hopefully they’ll come back.

“In terms of sponsorship hospitality — bearing in mind that we are small and intimate festival — we allowed an event’s sponsors to park in the front row. We created a 10 metre gap between the stage and the first cars, both for the sightlines, and to ensure we had a distance area to use for walking authors onto the stage. We could also use this area for authors to be socially distanced but still meet and greet the sponsors. There was an

opportunity for safe interaction and photographs. Sponsors also received a signed copy of the book. It was a completely different experience for them this year.

“One of our trustees was looking after an author, and after that the author went backstage to be miked up, and the trustee thanked the sponsor again. The sponsor cut them off saying, ‘No let me stop you there, I want to thank you for putting this on.’ I think we got the balance right to ensure there was recognition from author to sponsor.”

“We didn’t go digital partly because I had come up with the drive-in idea, and partly because our festival is in September, and I thought by then, people might be ‘Zoomed out.’ Looking ahead, I hope there will be room for both live and digital events. The concern for most of us is that people are still going to feel nervous, even if restrictions are lifted. We need to come up with solutions that will help people overcome those fears to ensure that our festivals survive and thrive.

“During the events I’d walk around asking people how they found the experience. They said it was nice to actually sit, listen, and be in the zone, rather than online. Audiences want to connect with the writer. I want to feel I’m in the same room as them. That’s something the drive-in brought, even though they were in their cars. The other lovely thing we had was in those moments when humour erupted — it was lovely to hear the laughter across the field. You don’t get that digitally.

“Festivals have had to adapt, and hats off for getting around the technology. I have seen some wonderful digital events. We were *very* fortunate that our drive in festival worked.”

- Additional information about logistics can be found on the festival’s website, in the FAQs section.

WHERE WE LIVE NOW

Talking Points: Observations on aspects of the crisis

“I’ll never have time to read them all and they keep making more!” — Lee Randall, aged 8, driven to despair by her first glimpse of a huge university library.

This section looks at some of the opportunities and threats our sector is addressing going forward.

Innovative, Multi-Media Programming

Let’s be honest; all these months into the pandemic, many of us feel inundated with content. At the start, digital book events were a novelty, now they can feel like a chore, something to keep on top of rather than savour. In the “before” days an average reader might attend one book festival and a couple of bookstore events a year. Even if you’re in the business, as we are, one might attend three or four festivals and a collection of in-store events a year. There was no looming FOMO because most events took place at a remove. Even for a programmer, keenly aware of what’s happening around the UK, an author’s appearance at the Hay or Bath festivals wouldn’t preclude inviting them to appear before a Scottish audience.

Our sector always knew digital was out there, always knew it would need to step up, but we weren’t keeping pace. Which is not to say there’d been *no* digital engagement, far from it. Book Week Scotland has had a digital element for some time. Festivals have filmed events in the past, offering audiences the opportunity to catch up with them online. Edinburgh International Book Festival has offered visitors a chance to hear authors such as Norman Mailer and Margaret Atwood beamed in and appearing on the big screen. At Granite Noir we have offered livestreamed events, and in 2019, collaborated with Crested Butte's Murder in the Mountains for a conversation where half the participants were in Aberdeen, and half in Colorado.

Eleanor Livingstone, director of StAnza, told me they began creating digital content in 2009, for the first Homecoming, and have maintained a tradition of livestreaming some events. For one, they bounced around the globe moving from author to author. “We organised events from Mumbai to Sacramento, with people who organised their own half-hour performance and their own audiences in their venues — theatres, art galleries, book shops. Then they Skyped in. It lasted all day, moving against the clock. It was amazing. A year later we were challenged to do a Skype cyber-slam with the Melbourne

Winter Festival. That was more of a challenge, because it meant holding the same signal for two hours, but we did it!”

Enter the pandemic, and boom, our sector was catapulted into digital, forcing us to upskill at speed. We’ve coped, but there’s much to learn, and technology isn’t the only area where changes need to occur. Programming must adapt in response to the prevalence of digital events happening not only in the moment, but lingering online indefinitely.

The internet is awash with content. It’s currently possible to attend a dozen book events a day, but many feature the same faces, talking about the same books. Therein lies the problem.

From a programmer’s standpoint, there was always a jolt of excitement in being able to secure that big name for your festival.

Caroline Knox, Director of Boswell Book Festival, said, “It slightly takes the fun out of everything if it’s easy to get any author you might like. Normally, in Scotland, it’s a battle to get authors to come to the festival, particularly if you’re somebody like us. Therefore the excitement that you engender around having secured X conveys itself to the audience. I’ve looked at digital festival programmes and they’re full of big names, which is marvellous, but you think, ‘Well, they’ve got this big name, and then *they’ve* got them and *they’ve* got them. . .’ What I don’t know is how local audiences are responding, because we haven’t tried it yet. Probably our local audience doesn’t have this overall view of what’s going on the way we festival people have.”

Earlier I said that digital levels the playing field for festivals with smaller budgets, who can’t fly in international writers for a physical festival. And it makes sense that an immediate reaction to unprecedented hardship is to book the biggest names possible in pursuit of hits on your channel. But the resulting repetition is glaring because content lingers in cyberspace.

The hope, as it is with a physical festival, is that a big name draws people in, making them more likely to attend events featuring lesser-known names. But right now, with so much uncertainty and finances in disarray, festivals might find themselves unwilling to take the risk of putting on a potentially fascinating event if they are worried that it won’t generate views.

That’s why I’m concerned about authors who aren’t brand names losing opportunities to connect with readers — losing opportunities to be the bestsellers of the future. Midas PR’s Georgina Moore has the same concerns: “The people who have lost out are the mid-list authors. It keeps coming up in

my conversations and it's something that came up at the Big Book Weekend, where all the top level programming was getting through. Of course, they needed it to be big names to attract audiences. When you've got your audience in a physical space they might take more chances — not unlike the 3-for-2 offers in bookshops, where you grab something that sounds interesting because you have time to kill before your next meeting. There are fewer risks being taken with virtual events.”

Along with authors, audiences also lose out, and will *tune* out, if they're offered an unvarying diet.

Programmers will have to think differently about what we do and why. I'll talk about Zoom fatigue later, but now that the novelty of digital events has worn off, audiences may respond positively to having fewer, higher quality events to choose from. That will test our mettle in matching chairs to authors, and in building panels with the potential to spark fresh conversations that head in unexpected directions. It should impel us to explore alternate digital formats, away from the traditional talking heads set-up. As someone said recently, “Book events can't just be voices screaming at you from a computer.”

Back in April, Alison Barrow, PR director at Transworld Books (part of Penguin Random House), told me, “I think at the moment we are preaching to the converted, replacing what they would have had normally. They would have gone to festivals and bookshop events. What the industry needs to do is reach beyond that, but we can only do this if we are offering something that is high quality, consistent, entertaining, educative, and that gives you a reason to keep coming back.”

Drew Jerrison, Publicity Manager at Profile Books, said that the industry's immediate response to lockdown was to get as many events as possible out online, targeted at groups with a strong core following. But things dropped off dramatically, especially if an author did multiple events in a row. From his perspective, cherry picking events for his authors to do proved a better option. “We're being more selective now. For example, Attica Locke appeared at Bloody Scotland and she did a talk for Noirwich that was transcribed for *The Guardian*. For us that felt like a real package.”

Alison Barrow recently said, “Exclusivity is a thing. What I've found is where you have a clutch of events the audiences cannibalise each other. If it's online, most fans will go to the first one. If they can't for whatever reason, they'll go to the next one. By the time you've got to number six along the line,

forget it, you've had your moment. What you're looking for is something really different.”

Authors know this. Ian Rankin said, “When you do a live event it's a one-off, not to be repeated. With virtual the event is saved forever and you've suddenly got a worldwide audience for everything you do, which means when you tell a story twice in a row, people will notice”

One way to mitigate that is by creating unusual pairings to spark fresh conversations. Nick Barley did that with author David Mitchell, proposing that he pair Mitchell with folk singer Sam Amidon.

“David kept saying, ‘He sounds much more interesting than me, why can't it just be me interviewing Sam?’ I explained that a lot of people would want to hear about *Utopia Avenue*.”

Mitchell pointed out that by the time Edinburgh rolled around he'd have done 20 or so events around his latest novel. He was bound to repeat stories and jokes over the course of those conversations, and worried about boring his fan base with all those events cached online.

“He said, ‘Thank you for giving me Sam Amidon, and please let me try and create an event which is totally different from anything I've done before. If I do that, it's better for brand Mitchell.’”

Barley concluded, “That story is a blueprint for the kind of conversation every single author should get: What are we going to do together? How can we do it? Let's not do the same thing you did anywhere else in the past. I want more of that.”

At the same time, Barley recognises that the bigger the programme, the less likely it is that each event can benefit from such close attention. It's also true that he and Mitchell have a longstanding relationship, and were able to speak directly, an option that's not always available to programmers when building their schedules.

We should ask what digital offers that a live event cannot, and strive make the most of that. Our competition for audiences comes from not only other festivals and bookstore events, but other media. Effectively, digital events turn us into broadcasters. It's worth looking at other artistic disciplines to see what they do and how that might be adapted to our sector. That could mean creating more content with films, more author- or story-led walks, more audio-only events, or even multi-sensory experiences.

That was the approach taken at Margate Bookie, said Director Andreas Loizou. “Pivot is the most overused word at the moment. Because of my working experience, I’ve used Zoom, Teams, Skype, and I knew that this was not the solution [Margate was] looking for. I remember in April everybody discovered Zoom, *everybody*. It has its place, but it was so overdone. I know that from the events we’re running, it’s harder now to get an audience for a Zoom-only event.”

When his team said, “Let’s go online,” he said, “Let’s wait.”

He wanted to innovate. Step one was a fanzine built around the Punk DIY ethos, offering a showcase to writers in their network. Next they looked at a scheduled poetry slam. “We took the slam and spread it over 15 nights, giving every poet 10 minutes. It built the element of competition. We did it on Facebook and noticed that instead of getting 100 people in a room, we ended up with something like 3,000 views.”

Their third initiative was an online short film festival.

Finally, they launched A Different LENS, an interactive map produced by Elspeth Penfold, an artist who incorporates walking into her practice. The curated literary map uses locative media and can be accessed through a URL on a phone or computer. It will keep evolving. One element is a series of shrines to five authors and their books dotted around town.

Loizou said, “People can take a theme, such as sand, they can write a poem about sand, and we can put it up with sound clips, pictures, videos, capturing what it’s like at the beach. Another of our themes is blindness, so we have people talking about Milton. Elspeth is working with people from East Kent Mencap, who have a completely different view of the town. We got funding for them to do artwork around their thoughts and feelings, and you will click on the map to access ten people’s experiences. We felt that artwork was a more creative response than ten people on a Zoom call — which is a valid experience, but this is a different approach.”

Eleanor Livingstone, Director of StAnza, regularly explores imaginative approaches for her festival’s celebration of poetry. “In the past we’ve used sound installations and things like that. Just because an event has to be online, it doesn’t have to be visual. Part of the work we did over the summer was make audio recordings, which are more concentrated. It’s not necessarily a poor experience because there’s no visuals coming with it.”

Realistically, not every festival is resourced to be able to create cutting edge programming. The team might be freelance or volunteer, the budgets could be low. Are collaboration and co-production ways around that?

Lithub.com's article, *What Happens When Literary Events Move Online?* (Anna Leahy, Sam Risak and Tryphena Yeboah; 15.10.20), offered inspiration about how collaborative programming might work:

“Wordplay . . . was among the first large-scale community literary events to make the shift from in-person to online programming. Founding Director Steph Opitz told us the organizers decided in March to switch formats instead of cancel, in part because she was concerned about all the other cancelled events for authors with new books and in part to curb financial losses. ‘It happened so fast and it was new to us, so we thought we might as well try it,’ Opitz said. Wordplay leaders quickly reached out to organizers of other book festivals to collaborate, which worked out especially well. Wordplay, for instance, hosted an interview with Booker Prize-winning author Salman Rushdie, Oregon Public Radio produced the audio, and The Believer published the transcript.”

The Reading is Magic Festival, and work the Scottish Book Trust does with its nationwide network of partners, are other models we could study for tips and inspiration.

Scottish Book Trust's events run all year round, and all over the country. They receive additional annual funding from SLIC which, in a normal year — 2020 was a blip — they use to fund Book Week Scotland events with every library authority in Scotland. Philippa Cochrane explained, “This year not everybody could participate, because of building closures and so on. In previous years, *every* library service has taken part. The money comes in from SLIC and goes right back out, and we put the Book Week Scotland framework around the event.”

In the first half of each year Scottish Book Trust puts out a call for other partner organisations to take part in Book Week Scotland. This year, organisations could apply to either put on digital event or a socially distanced community activity.

They ended up with some purely digital events, some that were socially distanced, and some that blended the two approaches. Every interpretation reflected the community and partnering organisation's understanding of its audience and their preferences. For example, the University of Glasgow's Creative Writing Programme put on a “Queerness in the 1980s” event with then-Booker-shortlisted writer Douglas Stuart. An event programmed by

Ceòlas, called As an Tobar Stories, featured a collection of twenty of the best Gaelic short stories, read by their authors, who were also interviewed about the impact that writing in Gaelic would have on their future careers. (For more information, visit <https://www.ceolas.co.uk>.)

Another example was the guided walk put on by Kinross-shire Local Events Organisation (www.kleo.org.uk). During a walk around Kirkgate Park with author, illustrator and designer Esther Kent, attendees were encouraged to think about things they could make from a pine-cone and a feather, and finding a favourite bird to draw, to cite two examples of activities. They were encouraged to share photos of their creations on the KLEO Facebook page.

For more information about Scottish Book Trust's year-round events, please visit their website, www.scottishbooktrust.com, and feel free to drop them a line. Cochrane told me she'd love to see more book festivals get involved with Book Week Scotland.

At Reading is Magic, said Programme Consultant Janet Smyth, "We had already chosen Cressida Cowell as our guest selector for Bath Children's Festival, so she migrated into the Reading Is Magic brand, which gave us a nice framework in which to establish the partnerships and to slightly separate the ownership of them. We created a new image and identity and tried not to overlap on content, so that we could pool our audience groups and still provide content that we may have had individually within the physical world. We could bring this together and then put it out to a conjoined audience group."

Another model to consider is Paisley Book Festival, which took place for the first time just before lockdown, but is migrating to digital for its second year. Paisley benefits from an array of grassroots activities, such as local writers groups and reading groups. Libraries and schools are also engaged with community events.

The festival's Co-producer Jess Orr said, "What was different from other book festivals that I'd worked on was that some of the events would come from a local call out. That's an interesting balance to strike between showcasing the local authors and events that have been pitched to us, and the other part of the programme which is us thinking about who we want and pursuing them."

If they green-light a pitch it's treated like any other event, with the same fee, support, and so on. Proposals can come from individuals or organisations. If the latter, the festival team creates a partnership around the event, though they handle all ticket sales and marketing. The festival also works with guest curators, working around a theme of their choosing.

As an aside, it's worth noting that every time we collaborate we gain access to additional mailing lists and networks. Alison Barrow noted, "One benefit of [Penguin, Random House] partnering with festivals and bookshops, or just any third party, is the access to that third party's database of contacts who have previously signed up for events in real space or just have an interest in connecting."

Children's and YA Events

Digital children's events present an interesting challenge, and my experience as a viewer (with no experience of parenting, it has to be said) is that it's easy to miss the mark. Without young readers in the room to focus on, writers and interviewers can lose track of what the event is for, speaking as peers rather than delving into questions that kids want answered. I have seen writers read in uninflected tones, forgetting to look up and engage with the camera. That's bad enough before an adult audience, worse if holding a child's attention is required. It's not the way to get kids to fall in love with books.

Janet Smyth said, "Kids are not hanging around for long. Rarely do they sit down and watch a movie all the way through or even a TV series; everything is short, sharp bursts of immediate content that has to be sparkly, has to have a bit of music and has to be really sharply edited. The competition is more challenging in the digital world for young people's events — and they are making their own content, as well. They're all using TikTok, they're all making Instagram stories — and they're better at it than we are."

In other words, there's a difference between a festival arriving in town once a year as the highlight of the local calendar, or it being just one more thing on a screen vying for a family's attention. The goal of attracting live viewing figures for kids' events becomes even more problematic during holidays and weekends and possibly shouldn't be a goal at all.

Children's author Vivian French told me, "The people who have a little bit of a performance background really score because they know how to change expression, and bring things for kids to watch. I think the online events work much better if you've got somebody interviewing the author, because it gives you a break, a different face to look at, and a different voice to listen to. Plus, they can respond to what the person has said. As long as they both keep the viewer involved."

She recalled being raised on programmes such as Tony Hart's, and recommends that we look to children's television for inspiration. "Children's authors and illustrators should be recommended to see how they do it because they're experts. Some of the draw-along events I've seen this year have been great, but sometimes they go too fast. Keep it really slow, but chat a lot and make it interesting — maybe even make some mistakes. In other words, making it feel more realistic works better. You need to talk to the camera as if there is a person there, which people sometimes forget, and then viewers feel left out."

Tying digital content to a schools' programme, complete with resources — the model used by Reading is Magic — may be the answer.

In terms of numbers, by early November they'd had more than 10,000 video views with people tuning in from 67 different countries. The team projected they would reach 176,000 children by the end of 2020.

I've written elsewhere in this report about some of the nuts and bolts involved in putting on Reading is Magic. It was a carefully constructed, dedicated children's programme created with schools in mind from the very beginning.

Janet Smyth said, "We packaged it so that there were resources around each event that teachers could tap into. For example, for Adam Murphy's event, the teacher could use that for a whole hour in the classroom. They could pause it, get the kids to do their drawings, and then come back. We encouraged authors to respond as if they were live, for example, saying, 'Hi, I love what you've just done.' Kids events, unlike events for adults, are a different ballgame if you want to do it in a way that it's going to be successful and going to be watched, and in a way that's going to be interesting. If an event's production values are at all ropey people stop watching."

Smyth said, "We made a deliberate choice to be a schools programme, because over the summer there had been a busy marketplace of family content, not just book festivals but theatres and music. We decided the one thing nobody had really focused on was a festival designed for schools use."

In Scotland this past summer, Glasgow's libraries took part in the Summer Reading Challenge, delivering The Silly Squad, featuring 14 authors. Viewing numbers across Scotland were low, said Glasgow Life's Katrina Brodin, Programme Manager (Reader Development and Literacy).

"By the end of August it was 1,795 views for 14 events across Scotland, with heavy promotion. Events were about 20-25 minutes long and the average view duration was coming in at 4.22 minutes. That's only 20% of the event

being consumed digitally, whereas in that protected space or the live space, those kids are captivated from beginning to end. To put that in context, it was the holiday, so there wasn't a schools route to promote it."

Several festival directors I spoke to said the current approach to digital children's events would benefit from a tweak, whether that's rejigging their length, their content, or the way they're produced. The answer might even be that live audiences are essential for events aimed at very young kids.

It is worth considering Young Adult (YA) events separately from children's events. Wigtown Book Festival's artistic director Adrian Turpin was particularly positive about the role of digital in the festival's Young Adult programme: "Traditionally it's been hard to create satisfying YA events in a physical space. Lack of access to transport for young people, a large, sparsely populated region, and competing activities during the small windows in which events are possible have meant that getting a core group together is always a challenge outside of an education programme.

"This is also often a disincentive for publishers and writers who may be asked to travel a long way and give up days of their time to speak to a very small audience. Digital allowed us to reach a wider audience and to programme consistently later in the day (for example, 9pm), at a time more appropriate to the audience.

"We recognise that the experience and being in the same room as writers is even more important for a YA audience than most. But this is one area where a hybrid model in future may be particularly effective — offering live events to small audiences that are simultaneously streamed to young people who can't otherwise get there, and to authors' wider fanbases."

Measure for Measure

Data rules modern life, but in our rush to measure absolutely everything, shouldn't we stop to ask *why* we're doing it — and how to translate those statistics into meaningful changes?

Adrian Turpin asked, "What does it mean when you have 30,000 YouTube views? Is that still the same high quality level of engagement? Do we know? We can talk about how successful we are in terms of numbers, but what are we? What are we trying to achieve? Does what we're trying to achieve change because of digital?"

Nick Barley voiced similar ideas. “I'm not asking what digital success looks like, I'm asking, ‘How can we create public discourse? A community of thought?’ Thinking things through together is what really feels special when a festival event works. Online and live events need to contribute to the sense of a community of thought. If they're not doing that, then they're probably not very good events. Success means creating a sense among participants that they are part of something that's making them think, helping them understand their place in this scary, confusing, chaotic anarchic world, and the sense of agency and trying to make it a little bit better. If we can do that, then we've got a festival.”

What are we measuring?

Registration at events, is one measure (the benefits of using a registration system are discussed elsewhere). Chris Bone, of Hay Festivals, talking about this year’s May programme in Wales, said, “Some of our events were showing up to 20,000 registrations, and we thought, ‘Okay but what will that equate to in terms of live views? A few hundred?’ Not at all, it was an astonishing number, like 70 to 80% of people who registered would turn up. That has changed. Now, I think we're around 50%. But I've heard about some festivals that are in the region of 10-20%. A lot depends on how early your programme goes up. We've yet to see where the sweet spot is, but if you’re asking people to register, it seems to be a month to three weeks before the festival, get to a good level of commitment.”

We also measure the number of visits per event, though it’s worth remembering that each tick represents a device, and we don’t know how many people are sharing it. Visiting figures can be separated into ‘on the day’, followed by a cumulative tally of catch-up views while a video’s available online.

But once the audience is in, how long do they *stay* before logging off? That varies event to event, festival to festival.

Paula Ogilvie said, “We saw an average 10% drop off between an event starting and finishing. Our author Q&As normally started 15-20 minutes before an event’s scheduled end time and we didn’t see any discernible reduction in viewing numbers over this period. When the Q&A continued *after* an event had finished (i.e. the screening was over and only the post-event holding image remained visible), viewing numbers dropped by 55%, and steadily petered out. We wouldn’t really expect any other pattern of behaviour.”

Nick Barley said, “Our audiences stayed in events on average for 43 minutes. Inevitably a proportion will have landed on an event, thought ‘this is not for me,’ and left after a few minutes, so if you factor those in, we think 43 minutes is very significant, because it means that the vast majority stayed for the full hour. I very much hope it’s a figure matched by other literary festivals, and if so, it will prove that our online audiences are tenacious and deeply engaged.”

Wigtown audiences watching on YouTube stayed an average of 15 minutes. That number requires context, however. Wigtown’s figures are skewed by the fact that they had many events (e.g. short films and readings) that were 15 minutes or less in length. Further analysis is taking place of individual events, but Wigtown’s experience of hour-long events outside the festival is that about 80% of the audience stay for the entire event.

Bloody Scotland audiences stayed an average of 38 minutes on Friday, 45 minutes on Saturday, and on Sunday they stayed an average of 56 minutes, a figure that might skew higher because that evening the festival broadcast a play.

As an aside, I experienced an interesting phenomenon thanks to the rolling model of events at both Bloody Scotland and Cheltenham. Because they followed in quick succession, I was drawn in. Having pencilled only one event into my diary, I found myself hanging on to see subsequent events. If others did that as well, it must have had an effect on the statistics. Presumably I was only counted the first time I joined the feed?

Most festivals were viewed by far more visitors than they’d welcome in person in a normal year. For example, Bloody Scotland had 27,000 visitors tuning in from five continents and 20 countries, three times more than physically attended in 2019. Bob McDevitt said, “For us, success was the genuinely global level of engagement, which was brilliant. We got really good feedback about the festival. I also thought panels were good, because we weren’t competing against ourselves, with three venues running simultaneous events, and we were able to put at least one big name on each panel.”

Edinburgh International Book Festival’s 146 events were viewed more than 210,000 times around the world, a number that will grow thanks to those catching up on demand. During live events the screen displayed a ticker, and watching Nicola Sturgeon interview Bernadine Evaristo I saw the viewing tally race into the thousands — many more than would fit into their largest marquee, which seats around 750 people. According to the festival’s website, a whopping

5000 tuned in on the night and 11,220 watched later on demand. Audiences came from every continent except Antarctica.

Event in the Spotlight

In July, Aye Write programmed a conversation with two popular crime writers. Katarina Brodin said, “We sent an email out to about 18,000 ticket buyers to tell them about that event. I think 34% opened the email and 6% clicked through. In terms of cold call that’s successful, because 2% is usual in the industry.

“The event received 880 live views and playbacks. The average view duration on that night on the live views and playbacks was 15 minutes 20 seconds. Maybe a third of the event. The next day it was still up and we had 930 views, with an average viewing duration of 17 minutes 22 seconds, which is 26%. By day two, it had almost 9,000 impressions online. Twenty-four hours later that had gone to 11,044 views, but the average view duration had dropped to 16 minutes and eight seconds.”

An **impression** is when digital content renders on a person’s screen. They’re used to measure the performance of most kinds of online advertising. A **view** refers to the number of times someone engages with digital content. To qualify as “viewed” the content need not be watched through to the end. Five seconds counts as a view on Facebook, and 30 seconds counts on YouTube.

For that summertime event, said Brodin, “Impressions were just under 12,000. Two weeks after the event we had 1,417 views, and average view duration had fallen to 15 minutes and 40 seconds, and we had about 15,500 thousand impressions. The biggest route for people organically discovering the event was via suggested links that you get on YouTube, and the biggest social media push to it was from Twitter. People accessed it via an organic search on YouTube 79 times.”

Still, what do we do with these numbers? Maybe we need a digital impact toolkit, suggests Adrian Turpin. “Between our launch and the end of the festival we had 325,000 page views on our website. We had 32,000 YouTube views and 38,000 Facebook views. The YouTube average stay was about 15 minutes. Is that good? In the same way that we’ve become used to KPI figures for audience attendance, we need some kind of metrics for digital.

“Out of all the people from abroad, Canadians watched the longest, at 17 minutes. Americans averaged nine minutes, which probably tells you something about the different country’s attention spans, and reflects on Canada being more attached to Scotland.

“If we’re going to talk about the impact of our events, we’ve got to say, ‘What are we trying to achieve? Have we actually achieved it? What figures can we bring to show that we’re getting engagement? Do we need to do that in a different way?’ Nobody’s had time to worry about that. Everyone’s worried about surviving, and funders are worrying about organisations surviving, but in the long term, we cannot have a sector where we’re saying, ‘We did really well,

we had 20,000 views.’ For all I know we should have had 300,000 Facebook views and 300,000 YouTube views.”

Here we are beaming our content around the world, but what is it doing for those audiences? Or for our festivals? How can we retain our new digital audience without alienating loyal core supporters?

Audience Engagement: Are They Paying Attention?

Does this sound familiar? You log into a digital book chat and while the introductions are happening, spend a couple of minutes checking out what the participants are wearing. You twist your head to read spines and see how many of the same books you own. You admire their paint hue, their cabinetry, their soft furnishings, their artworks. Eventually your attention refocuses on what’s being said, and it’s truly interesting — but does it require your eyeballs?

A friend of mine tweeted about how much he enjoyed hearing my conversation with Rutger Bregman for Edinburgh International Book Festival — while also framing a picture. This is pretty common. Lots of us, with the best will in the world, treat digital book events like radio broadcasts or podcasts. We listen but stop watching after a while.

It makes me wonder: how invested are we, really? (Especially knowing we can go back and catch it again later, if we’re super motivated.)

Alison Barrow has organised thousands of book events over the course of her career, and said, “For me there is something very flattening about an event online. All parties need to massively up their energy; it has to be a performance. When you’re in a real space with people, picking up the chemistry in the room, picking up body language signals, the audience picks that up too. There’s a ripple of laughter, a sense of discomfort sometimes, or maybe pathos — whatever the emotion, you pick up much more of it in a group space.

“For viewers watching through a screen, so much of that is syphoned away. Also, very often we’re watching in our own space and distracted because there’s a noise outside, or a knock at the door, or something on the stove that we need to attend to. There isn’t that same sense of community.

“Viv Groskop did a Zoom masterclass for us at work. She said, ‘Forget the visual, because after five minutes, we’re just listening more than looking at what’s happening on the screen. It’s all about the audio, it’s about the content. It’s not about the visual drama.’ When I’m briefing authors doing these things for the first time, I now tell them to think about it as an intimate conversation,

as though they were doing a radio or a podcast, because very often your audience is multitasking.”

And, as we’ve seen, very often your audience checks out before the event concludes.

All of this makes me wonder, for traditional author interviews and panel events, how much visuals really matter? Are we wasting precious resources making them as good as they can be? Would we be better off directing our efforts at ensuring the sound is pristine, providing transcripts, subtitles, or translations, while funnelling resources into other *kinds* of digital events? What must we do to hold someone’s full attention throughout? It’s a conundrum.

And if we do move to blended festivals, how can we avoid creating a two-tier experience, creating a them-and-us schism between the fun those attending in person are having, versus those watching online? Fairly or unfairly, festivals are often branded “Too Middle Class” or “Too Exclusive.” How might that scenario affect views about our sector?

How much deeper is our involvement when we’re actually in the room? We’ve all seen people glued to their phones during live events, and I recall doing one festival interview while an elderly author slumped in the front row audibly snoring. But these are minority occurrences.

In *Literary Festivals and Contemporary Book Culture* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), Millicent Weber explores the idea of being part of a greater entity: “Motivations for attending literary festivals are complex and varied. . . . Seeing, hearing, and being in the same space as the creator of a work adds an extra, valuable dimension to some individuals’ enjoyment of creative work. Their satisfaction [comes] from encountering the author ‘in the flesh,’ and particularly the way in which this encounter is believed to augment, rather than undermine, enjoyment of the written work.

“Social engagement with other audience members, regardless of their taste in literature, is the strongest motivator to attend. Literary festival audiences seek experiences that combine engaging leisure activities with cultural, intellectual, and professional development. Being physically in the space meant that the audience member had undertaken to provide their full attention to the event. Listening and responding to the same cues as a group of other people, in the same physical space and within the same set of social and cultural norms, offers a unique sense of interconnection.”

Factor in the excitement of enjoying a conversation and then queuing to meet the author afterwards, and that chance of a moment together — which is as important for authors as it is for readers.

Speaking from his home in Ontario at this year's Bloody Scotland, Linwood Barclay said, "This is great, there's no jet lag or airport queues, but the bad thing is the lack of human connection."

Ian Rankin told me, "With digital events the screen goes blank. You don't go backstage and say, 'Wasn't that great?' or, 'Wasn't that a really interesting question from the floor?' In the green room you keep the discussion going, or at the signing someone might ask a question they didn't get to ask in the tent. After a live event you've got such a buzz when you see a queue of people waiting with your new book in their hands. Everyone queuing up is a fan, no one's coming along to tell you how bad you are. You're getting all this love and attention. It's like getting a massage.

"Writers spend most of their life thinking they are not really good, and they work in isolation. Having that feedback sets you up for starting the next book, and writers need that. It's one of the things that's been lost, that social interaction. Part of it is also tactile — you're touching people and shaking hands and getting hugs. I miss all that."

What I haven't mentioned is the engagement of ideas, the way one live event can propel you into another, until you can practically see ideas whizzing through the air. StAnza's Eleanor Livingstone said, "Festivals give you a kind of aggregate experience. If you go to one thing, and you're thinking thoughts, and then you're sitting at another event, and it resonates with something that was just said that morning or the day before. And then you come out of an event and meet people who've been to something different and you compare notes."

Similarly, a digital festival lacks the kind of author-to-author and author-to-industry engagement happening behind the scenes. In public spaces, green rooms, restaurants and pubs, friendships might be forged, collaborations launched, or fresh industry alliances created, such as an author meeting a new agent or publisher.

Getting out and pressing the flesh, is especially vital for authors at the start of their careers. They need to engage with readers, meet festival teams, meet booksellers — in person. Going to a festival located someplace their book tour wouldn't visit brings them face to face with potential readers.

Ian Rankin speculated, “What might happen is that authors at the start of their career will still be taken on tour because they need to build up that readership, and the best way to do that is through personal appearances. Going to book shops in the middle of nowhere and talking to six people is how your career evolves, and it's a valuable part of the process.”

The Importance of Good Chairing

Thoughts about engagement lead me to thoughts about the increased importance of good chairing in the digital realm. To be blunt, bad chairing is even more noticeable online, and it's a major turn-off.

Before you cry, “You *would* say that!” let me quote others, beginning with author Ever Dundas, who said, “Chairs can make or break events. They are really important. I don't think some festival programmers take this seriously enough. I get really aggravated when chairs aren't doing what they should do. It's a real skill.”

Author Gavin Francis said, “It's not easy chairing digitally, is it? In person you can pick up on nonverbal cues, and can communicate with your author if you feel they're running out of steam and need a bit of a nudge. Online it's hard to communicate that when everything you do can be seen by the whole audience.”

Paula Ogilvie pointed out that her festival didn't have heavy edits to make on its pre-recorded events because they deliberately chose chairs who knew their stuff. “They knew how to lead an event and how to keep it tight.”

And with so much repetition out there online, choosing a good, perhaps unexpected chair can put a new spin on an event. You wouldn't find Marian Keyes interviewing Ian Rankin at your average crime festival, but when Fane productions teamed these two popular authors up, the event proved successful and distinctive.

Ruth Wishart said, “[Digitally speaking], it helps if you've already either chaired or have a personal relationship with the author. I chaired Kerry Hudson for Ullapool. I was at home, she was in Prague, and the technician was somewhere in Wester Ross. It could have been a nightmare but it was perfectly agreeable, because I'd met Kerry at another book festival and gotten to know her. Where you're starting from scratch with somebody digitally, without being in a studio setting, it's more difficult. You don't have the facial signals and the

body language and so forth. The two dimensional space is never quite as intimate.”

She added, “I know I'm hopelessly biased in this regard, but it is very important to get good chairs. If there is a shy author, or one who needs a lot of steering, it's helpful to know that the person that you've got chairing the event has been down that route before and will know how to bring them out.”

Let's think about body language for a minute, because it's an aspect of good chairing, and its absence, on digital, may be part of the reason why many of us are treating digital events as if they were radio programmes.

The pandemic inspired a rash of articles with titles such as *Why Zoom is Terrible* (Kate Murphy in the *New York Times*, 29.4.20), *Zoom Fatigue and the New Ways to Party* (Anna Russell, *The New Yorker*, 17.9.2020), and *Why the Zoom Gloom Has Set In* (Maya Levitin, *Unheard*, 27.5.20)

Murphy explained, “The way the video images are digitally encoded and decoded, altered and adjusted, patched and synthesized introduces all kinds of artifacts: blocking, freezing, blurring, jerkiness and out-of-sync audio. These disruptions, some below our conscious awareness, confound perception and scramble subtle social cues. Our brains strain to fill in the gaps and make sense of the disorder, which makes us feel vaguely disturbed, uneasy and tired without quite knowing why.”

This matters because we're sensitive to facial expressions. “Authentic expressions of emotion are an intricate array of minute muscle contractions, particularly around the eyes and mouth, often subconsciously perceived, and essential to our understanding of one another. But those telling twitches all but disappear on pixelated video or, worse, are frozen, smoothed over or delayed to preserve bandwidth.

“Not only does this mess with our perception, but it also plays havoc with our ability to mirror. Without realizing it, all of us engage in facial mimicry whenever we encounter another person. It's a constant, almost synchronous, interplay. To recognize emotion, we have to actually embody it, which makes mirroring essential to empathy and connection. When we can't do it seamlessly, as happens during a video chat, we feel unsettled because it's hard to read people's reactions and, thus, predict what they will do.”

Trying to read these cues on a screen consumes a lot more energy than sitting opposite each other in person. And there's no audience on hand, radiating

energy and good will while you're beavering away on stage, trying to draw out those ideas and stories.

Anna Russell's piece described the work of Jeremy Bailenson, founding director of the Virtual Human Interaction Lab at Stanford University: "Bailenson has argued that Zoom and other video platforms cause users to experience 'nonverbal overload.' On video calls, faces appear much larger than they would in real life, creating the impression that you are very close — too close — to one another. (Everyone's a close talker on Zoom.) Then there's the fact, often remarked upon, that on Zoom you're always on. In real life, when members of a group aren't speaking, they're looking at the speaker or they're looking down, or they're looking at their notes."

When I chair a digital event I tack my notes to the wall behind my laptop so that I can look across, rather than down. I concentrate on my author's face, as if we were really eye-to-eye. I nod and gesticulate more than normal, to reassure them that I am paying attention and engaged with what they're saying. It's more intense than chairing live.

Interestingly, when I've chaired in a studio with an author who was beaming in, the experience was intense, but a degree less fraught, possibly because their image was enormous on screen, and it felt more like being together. Maybe it was having the tech team for an audience. It might also have to do with the difference between working in a bigger space versus feeling confined within rigid parameters in my flat, trying not to move too much so that I don't fall out of the laptop camera's frame.

(One notable exception was an event I filmed in a studio during which an author's image froze repeatedly. It became a stressful hour of second guesses, listening extra-hard to cadences to anticipate when an answer might end in order to be ready to fill the space without allowing awkward gaps.)

On a final note: some of the people I spoke to felt that digital events can feel more intimate than live events because author and interviewer go into a kind of bubble. Safe in their home, with no sense of an audience's presence, an author might open up in a way they wouldn't otherwise. I'd like to think this was another example of the beauty of skilful chairing, rather than a function of digital transmission, but then I *would* say that.

Cultural Tourism or Cultural Exporters?

If any festival anywhere in the world can theoretically book any author from anywhere in the world to be part of a digital event, how will festivals retain their individuality? And if festivals live online, what happens to the local communities they serve? In my mind these questions are linked.

In April I wrote that “a festival is not simply a place to hear authors in conversation, it’s a destination in its own right, playing a significant role in the local community. The revival of Wigtown’s fortunes is a case in point. At live literary festivals . . . attendees become part of a community in a designated bubble for book lovers. Magic happens. They meet fellow readers, favourite authors, and discover new things to love.

“Festivals encompass activities beyond book panels. At Granite Noir, for example, we programme drama, music, and film events, and held one talk in the refurbished Aberdeen Art Gallery. Research has shown that festivals increase tourism, provide spending opportunities, and provide employment. Their effect is much bigger than what happens in the auditorium.”

How much bigger? Well in year two of Granite Noir we noticed an influx of new ticket holders. A little digging revealed that they were the friends and family of the dedicated crime fiction lovers who’d supported us initially. Those early adopters had gone home, enthused about having a fantastic time, and brought us reinforcements from around the world.

Adrian Turpin said, “We have a tradition in Scotland and the UK for people coming together at book festivals to listen to authors, dispensing wisdom, entertainment, whatever. It’s been very grassroots based and geographically specific. Festivals reflect their communities. If that element is taken out, what are we left with? Even if we can say we’re reaching these huge numbers, we’re reaching New Zealand and Canada, what happens to the cultural tourism aspect of it? Or are we being ambassadors for Scottish culture?”

“In a digital age, should we still be thinking our core audiences are our locals? Is it more important than I’m pumping out an image of Scotland and Scottish literary culture, and Dumfries and Galloway around the world? Or that I’m actually serving an audience that we’ve built up, who have been coming to events in Wigtown for many years? Questions like that probably sound really pretentious but they’re important to think about.”

He added, “If one of the opportunities the digital approach gives us is audience development, okay. In a digital model this becomes a large chunk of our audience; in a hybrid model this is a chunk of our *extra* audience, which

we've got to come up with more effective ways of developing, because competition becomes harder.”

The audience for Edinburgh International Book Festival was noticeably different, said Nick Barley. “This year 50% of our audience came from outside the UK. In a normal year, 75% come from Scotland, and most of those are from Edinburgh and the Lothians. Of the remaining 25%, the vast majority come from England or elsewhere in the UK.

“The proportion of people who come from outside the UK is probably 4%, representing people who have come to Edinburgh for the festivals, intending to go to a range of things. We've gone from 4% to 50%, which is astonishing in terms of the international reach. But it also means that quite a significant proportion of the people who were or have been regular audience members didn't come. Whilst it was a really interesting shift in the pattern, it also marks a diminution of the number of people from Edinburgh and the Lothians who would normally be stalwarts of the festival.”

Lyndsey Fineran said, “A lot of the changes we made this year were because our hands are forced. We often get told, and I'm sure a lot of festivals are the same, ‘Why don't you film your events? Why don't you record your events?’ Because festivals create this incredible content, and it just goes. But that's part of the magic of it, because for the people in the room it only happens once.”

The lack of footfall has economic ramifications for everyone, but is perhaps more noticeable in smaller communities.

Ullapool's Joan Michael said, “My thought, and this is not the committee's thought, it's my own, is that we do our festival digitally next year, but if we had to go digital after that, forget it. Part of our thing is the place. People come for the views, the pub. They come because it's small and they mix — we don't have green rooms, the writers come and take part in other people's sessions and ask questions. Without that, the whole atmosphere is gone.”

Isla Rosser-Owen, Director of the Islay Book Festival, said, “The festival grew up out of a book club in one of the fishing villages, and has always been very much rooted in the community. Most of our visitors in a normal year would be from the local community, or people who are on holiday on the island. It's not so much about attracting cultural tourism, although, because we have expanded over the last few years, it is sort of slowly moving in that direction. I

think we're at the stage where we don't necessarily want to expand much further. We don't want to lose that community rootedness.

“During our online events we had a very different audience. Normally our audience would be maybe 80% local community. Online that was more like 20%. Viewers came largely from mainland Scotland and the rest of the UK. We got some international audience as well.

“I think we attracted people who would normally come on whisky holidays. We picked up a lot of people from Twitter and Facebook. There was a lot of interest from Canada, but also US people with Islay ancestry who tune into anything about Islay. We also partnered up on an event with Bocas Lit festival in Trinidad and Tobago, because there's an anthology of Island writing that we've been looking at. This is where digital events are very handy, because we thought, ‘How could we ever do that with the authors coming from islands across the world?’ We ended up hosting a conversation with the editor, based in Trinidad, and writers from Barbados, Tonga, St Lucia and Bermuda.”

Retaining a sense of place was one reason why Edinburgh International Book Festival built a studio, to be seen to be broadcasting from the Scottish capital (this is discussed elsewhere). It's why Bob McDevitt and his colleague made a film showcasing the beauty of Stirling for Bloody Scotland. And it was a vital element of Adrian Turpin's plans for this year's Wigtown Book Festival.

The team established three key goals for the festival, the first being: “To create a kind of digital simulacrum of what it would have felt like to be in Wigtown at the festival.

“That meant our soundscape project and videos, and using social media to amplify that. We wanted to make sure we were profile-raising for the region, and I think we did that quite well. We wanted to work with businesses, because one short-term aim is to survive the next couple of years. We built the bookshops into it, and the book town. That was a positive thing for us.

“The theoretical part was asking ‘How can we work with and for the book town and its people?’ And it was hard to achieve. Then it was about working out that there was a wider audience that could be brought in. I think the jury's still out on that. Early stats suggest that there's a slightly higher percentage of people from overseas and outside Scotland [watching events], but again, that's a very different quality of engagement to getting them to actually come to Wigtown.”

Bringing tourists into an area is more than a PR exercise, it provides a necessary jolt to the economy, as well. It's estimated that the combined Edinburgh August festivals bring anywhere from £300m to £1bn into the city.

In 2019, Wigtown Book Festival generated £4.3 million for the regional economy, primarily from tourist visits and spend during the event itself. No one who attended the 20th anniversary event celebrating Wigtown becoming Scotland's National Book Town could fail to be moved by the before and after photographs and stories telling of a dramatic reversal of fortunes in what was a struggling town.

Sure, digital attendees might be inspired to come along in person at a future date, but in significant numbers?

The Environment

Watching Ann Patchett speak at The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival, I enjoyed hearing her admit to being an introvert living as an extrovert on behalf of her career. Post-pandemic, she thinks she might object to getting on a plane and coming to a book festival, from personal preference, and out of concern for the environment. She said she hopes she'll have the courage of her convictions and feel able to say, "No I won't come but I will do it digitally."

I heard similar thoughts from Ian Rankin: "An author might say, 'I can come here and speak to 650 people, or we can do it from my living room, and I can speak to 2,500.' They'll think, why should I get on that plane? Why should I use up that carbon footprint? Why should I spend the time?' An event can take up three days of my life, while a digital event takes an hour. I've got three days back to be doing some work, and it's a real benefit to the planet."

StAnza's Eleanor Livingstone points out, "There is a contradiction between the idea that cultural tourism is something Scotland is trying to encourage, and the idea of us all being as green as possible. At StAnza we always try to make everyone travelling within the UK come by train, but the logistics don't always work. And of course, it doesn't work for international guests." ([Here](#) is a link to The Environmental Strategy for Scotland.)

Digital events are good for the environment and may offer Scottish festivals a simple work-around post-Brexit, and where visa issues arise, as has happened in the past. But if we do not bring in international authors or those

coming from some distance, we risk excluding them from the physical space and all the benefits that come from live interactions.

It's already common to work around a publisher's plans to bring their author to the UK, so conversations between festivals and the industry about how to tackle this should prove useful. And if a spirit of cooperation and co-programming develops, it may be that the damage done by flights can be ameliorated by making great use of an author's time once they are here.

Monetisation (and Book Sales)

It's a truth universally acknowledged that people are reluctant to pay for content on the internet. We've seen the effect that has had on the newspaper and music industries. I would hate to see our festival sector endure the same fate, but in reaction to a global crisis, a precedent was set and most events were offered free of charge, at least at the point of delivery. Now we have to figure out how to convince audiences to pay for access to all or part of our programmes. If we don't, we won't be able to put them on at all.

Janet Smyth spoke for all of us when she told me, "The digital content being offered free is really expensive to make. I think there's a slight disconnect with our audiences. We've not been particularly good at telling them what we have to do to make their content. We pay for Netflix and Amazon Prime and the BBC, but we know the production values and the quality. We have to try and get that message over that even though it's a writer sitting on their Zoom, it still costs us money to make that for them."

Opinions seem divided between those saying we place less value on things we can access for free, and those opposed.

Ullapool's Joan Michael said, "In a way, putting events online is doing authors a disservice. People say, 'I can just go and watch them, it's up there for free, so why should I go out and pay? Doing my risk assessment for a funding application, beyond COVID, one risk I've put down is that we won't get our projected income. People might think, 'Why are we going to pay when we can see all these things for free?'"

Still, it's been heartwarming watching social media and scrolling through streams of messages thanking festivals for providing this trove of free content. Many of the messages explained that the cost of travel, childcare and accommodation, as much as the cost of tickets, has always been a prohibiting

factor, and for the first time ever they were able to take part in a festival they longed to visit.

Eleanor Livingstone said, “I don’t agree with the argument I’ve heard, which is that if people get events for free they don’t value them. I’m not saying that never happens, but I think that’s a UK attitude. I started going to festivals in Eastern Europe about 15 years ago and there, the tradition is that culture is valuable, culture is something that will be paid for by your taxes. You don’t expect to pay for it personally, but you value it and make sure your children get to experience it. I went to events in small villages that were not for children, but the parents in these villages thought that this cultural offering was something their children should appreciate. It really made me think, it's not you don't value it because you pay for it, you value it because there’s a tradition which encourages you to value it.”

Festival income comes from many streams, including Creative Scotland, local council, and private funding. It comes from sponsorship deals, ticket sales, and for many festivals, from book sales, either through their own shop, or as a percentage cut of its bookseller’s on site sales. For some festivals there’s revenue from on-site cafes and bars to factor in. All of this goes into paying annual and casual salaries, authors’ appearance fees, chairing fees, venue costs, printing costs, equipment costs, travel and accommodation, entertainment costs (including the author care provided in green rooms), etc..

Without ticket sales, festivals who don’t charge are forced to go cap in hand to the public asking for donations. And while the public is generous, the sums coming in are a fraction of normal income.

Digital festivals are *not* inexpensive to mount, and if the immediate future includes socially distanced seating for live events, audience numbers will have to be lower. Even if the vaccine does turn out to be a miracle, there’s no guarantee that the public will feel safe about gathering in theatre-settings anytime soon. We must figure out how to monetise our digital events.

Nick Barley said, “The normal turnover of our festival income is just over 4,000,000. About 1 million is ticket sales, and just over 1 million is book sales and cafe and bar income. When we announced the cancellation of our physical festival, the million pounds of the ticket sales and the million pounds with the book sales — gone. The remaining roughly 2 million is split quite easily: half a million from public sector subsidy, government and the council and expert

funding, that kind of thing. One and a half million from sponsors, friends, benefactors and donors to private support.”

Wigtown mounted a fundraising drive that brought in around £30,000, but that’s a fraction of the normal income from its ten day festival.

Ian Rankin said, “We want to try and get people used to paying a few quid to be at the festival. We've got to try and manufacture a sense of goodwill so that people would be willing to pay. Look at how many people are watching events. At Bloody Scotland and Edinburgh they got 1500, 2000 for some. If we can get 2000 people paying even a small amount of money that's going to make this viable.” In other words, while there may be a perceived value difference between digital and physical events, meaning we can’t charge as much for digital, we have an exponentially greater audience. Small sums add up.

Most festivals around Britain wanted to protect their relationships with sponsors, not only for their 2020 programmes, but looking to the future. Pandemic economics meant not all past sponsors were able to participate this year, but the general consensus from my conversations is that there’s been tremendous support. People value the sector and what it delivers.

Elsewhere in this report, Paula Ogilvie talked about the decision taken by Baillie Gifford Borders Book Festival to spread out its programme in order to offer something special to sponsors. In the case study about Appledore’s drive-in festival, Ann Juby described their efforts to create special moments for sponsors.

Nick Barley said, “We spoke to our major donors very quickly after we cancelled on the first of April, asking, ‘Would you support us in this attempt to do something online? If you keep your money with us this year, it won't be what you initially signed up for. But it will be something and we will offer you certain benefits.’”

Naturally some said that digital wasn’t for them and dropped out, but the majority of sponsors stuck with the festival and some new ones joined up. Not only did they receive branding on screen, but there were events as well, for example a cocktail party that involved sending a bottle of wine to each sponsor and gathering together in a Zoom room with an author and an interviewer to enjoy a conversation that was not open to the public.

The festival generated enough income to pay staff salaries throughout the year, to maintain the skills and expertise it needs to keep going, and to mount the sophisticated set-up we saw on screen in August. It also enabled them to

invest in their online bookshop, which will remain open throughout the year. In the end, said Barley, they managed to break even.

Where digital festivals are markedly problematic is book sales. Even at festivals where sales were respectable, they were nothing like the numbers shifted in a normal year. It's reasonable to think that the digital audience migrated over to retailers such as Amazon, but publishers told me they can't easily track those sales in relation to a festival appearance.

With so many out of work or furloughed, it's hard to begrudge anyone choosing to spend 99 pence on an ebook rather than several times that for a hardcover or paperback, but it stings. And as sincere as we are about festivals being about exchanging ideas, they are also about book sales.

"The big challenge is how we support the book sales. We didn't see much click through to the book buying [at Reading is Magic]. Traditionally the reason an author was offered to a festival was because of book sales. It's a key part of the entire ecosystem," said Janet Smyth.

(Another knock-on effect could be that if bookstores fail to factor in the pandemic, they'll notice an author's annual sales are down and scale back their order for stocks of the next book. Sales figures are based on Nielsen BookScan, which is both a record and driver of commercial performance in the booktrade. Wholesalers and other supply chain participants seek to manage stock levels informed by data and therefore the performance of an author's previous titles is a significant consideration in determining the sales/performance of subsequent work.)

At Edinburgh International Book Festival, said Nick Barley, they sold around 3,500 individual books. "The income was about 50,000 pounds from book sales. In a normal year, our income would be a million pounds from book sales." Bear in mind that there were fewer events, but roughly the same number of viewers, albeit many of them coming from outside the UK.

Ogilvie said of her festival, "Book sales were not great, and that's going to be the topic of some very difficult conversations with publishers going forward. All festivals jumped into the unknown with this, nobody knew how well or badly the book sale conversion would go. All we could do was try to attract as many viewers as possible and keep signposting them to the bookshop. But the reality is that it does not compare to book sales at a physical festival."

Hay Festivals' Chris Bone said that where book sales are concerned, "My opinion is that it's about value added products for festival goers. What deals can

you do with publishers to incentivise people to buy from you, or buy from your local independent bookseller? For all of our Book of the Month sessions now we've been doing signed bookplates. There's a marked increase in the sales of titles on the back of that."

The book with ticket model is one option, but it's problematic. It can be off-putting for people who'd love to hear an author speak, but don't want (or can't afford) the added cost of the book. As noted elsewhere, it's probably not sustainable if you're hoping people will attend multiple events, and even in the physical realm, that arrangement only works with a big name author.

Ian Rankin also talked about creating incentives to get people to purchase tickets. "This is the very beginning of our journey with this new technology. Things will change and evolve. Maybe there will be a way, if you buy a premium ticket, that you can click on an after party and find yourself in a Zoom meeting with the author and the person who's been interviewing them, maybe the publisher, the editor, and a few other friends, other authors involved in the festival, and they're all hanging out, you're sitting with a drink, and you chat.

"That could be something to do for a gold or platinum ticket holder. You can go along to an event for free, or nearly, but if you want the extra content you pay for it. This happens a lot online with bands. I'm sure that people organising festivals and bookshop events are thinking of all of this. Last week I did a contest with Waterstones and my six prize winners got to join me for a virtual drink. They were sent some booze and a glass and snacks, and we clicked into a Zoom room and sat around shooting the breeze. As part of the deal I had six books here. I signed all their books and they saw me do it. Then we got the books got packaged up and sent to them. It was quite time-consuming to set up, but a lovely thing to do."

What are some of the other ideas around monetisation I heard?

From Hay Festivals' Chris Bone: "There's an issue for writers and their ability to get fees if something is going up online free. You're not going to see a model where they can do 20 individual events and get a fee for each one. It will be three or four. At the same time, add in the fact that a lot of publishers now have their own event models. With a big name a publisher will do its own event, maybe with a bookselling partner, doing a book with ticket deal. That goes out first. Then a week later they'll do a couple handful of free to view things online, whether that's a festival or a bookshop. If you're a smaller festival relying on

the big names to bring an audience to you, then it becomes really problematic quite soon.

“But even in the physical space another problem is that you have outfits like Fane who are going out on the road with writer tours. For the Hays of the world, we have a sense that when people come to us it’s for our curation and the groupings, the unique conversations. They don’t just come because it’s a celebrity author. They come for the mix, and to be immersed in that.

“In terms of charging, I think [the answer is] some kind of membership scheme, which we sort of have with our Friends of the Festival and the Hay Player subscription. I think the sensible thing is to have year-round support as a model, rather than an event by event by event payment.”

Nick Barley told me, “It’s risky for us to rely only on sponsorship donations and public sector money. There are question marks over how much the government can afford to put in, and who knows how deep the recession will be, and how it will affect our sponsors. We’ve got to try and find ways to encourage audiences to part with their money. This year, we had a donation scheme, which yielded approximately £100,000, plus Gift Aid was another £40,000, so we’re talking about roughly £140,000, which is not enough.

“I’ve been talking to Spotify. A version of Spotify is available free but you have to put up with adverts and other constraints. It’s a minimal free option. They then have a thing called conversion economics, which incentivises people to pay some money to be able to download what they want, when they want, where they want. They offer three months of Spotify for 99p, or something like that. At the end of month three you go onto their direct debit scheme. People think they’ll cancel at the end of three months, but most don’t, and end up paying a reasonable amount on the subscription to listen to whatever they like.

“I’m not certain of the numbers, but I think approximately 200 million people around the world are paying roughly 10 pounds a month to be part of Spotify, when they could listen to it for free. The music industry has already been working on this for 10 years, and I think we can learn from other sectors about how to find a way to get subscription-based involvement. I don’t think any of us think that pay-per-view is going to work in the book festival context.”

What if Edinburgh was able to land a massive name in 2021, a Barack or Michelle Obama, and one could access that digital event *plus* the rest of the line-up for the cost of an annual subscription? “That will allow experimentation

and opportunities for new authors, which is so necessary to the health of the publishing sector,” he said.

Season tickets could be tiered, for example, £100 for complete year round access to every event, or £40 for access to ten events.

Some festivals already charge in various ways. The Manchester Literature Festival used a sliding scale: “This event will be available for ticket holders to watch for 72 hours after the streamed broadcast. Tickets for this event are available on a Pay What You Can £6 / £12 / £20 basis. There are also a number of Free tickets available for those that need them.

“Please pay £6 (low income / concessionary rate), £12 (standard ticket price) or £20 (if you are watching at home with another member of your household) if you are able to. Any ticket revenue we receive will help Manchester Literature Festival survive these challenging times and hopefully bounce back with a live festival in 2021. However, if you can't afford to buy a ticket please do join us for free.”

As noted earlier, CYMERA offered tickets at three prices, and while the bulk went out free, people were willing to pay because prices were low. They also have a scheme of annual memberships with assorted benefits attached. Boswell Book Festival also has a friends and patrons model, with different benefits at different price points.

The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival offered events free to watch live, while an access pass to watch the entire festival on catch up through the end of 2020 cost £20. Hay Festivals run a subscription scheme which, for £10 a year, gives book lovers access to thousands of videos.

Looking ahead to 2021, *if* their funding comes through, Ullapool plans to charge for admission for a blended festival. Joan Michael said, “We are thinking of charging £9 to see the event in our village hall live, £7 to watch it streamed through to additional seating in a marquee on site, and £4 to stream it at home.

“I know if I pay to watch something online I make sure I’m there watching it. I signed up for quite a few events in Edinburgh and only watched about half of them live. I still have to catch up. If I’d paid for them I wouldn't have booked the same number, I’d have been more selective. We think £4 isn’t beyond, because they're not having their accommodation to pay for, or travel, and they’re secure in their own home.

“Plan B, if our venues are closed, will be to go digital. There will be one event every week at the same time until all of the programmed authors have been on. That way people will just pay £4 a week over ten weeks or so. They will be live events, not available on catch up.”

While speaking to Bob McDevitt, he pointed me towards the Iris Prize LGBT+ Film Festival, in Cardiff, as a possible model for staggered payments that allow audiences to tap into their specific interests. “Once you signed up you had 24 hours to watch the films in that package for free. There were various other things such as Q&As with filmmakers, or a package of short films for 24 hours. As soon as the festival week finished they had all the content in purchasable packages at inexpensive prices.”

SOME INCLUSION TALKING POINTS AND SPECIFICS

Digital events have the potential to offer unprecedented access to a greater range of people than it's possible to reach in person, and to do so in an unthreatening way. Anyone with a device and wi-fi can access an event without leaving home and, at least at present, often without spending money to attend. Digital events are a gateway into festivals for people who have not regularly attended in the past. While it's true that people who are used to attending live events are more likely to attend digital events, audience feedback tells us that many who never attended events in the past have been enjoying them virtually.

Digital events are more convenient, time-saving (no travel or overnight stays), and more accessible to those living at a remove from cultural venues.

For those with mobility, mental or physical health concerns, learning disabilities, physical disabilities, caring responsibilities or financial constraints, digital events can feel more inclusive. They are relatively easy to access and thanks to catch-up availability, can be enjoyed when it's convenient.

In theory, digital events offer opportunities for audience outreach, welcoming everyone who previously found festivals too intimidating, expensive, middle class, elitist, and simply "not for the likes of them."

Allan Wilson, Information Officer for CALL Scotland, spoke to the idea of inclusion via email, saying, "My observation would be that the crowds associated with book festivals could be very scary for someone with autism. Physical access to venues could be an issue for children using a powered wheelchair. Children with complex disabilities often have to leave a room, for toileting, etc., which would not suit the normal book festival practice of closing doors during sessions. Digital could be very beneficial for children and adults with disabilities. I was struck by a comment by Nick Barley made on the *Good Morning Scotland* review of the festivals, in which he told of feedback from a person who was housebound and had been able to engage with the Edinburgh International Book Festival for the first time, saying how much she enjoyed it."

- The Government Communication Service said: "At least 1 in 5 people have a long-term illness, an impairment or a disability. Many more will have a temporary or situational disability."
- 21% of the UK population identifies as disabled.
- The Social Model of Disability said people are not disabled because their bodies or minds aren't 'normal'. They are disabled because of barriers in society.

This complicated issue deserves deeper scrutiny beyond the scope of this paper. There are some links to articles in this section, and more in Appendix A. I offer what follows as a springboard for future discussions.

We have the opportunity to harness digital's capabilities in order to deliver events to a wider range of people facing particular challenges. (At the same time, we must never lose sight of the need to make venues and live events accessible and welcoming to authors and visitors alike.)

Bearing in mind the nine protected characteristics covered by the Equality Act 2010, I contacted more than 30 UK charities asking six starter questions (below), and whenever possible, followed up via email or with a conversation. The reactions occasionally surprised me: several charities failed to respond, some wondered why I had approached them and told me to look elsewhere. Those happy to engage included: Deaf Action; Dyslexia Scotland; the British Dyslexia Association; The Scottish Refugee Council; RNIB Scotland; the Scottish Association for Mental Health; HIDAYAH; and CALL Scotland.

I also spoke to author Ever Dundas, founder of the [Crip Collective](#), to get her perspective as both a participant in and viewer of online events. Her thoughts are presented as a Case Study.

Regarding digital poverty, I spoke about it specifically with Katrina Brodin, Programme Manager (Reader Development & Literacy) at Glasgow Life, which produces Aye Write, with the SCVO, and The Good Things Foundation. It cropped up as an issue during my interviews with festival directors, too.

My starter questions were:

1. What kinds of events does your community* attend in person and/or digitally?
2. Do they normally attend book events? Has that changed with the move to digital?
3. What feedback, good or bad, have you received about digital book festival events?
4. What should book festivals keep doing to serve your community?
5. What are we getting wrong?
6. Do we need to widen the channels that alert your community to our events? If so, what do you recommend as the most effective approach?

*NB: I explained that the word “community” was a generalisation employed by necessity, and that I understand any group of people with some shared characteristics is as diverse as its members.

Two Vital Takeaways

In every conversation, one message predominated: inclusion begins at the programming stage. The importance of inclusive programming — already a key concern within our community — was consistently cited as more pressing than how we deliver events.

It stands to reason. If we programme with a specific group in mind, they will feel greater ownership and by extension, greater impetus to attend. But we also have to build relationships. Those I spoke with encouraged us to spread the word directly and specifically to their individual communities, especially when events might have special relevance.

But that kind of outreach, while valuable, is only part of the job, said Scottish Book Trust’s Philippa Cochrane.

“Inclusion has to be about building trust with people in a way that’s more than a box ticking exercise. This is a genuine, committed, long term process that we want to get involved in, and something we want done from a basis of equal footing and equal input. It shouldn’t be asking them to tell us what they think we should be doing, then we go away and interpret what’s been said and offer it back to them, expecting praise and applause. We’ve got to give ourselves the time to get it right. Digital throws an extra layer into that.

“There is still work to do; it’s about how you reframe what you’re programming. You have to change the messaging of why it’s relevant to them. That’s why Scottish Book Trust does what we do in partnership, because we don’t know how to reframe it, but our partners, who do this work day in day out, absolutely do.”

Before dipping into specific examples that emerged from my conversations, I’d like to note that some authors now stipulate that they no longer wish to appear on all white or all male panels. That is great and welcome, but it shouldn’t fall to authors to police our programming. We should be doing it ourselves.

- <https://scottishbamewritersnetwork.org/safer-spaces-policy/>

- Morton Smyth’s 2004 report, How To Reach a Broader Audience: <https://www.culturehive.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2013/04/Not-for-the-Likes-of-You.pdf>

Tapping into Existing Technology

The range of access needs might feel daunting, but get your platform to do some of the work. When choosing which one to use, venture into the accessibility pages and explore its built-in features. This might include screen reader accessibility, keystroke functionality, or subtitling and closed-caption capabilities. Even the record function allows people to return to a session for clarity, or watch when they are able, rather than at a prescribed time.

Of course nothing is glitch-free. For our network in particular it’s worth noting that Scottish accents are notoriously difficult for AI to translate. Inaccurate subtitles or closed captions benefit no one and can damage reputations. If you employ a human transcriber then, like a BSL interpreter, their fee must be incorporated into your budget. Where a platform lacks an automatic captioning system, it probably affords connectivity to a human captioner (such as Stagertext) or, depending on the type of account you hold, an outside transcription app.

Luckily, technology regularly improves. For example, Zoom reconfigured their settings not long ago to ensure that a BSL interpreter is always visible. This function “pins” the video of the interpreter in place, whereas in the past they dropped off the display during a presentation.

- Some interesting points about accessibility features, with special emphasis on Zoom: <https://www.smashingmagazine.com/2020/06/accessible-video-conferencing-tools/>
- This, about running accessible digital meetings, has crossover relevance for book events: <https://abilitynet.org.uk/news-blogs/how-host-accessible-online-meeting>.
- Every event host or monitor should be briefed about dealing with “Zoom bombers” (thankfully, increasingly rare) and how to deal with audience members using racist, homophobic, ableist or sexist speech. There are

methods for silencing and removing these individuals, which vary from platform to platform.

Dyslexia

- 10-15% of the population is genetically predisposed to dyslexia; 4% of them very serious, 6-8% mild to moderate.
- Tips on dyslexia-friendly formats to keep in mind when creating print matter or web pages:
<https://www.dyslexiascotland.org.uk/sites/default/files/library/DyslexiaFriendlyFormats.pdf>

Cathy Magee, Chief Executive of Dyslexia Scotland, said, “So many people with dyslexia have fantastic imaginations. Many have had bad experiences at school and will think of reading as their Achilles heel. Quite a few dyslexic authors say, ‘The biggest achievement in my life was getting something in print.’ It’s the opposite of what they were taught: they were told they were never going to get anywhere with literature. It would be inspiring to get dyslexic authors to talk about their journey into print at their events.”

There’s no shortage of dyslexic authors, either! Roald Dahl and A.A. Gill were dyslexic, and among living authors, the roster includes John Irving, Sally Gardner, Richard Ford, Lynda La Plante, Fannie Flagg, and Fleur Hitchcock.

Highlight the inclusion of dyslexic authors in the programme, recommends Sue Flohr, MBE, Head of Policy at the British Dyslexia Association. Then, get the message out via social media, or an article in one of the association’s publications. “Many dyslexics think that literary festivals are not for them because it’s all about reading, whereas nowadays it could be a completely different experience. We can receive text in all sorts of formats.”

Consider those alternative formats for your marketing and PR, suggests Magee. “Get the word out via YouTube or on social media, with messages that include photos or videos. Maybe a one-minute talk by someone about the book festival that explained what was coming? That could inspire someone to think, ‘Actually, there’s something there for me.’ Don’t assume people know what book festival content will look like.”

She adds, “We are always happy to share festival information on social media and with local communities and branches. People are always looking for events. But remember, regarding children’s books, parents are going to be the

route in, and dyslexia is hereditary. You can't assume that the parents or grandparents won't also be dyslexic."

Additional Ideas

- Online forms for booking can be challenging. Having a phone sales option helps, though be aware that dyslexia can make it difficult for some people to read out the numbers on a credit card.
- When presenting information, keep the design uncluttered and avoid large blocks of text. Short, digestible chunks are easier to manage. This kind of short, sharp writing will be familiar to bloggers and anyone writing online content, not to mention journalists aware of the visual relief provided by a pull quote. More ideas about dyslexia-friendly presentation can be found via the link in the box at the top of this section.
- Magee said: "In terms of instructions — because for some dyslexics organisational skills are an issue — make them as clean and as simple as possible. Following instructions and sequencing can be issues."
- Shorter festival sessions consisting entirely of readings — elements of this year's Wigtown Book Festival, and the Toronto International Festival of Authors — are another option. Magee said, "Most dyslexic people say they love listening to stories being read aloud."
- Dyslexia Scotland runs members events throughout the year and saw attendance rise with their move to digital. They've dedicated sessions to helping people improve their digital skills, focussing on Zoom, which they've found more user-friendly than Microsoft Teams.
- Speaking with Flohr and Magee makes me think we might occasionally substitute the phrases "story" and "storytelling" for "book festival/event" and "literary festival/event." Magee said, "My nephew, who's severely dyslexic, earned an A star grade on his English A level without reading a single book because he did it all on audiobook. Let people know that a book can be an audiobook, a graphic novel, an ebook. And that it's not always about highbrow literature, it's about stories."

- Creative writing workshops with dyslexic authors are a way to encourage participants to tell their stories and discuss the different ways that stories can be enjoyed.

Mental Health Challenges

SAMH (Scotland's Mental Health Charity) referred me to Maeve Grindall, the Social Movement Support Officer for See Me Scotland (www.seemeescotland.org).

She said, "In terms of how people feel about accessing digital events, as you can imagine, there are a lot of different perspectives on this from the feedback we've had. For some people with lived experience online events can be particularly draining and sometimes overwhelming if there are a lot of participants/voices involved. For others they are a practical and straightforward way of accessing events and connecting with people at a time when they have become much more isolated. For some people, e.g. with physical health problems, life in lockdown has not been such a dramatic difference, but now finally the world is providing many more ways for them to engage and socialise from home. We are currently trying to learn more about how best to engage digitally and grappling with these questions too.

"We have found it useful in Zoom events having someone separate to the host to manage the chat function, and to highlight at the start of the session that this person can be privately messaged for technical or other support (particularly if there is challenging subject matter). This person would at least be able to signpost to relevant organisations. Content warnings can be useful, but a general feeling of someone on hand to offer support is helpful as well. It can also be good for hosts to say they will be sticking around for a few minutes after events, if practical. Unlike physical events, people can suddenly find themselves abruptly alone when they end which can be quite jarring."

Grindall is leading on a piece of work around tackling mental health stigma and discrimination through art, and shared her findings with me, along with permission to quote from them.

Again the message was clear: programme events that open up conversations about mental health.

The full report is here: *Using the arts to challenge stigmatising attitudes and behaviours associated with mental health:*

<https://www.seemescotland.org/movement-for-change/get-involved/partner-with-us/communities/the-arts/>

A key point is the importance of creating art centred around people's lived experience of mental health problems. "Art which included the voices and stories of people with lived experience had the highest response rate of respondents agreeing or strongly agreeing that this had helped to improve their knowledge and awareness of mental health (48%) and helped to positively change their perceptions of people with mental health problems (55%)."

For our festival community this translates into booking authors who are writing about their personal experiences, alongside those writing more objective, investigative books on mental health issues, and having those conversations. This is something I feel the book festival community does well already, and will continue doing.

As noted in Grindall's comments and elsewhere in this paper, one of the drawbacks of a digital event is the abruptness of the way they end, with a wave and a click and everyone dispersing to their private space.

On 18 October, Liz O'Riordan, a consultant breast surgeon and award-winning author and broadcaster, tweeted: "Here's a plea to anyone organising virtual conferences. Could you give your speakers some love immediately afterwards? Giving an emotional talk and then hanging up as the next section goes live is hard, often as we're home alone. It's draining and can leave you feeling empty." Her tweet received 2,000 likes.

Perhaps it's possible to create a transition space. Festival teams are not therapists, and their mental health must be safeguarded, too, but we might think about creating a safe post-event digital break-out space where people could meet, converse, and decompress. (It might be worth reminding those entering the room that they can turn off their camera and identifying name, if anonymity is an issue.)

Sight Loss

- In the UK, there are almost 2 million people living with sight loss. Of these, around 360,000 are registered as blind or partially sighted. — NHS UK
- The "more than two million people living with sight loss" is an estimate based on how commonly different eye conditions and resulting sight loss occurs. The figure takes into account factors such as age, gender and ethnicity, and builds up a picture of the numbers of people who are living with significant sight loss. This not only includes people who are registered, but also those who are waiting for treatment, those whose sight could be improved, those who have not registered, and people whose sight loss is not at a level that allows them to register. — RNIB

Ian Brown, Senior Communications Officer for RNIB Scotland, responded to my questions via email:

“There are some general issues around communicating digitally with people who use screen-reading technology. For written information on screens, as in print, sans serif fonts are preferable. Also preferable is a strong colour contrast between the text and the backgrounds, not superimposing text on photos or graphics (this can confuse screen-readers), and avoiding lots of italics and block capitals.

“In terms of how *au fait* people with sight loss are in using digital technology, this is hard to generalise. While blind and partially sighted people tend to be older, some are quite savvy in using new technology. Others might find it quite daunting, although RNIB Scotland does offer a technology advice service on request. We maintain the biggest Talking Books library in Europe. Books are lent out free via downloads, on disc, memory-stick and in braille. We organise book groups throughout the country.

“For around 12 years RNIB Scotland hosted an invite-only event at the Edinburgh Book Festival where we launched one of our latest Talking Books. We invited people with sight, along with publishers, library staff, literary bodies, councillors, etc.. I'm not sure what, if any, book festivals our individual members attend themselves. Unless some provision has been made for physical accessibility, and information in accessible formats, I suspect probably not many. I'm not sure if digital has changed that, but again, I suspect that not many attend.

“To attract blind and partially sighted people information will have to be in accessible formats. Some thought would have to be given to the physical layout of venues, avoiding lots of clutter. Guide dogs should be permitted and perhaps a few water-bowls provided for them. If there is an attendance fee, a sighted guide should be allowed to accompany a person with sight loss free of charge. Audio announcements in the venue would help in giving information on the day, rather than everything being in print. Some basic disability awareness training for staff would also be useful, as would provision for indicating that a person applying to attend an event has a disability.

“RNIB reaches out to our members via our social media and our website. We could inform the participants of our book groups and other social and leisure groups [about book festival events].”

Additional Ideas

- Adding image descriptions to social media:
<https://www.rnib.org.uk/rnibconnect/technology/making-your-social-media-accessible>
- How to describe images: <https://ud2016.uk/some-guidelines-for-describing-images-for-visually-impaired-people/index.html>
- How to write text and image descriptions:
<https://www.perkinselearning.org/technology/blog/how-write-alt-text-and-image-descriptions-visually-impaired>

Hearing Loss

- According to www.Gov.Uk: Roughly 11M people in the UK are deaf or hard of hearing
- 2M people in the UK use hearing aids
- Nearly 42% of those over 50 have hearing loss, rising to about 71% of people aged 70+
- There are 151,000 BSL users in the UK
- Deaf people are more likely to: have poor mental health — up to 50%, compared to 25% for the general population, and to be unemployed — 65% of working age deaf people are in employment, compared to 79% of the general population

BSL interpreters are familiar figures at book festivals, and have been an integral part of digital events throughout the pandemic. At Edinburgh International Book Festival this August I was intrigued to see a green screen set up, with its own cameras, to capture the work of the BSL interpreters. When watching the event, all you had to do was click a button on your computer to pull up an interpreter or subtitles.

At Granite Noir, in Aberdeen, we have traditionally provided BSL interpretation for our headliner events. At Edinburgh International Book Festival, where there is a team of interpreters on hand, certain events are assigned BSL interpreters from the start, but then a generous request system operates. So far requests have never topped out the upper limited budgeted for. In 2020, however, for technical and practical reasons, all BSL events were

chosen in advance in consultation with the interpreters, who selected a range of things they felt most likely to work for the deaf community.

I spoke to Philip Gerrard, CEO of Deaf Action, an Edinburgh-based deaf-led charity providing services to the estimated 1,012,000 people in Scotland living with some degree of hearing loss. He's been a frequent visitor to Edinburgh International Book Festival in the past, and praises their system of taking requests.

Booking a ticket is normally the biggest barrier for first time festival-goers, he said. Deaf people can have difficulty navigating the system if they don't have English and don't know how to request an interpreter. "That has to be a positive experience for them, to get them to go. If I had to suggest an improvement at Edinburgh, the festival I attend, it is that it would be helpful to be able to request an interpreter as part of the booking process rather than having to do it separately."

As far as digital book events, Gerrard cites some wins: "I use digital radio equipment to help me hear better. It's a bit like plugging headphones into your computer to listen to music. I can't do that at a book festival, but I can use it with my computer. Another win is that you can have subtitles on some platforms, though they're not all equally good. Not all deaf people have English. Those who are already used to festivals usually do have English, and they tend to prefer subtitles. Digital events can make lip reading easier, which is another aid to comprehension."

On the down-side, sometimes an interpreter is hard to see on screen. Gerrard is a fan of the new Zoom function allowing a dedicated fixed screen for interpreters. And he reminds me that in common with everyone else working remotely these days, the deaf community can experience "Zoom Fatigue." "The last thing I want to do after working online is go back online in the evening. And it's not the same unique experience as attending a live event."

Additional Ideas

- Budgetary constraints mean most festivals cannot engage a team of interpreters, therefore organisers become curators, making decisions on behalf of the deaf community. That may not be welcome or as efficient as a request system. Gerrard said we should be up front about it, saying: "We only have money for X amount of interpreted events."

- Gerrard recommends alerting charities such as Deaf Action, and dedicated Facebook groups, such as Deaf Community in Scotland, to spread the word about our festivals. In other words, bring the party to the people. “I get frustrated with so many book festivals or theatres that just put things on but don’t engage with the community,” he said.
- Ticket booking for first timers can be difficult because of the language issue. Make it as simple as possible.
- Stagertext explains why subtitles are important:
<http://www.stagertext.org/about-stagertext/digital-work>

Reaching Out to Refugees

“When people arrive in Scotland, a new journey begins. The UK’s asylum system is tough and takes its toll on individuals and families. Settling into a foreign country and a whole new system can be disorientating and challenging.” — Scottish Refugee Council

Soizig Carey, Art and Cultural Development Officer of the Scottish Refugee Council, answered my questions by email:

“Generally speaking, there is so much potential in literature to appeal to and reach refugee communities, particularly as a medium which is already multi-lingual. I wouldn’t describe refugees living in Scotland as one community, but rather multiple communities from a diverse range of geographical, political, social backgrounds. It would be useful for book festivals to collaborate with local organisations and communities and build long term meaningful relationships.”

This might include:

“Programming multi-lingual events (for example, Arabic, Farsi) and activities which reflect refugee communities. This can really enable access for new arrivals and people with limited English. For people with a more advanced grasp of the language, it can mean so much to hear in their mother tongue and equally participate. Perhaps interpreters and translators can be on hand at certain events.

“Budget for access and welfare to support participation. Before COVID-19 this meant financial support for travel and food, as people in the UK asylum system are either on extremely limited funds or nothing at all if their claim has been refused. It is difficult enough to get by, never mind attend cultural events and activity. COVID-19 has highlighted this poverty in terms of digital inclusion. Access to devices, and most markedly to broadband, is a big challenge which needs to be a consideration. We are still trying to find ways around this ourselves.”

- There is more information in the Refugee Council’s report on impact of COVID-19:
<https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Covid-impact-survey.pdf>
- In addition to the Scottish Refugee Council (<https://www.scottishrefugeecouncil.org.uk/working-for-change/arts-culture/>), groups such as The Welcoming (<https://www.thewelcoming.org>) and Open Book (<https://openbookreading.com>) are longstanding festival allies doing a lot to connect new Scots with our community.

CASE STUDY: EVER DUNDAS, AUTHOR AND FOUNDER OF THE CRIP COLLECTIVE

“I’m a queer disabled writer living in Edinburgh. I write literary fiction, science fiction, fantasy, and horror. I gained a Creative Writing Masters with Distinction from Edinburgh Napier University in 2011, and I have a First Class Degree in Psychology and Sociology from Queen Margaret University.”

“As an audience member, digital events have definitely opened things up. I've got ME and fibromyalgia. The main symptoms are chronic pain, sensory issues, cognitive problems and exhaustion. I have limited energy reserves, which can definitely be an issue in terms of attending events. For instance, Edinburgh Book Festival is one of my favourites, but partly because it's handy to me. In normal circumstances, I’m able to get there easily. For friends of mine, it’s more difficult. They’re not necessarily disabled, they just live a bit further away, and they're on a lower wage. It costs a lot for travel and the tickets, and is not something they can afford.

“Even though I live close by, it's still a lot of effort to get myself together to maybe go for an hour’s event, then maybe meet up with friends, but after that I'm quite exhausted. I can't go to several events in one day. But this year, one day I attended three events, practically in a row. That’s still quite a lot, because it can be exhausting even if I don't need to go anywhere. But I could never have done that normally in the physical world.

“This year I could be in my bed watching, and if I was too tired to watch all three in a row I could catch up later. Being able to catch up later for most events was really helpful. For a lot of people with ME, fibro and energy issues, being able to catch up when we have the energy and the cognitive reserves to be able to do so is good. We can get flare ups when we least expect it.

“As far as monetising events is concerned, I see it from both points of view, as a writer and also as an audience member who is disabled and on a very low wage. From that perspective having all these events free, or by donation, or pay what you can, is amazing. I could access a lot more events.

“On the flip side, in terms of being a writer and doing events myself, it's a lot of work from me and from the festival staff, which should be valued. It did concern me a little bit that online events weren't being as valued as they should be, given the amount of work they are. To see these events offered free made me a little bit uneasy, as well. Although I did see a lot in the chat discussions where people said ‘That was amazing. I'm going to donate right now.’”

“Disabled people are always having to prove ourselves and jump through hoops, fill out forms, prove that we're disabled, or at a low wage. It's tiring. I'm wondering if, in terms of these things, it would be better that we didn't have to. I'm assuming most people are going to be honest about what they can afford. But yeah, it's tiring, always having to prove that you're low wage. It's a little bit humiliating as well.

“So far, from my point of view, digital festivals have been quite a positive experience. It's been great seeing things like captions and BSL interpreters and transcripts available afterwards. Going forwards, I think the important thing is not to leave us behind. Disabled people have been fighting for decent online access for a long time. It would be good to have more hybrid events in the future. It's also important to still invite disabled people to participate in person at live events. There could be a slight danger of assuming that the disabled person could join online and doesn't have to be there physically, an assumption that it's automatically easier for them. I don't want anyone to use it as an excuse not to make events physically accessible.

“Talk to the disabled person about their needs and preferences. I actually prefer to do live events, even though online events are possibly a little bit easier for me. I've missed being there in person, and there are by-products of that, in terms of networking, that are easier in person. I don't want disabled people to be further marginalised by organisers thinking, ‘Oh, we'll just have them on remote, we'll be fine.’”

“A lot of disabled people couldn't attend events in person, whatever accommodations are made. It's been quite a revelation for them to be able to attend all these things. We need to continue that. And I love that we were able to have online questions that audience members can type in, and the chair can curate them. It makes people at home feel that they are part of the event.”

Additional Reading

- <https://disabilityarts.online/accessibility/>

- <https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/news/uk-cultural-organisations-join-up-to-promote-seven-inclusive-principles-for-disabled-people-in-arts-culture/>
- Disability Arts Online’s FAQ about the accessibility of their website is a great overview of best practice:
<https://disabilityarts.online/accessibility/accessibility-statement/>
- Beyond the mandates: The far-reaching benefits of multimedia accessibility:
<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/leap.1153>

Digital Poverty and Exclusion

If you’ve ever walked down a crowded street cursing fellow pedestrians who were glued to their mobiles, you might be surprised by the extent of digital poverty in the UK. *The Guardian* reported that lockdown had created a stark digital divide, with 1.9 million households having no access to the internet, and tens of millions more reliant on pay-as-you-go services to make phone calls, access healthcare, education and benefits online. People often face a devastating choice: food or data.

The Office of National Statistics (ONS) 2019 report, *Exploring the UK’s Digital Divide* (link in Appendix A) tells us: “The number of adults who have either never used the internet or have not used it in the last three months, described as ‘internet non-users,’ has been declining over recent years. Since 2011, this number has almost halved, but in 2018 there were still 5.3 million adults in the UK, or 10.0% of the adult UK population, in this situation.

“Circa 2018, the percentage of non-users in Scotland was around 10.7% of the population, while 7% of the population lack any basic digital skills. Among non-users, in 2018, 58% (3.1 million) were women. In 2017, disabled adults accounted for 56% of non-users. That is higher than the percentage of disabled adults in the UK as a whole, which was estimated at 22% in 2016-2017. Among non-users aged 16-24, 60% were disabled, which matches numbers for people aged 75 and older.

“In 2018, 12% of those aged between 11 and 18 years (700,000) reported having no internet access at home from a computer or tablet, while a further 60,000 reported having no home internet access at all. Of those in this age

group, 68% who did have home internet access reported that they would find it difficult to complete school work without it, suggesting that there may be educational implications for those without internet access.

“Since 2011, adults over the age of 65 years have consistently made up the largest proportion of the adult internet non-users, and over half of all adult internet non-users were over the age of 75 years in 2018.”

According to the Lloyds Bank annual Digital Consumer Index, pre-lockdown, 3.6 million people (7% of the population) were almost completely offline. The report said those over 70 are statistically more likely to be without the internet, nevertheless, 44% of those offline were under 60. The statistics also suggest that four out of every 10 benefit claimants have ‘very low digital engagement’ and that women are more likely to lack online skills.

In 2014, research by social and economic wellbeing group the Carnegie Trust, found that more than a third of households in the lowest socioeconomic groups lacked internet access. In Scotland, where the group is based, just 51% of households who had an annual income of between £6,000-£10,000 had the internet at home.

Unfortunately there’s no single, simple solution to digital poverty.

Digital poverty consists of three primary barriers, said Aaron Slater, Digital Participation Project Manager at SCVO: “Access to an internet enabled device, having access to connectivity at all, and having the skills and confidence to be able to use the device and the internet.

“A significant number of people in Scotland don’t have full digital access, or aren’t digitally included. Those from more deprived areas are more likely to be digitally excluded. People with disabilities tend to be disproportionately affected by digital exclusion.

“There are also challenges based on geography, and in Scotland, with more rural areas. One of the core offerings from the Connecting Scotland programme is a Vodafone mobile wi-fi device, but for parts of the highlands and some of the islands, specifically Orkney, you really struggle to get a signal.

“Early findings from data we’re collecting through Connecting Scotland suggests that connectivity and devices have been more of a barrier than the lack of skills and confidence. There, it tends to be older people who are lacking in skills, but we should not make the assumption that young people are digitally literate.

“Smartphones aren’t a silver bullet. Just because someone can use Snapchat or TikTok doesn’t mean they can meaningfully use the internet to fill in forms, create CVs, apply for jobs and so on.

“We see a lot of organisations that are motivated to support people to get online where they have the capacity to do that, in order to help people use their services.”

That makes sense. For example, if you’re an energy provider asking customers to submit meter readings online, or a retailer hoping to entice online shoppers, having digitally savvy customers is vital. We’ve all seen pop up chat boxes asking, “Can I help? Want to talk?” And in that sense, book festivals are no different. We already operate online ticket sales, and with the move to digital streaming it’s even more important that visitors are able to navigate our websites easily.

But it’s not our remit — or within our capabilities — to combat poverty. The help we offer has to come in other forms.

Slater agreed. “It’s everyone's business to help the digitally excluded. Every service stands to gain by having a user group that can access them. But it's no single organisation’s primary responsibility to get that person's digital skills up, which is the point that you're making about the book festivals. It's not your responsibility alone to address this, but you are a potential beneficiary of a digitally included nation.”

One of the difficulties is that a lot of the basic up-skilling — here’s how the device works, here’s how to create an email account, how to get online — is best done one-on-one and face-to-face, but with libraries and community centres shut, that kind of interaction has been put on hold.

Slater said, “One of the things we're looking at is working in partnership with each of the 32, local authorities, and understanding local dynamics, local partnerships with local support structures that already exist. We need to understand what resources are there and then ask, how can we connect dots? How can organisations, support each other, so we're working together for that greater good and greater benefits?”

I also spoke to Emma Stone, Director of Design, Research and Comms for The Good Things Foundation, which has been involved in supporting digital inclusion for over 10 years. Pre-lockdown, much of their outreach was done in person, through community organisations.

She said, “Issues about digital and data poverty have become more exacerbated because the workarounds that those on lower incomes previously

had are no longer available to them — whether that's children accessing the internet in schools, or families going into libraries or community centres. Next, is that it's become so much more essential. If you cannot afford reliable broadband in your home, and — classic example of 'poverty premium' — if you're poor and you can't afford a contract, then pay as you go mobile data is more expensive. There's been a huge shift onto digital platforms, which is great if you are enabled and have the skills, confidence and access to do this. Because many of us struggle to get our time *off* screens, it's dangerous and easy to make assumptions, forgetting that this isn't an issue for everybody.”

Just how widespread is digital poverty in Scotland? Katrina Brodin, speaking specifically about Scotland's biggest city, said: “Glasgow, by its very nature is quite a challenging city, there is a high representation of BAME, and a lot of poverty and deprivation, to the extent that you don't really see in other places in Scotland. We've got one community in Glasgow where 49% of the kids were living in poverty pre-lockdown. That's going to be moving into the 50s and 60s now, as people will be losing their jobs, not maximising their income and benefits and things like that.”

That means 31% of Glasgow's homes have no access to broadband. “That's a third of the city,” Brodin said. “It's obviously going to be a higher rate when you get to the literacy hotspots, which tend to be in the more deprived communities.”

Looking ahead to next year's Aye Write, she said, “One of the things that we'll have to build into our plans is a digital community ticketing version, where you have organisations that support the individual's access, either at home, or when they're doing a one-to-one activity with them. If we've got fixed periods for digital content being up, which I think is completely right and proper, we may build in additional licensing for that organisation to be able to use it for an additional month in order to engage more people with the content. It has to be something that's not unfair to the author, to try and mirror the kind of reach that you would have had before. I think that is going to be tricky.”

My conversation with Philippa Cochrane, from Scottish Book Trust, touched on the problem, as well.

She said, “I have a range of thoughts on this that aren't around event provision specifically, but what we as a sector do more generally. All the teams at Scottish Book Trust are wrestling with it, as everyone else has done. We have migrated all of our programmes into digital formats for this year.

“There’s a question around, for lack of a better word, functional accessibility. Can people hear, see, interact with and take part in what you’re putting online? There’s also the digital access gap.

“I don't really like EDI as a term, but let's use it. When we start talking about making sure that our programmes are available to a diverse range of people, obviously, the crossover between whatever communities we might identify as being diverse communities who find the work of Scottish Book Trust difficult to engage with, are also likely to have a higher prevalence of people who are sitting in the digital access gap. So we're doing a number of things with the digital festival. We have been doing this for a number of years, but we're leaning into it further and further. Every year I'm upping the representation of groups that don't normally engage with us in our programming. Everybody's doing that, it's not a new thing, but it's worth articulating and it's the right thing to be doing.

“We're trying to do that both with authors that we're programming and also chairs that we're pairing with those authors, and making sure that that's happening in a comprehensive or as comprehensive a way as possible.”

Additional Ideas

- Internet access should be recognised as an essential utility, like electricity. To quote Iain MacRitchie, speaking at Edinburgh International Book Festival this August: “We need to treat connectivity as a water supply, that it’s a given and a right.” This is a non-partisan issue that book festivals or Creative Scotland might champion. (NB: At present, households and businesses pay 20% VAT on connectivity, whereas VAT on electricity and gas is 5%.)
- Buses offer free wi-fi. Could we find a sponsor for a Story Bus — with socially distanced seating for now — where people with devices could climb on board, access free wi-fi and enjoy events through their headphones? Might we commission route-related bespoke stories?
- Could we distribute pre-recorded events on USB sticks or DVDs to libraries for users to access via their membership? NB: Wigtown experimented with this following their 2020 festival. Cove and Kilcreggan Festival is looking into a similar initiative.

- What if we streamed events into libraries, cinemas, care homes, prisons, theatres and other facilities with internet access, where safe, socially distanced screenings of festival events can be held?

NUTS AND BOLTS

“Our live-streaming studio is lit red in support of everyone in the event industries who needs urgent support at this time. Collectively, we don’t just make events: we create employment and opportunities, build communities, educate, inspire & entertain.” — @WigtownBookFestival via Twitter

In this section I’ll address some of the specifics and issues around how we’re making digital events happen.

On the Day or In the Can?

Whether to livestream or pre-record, that is the question. Or is it?

The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival, Edinburgh International Book Festival, Wigtown Book Festival and CYMERA are just a couple of examples of festivals that offered a combination of the two formats. Others, such as The Ballie Gifford Borders Book Festival, Islay Book Festival, and the Cove and Kilcreggan Book Festival, went with primarily pre-recorded events.

Let’s examine those options.

A livestreamed event has a sense of immediacy, much like live television. You never know what might happen. Participants may react to news of the day, bringing headlines and current events into the conversation. Someone might fall off their chair. Their internet might crash. At Hay Festival, when the interviewer’s system died mid-event, author Anne Enright calmly filled the gap by reading from *Actress*, to the delight of all watching.

Depending on how the festival is using its digital platform (see the section on templates), on some of the more informal live events pushed out straight through Zoom (the most commonly used platform), an author might be able to see the chat box unfurling, and read and react to questions as they arise. Generally, though, they are moderated through the chairperson.

At other live events a festival staffer monitors the chat function, interacting with attendees and curating questions. They’re fed to the chair through a tablet or other device. This happened at Edinburgh International Book Festival and Wigtown Book Festival, to cite two examples. All live events can be topped and tailed with trailer videos and “Thank you for coming” slides incorporating links to donate buttons and book buying portals.

On the other hand, a pre-recorded event can be edited for time or content. Pre-records were the primary choice Islay Book Festival, Cove and Kilcreggan, and The Ballie Gifford Borders Book festival.

Isla Rosser-Owen, Committee Chair and Festival Director for Islay Book Festival, is also the Cultural Producer for Wigtown Book Festival. She explained that pre-recording was a pragmatic choice, made to safeguard against Islay's pernicky wi-fi.

The team took advantage of the YouTube function allowing them to load videos in advance, scheduled to go live at a certain time. (This was the method employed by CYMERA, as well.) Rosser-Owen said, "Once you've scheduled it, you can kind of wash your hands of it, therefore we didn't have any of the high tech streaming stuff that others were doing. It was all to try and avoid connectivity issues, which is obviously a big thing on the islands."

Once recorded, events were topped and tailed with a short intro slide and final thank you. All the editing was outsourced to a contractor.

"Pre-recording meant a lot of extra admin — arranging to do the recordings, reviewing them, sending them off for editing with notes, reviewing them when they came back from editing, uploading them to YouTube, making sure everything was properly scheduled and that the links were sent out to everyone. There seemed to be an endless string of things that needed to be done," said Rosser-Owen.

Lyndsey Fineran, The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literature Festival Programme and Commissions Manager, also remarked on the amount of work involved.

"Cheltenham might look quite glossy from the outside, but like most organisations it's a very small, hardworking team. It was all hands to the pump, but we knew that to do something of the size we were hoping to do, and at the quality level we wanted, we would need to bring in some expertise. Our agency worked with us on the pre-records with the international writers that we did in the lead up to the festival, as well as the children and young family and schools programme, which we filmed to give us a package to offer free to schools. They worked on the ground as well, because it was basically a broadcast scenario.

"The density of the experience was interesting. I felt as tired on the opening day as I usually feel at the end. There were a lot of pre-recorded events that needed to be finessed, so some of the events I had already seen three times. Some of our editing was just getting it down to time. With our tight broadcast schedule everything had to be under 55 minutes. Sometimes it was removing tech glitches, maybe someone's internet had a little moment. But we never edited the content."

Here in Scotland, the team in Melrose decided that pre-recording offered them the most control, given that digital was new territory. Paula Ogilvie, Director of the Ballie Gifford Borders Book Festival told me:

“There were so many moving parts to everything we were doing, and this meant one less moving part to worry about. It meant we could edit anything that needed it, and could brand things up better. But then we decided that the experience would be really flat, so we made the decision to have the live chat feature. I would say 99.5% of the authors were able to come back on the day for the chat, which took place during the last 15-20 minutes of the event.”

Pre-recording made for extra work for this team, as well. Ogilvie said, “We didn’t have to edit events too much because we made sure the folks we were working with as chairs knew their stuff. They knew how to lead an event and keep it tight. That was really important to us. When it came to the raw event there wasn’t much for Walter to do, but each event still took about five hours’ worth of work. As well as recording them, after we got all the right systems in place he was uploading them and filing them out. It had been recorded on his equipment, so he had to make sure everything was put up onto Vimeo. If you walk into a tent where the tech station’s already in place, yes, that might have taken five hours to set up, but you amortise that labour over the whole weekend.”

Ann Landmann, director of CYMERA, told me: “We had a solid seven days of recording, sometimes four events a day. We used the same filmed intro of about two minutes in length for all the events and had a thank you slide and a CYMERA 2021 slide at the end.

“What takes forever is the rendering — after you’ve done the video you have to convert it into something you can watch. The computer does it all for you, but I had issues with my hardware and software, and some events rendered for 16 hours. When I changed programmes they rendered in an hour, though I didn’t feel the quality was as good. I may be the only person who noticed that.

“I liked our mix of pre-record and live. We didn’t take as much advantage of pre-recording as we might have. We didn’t want to ask our authors to come back on the day because we’d asked them quite a lot already, and practically for free.”

Control of the end result was a concern for the Reading is Magic Festival, said Programme Consultant Janet Smyth:

“We felt for children’s events it was important to control the structure and the editing. You can’t expect an eight-year-old to sit in front of a computer

and listen to even their most favourite writer talk for an hour. In the digital world it's hard to control the quality of the interaction and the experience. If you're a grown up and you've been reading someone's books for years, nothing's going to stop you listening to that event. If you're a kid, you're like, 'I'm gonna go on TikTok now.'

"We decided to create episodic events. You could watch it as a single event, or as a series of different events. We had our podcast, our story time, our manifesto event, and our assembly event. Each had a different structure within the themes of each day. We worked closely with as many of the writers as we could to get them to think carefully about exactly what they were going to include in their event. We storyboarded every event as if it was a television programme.

"Another reason to pre-record was so that schools could use it as and how they chose. We packaged it so that there were resources around each event for teachers to tap into. It was important for us right at the start to pull together a focus group of teachers and librarians who advised us how to structure the events, with opportunities for the teacher to hit pause and get the class to do an activity, then come back to it."

Book Week Scotland, run by Scottish Book Trust, has always featured digital elements, and 2020 relies heavily on pre-records. Philippa Cochrane told me: "This year we're not doing any livestreams, even the panel events are pre-records, because we want to be able to share them with our partners and make them accessible as quickly as possible after they go live, so that they're there as content for the week.

"The fastest way we can do that with the resources that we have, which in terms of bodies is very small, is to pre-record. And this then gives us the space to get the best solution in terms of closed captioning, transcription and BSL that we can. We're putting all three of those elements into all of our pre-recorded panels, which accounts for six of our Book Week Scotland events."

As Paula Ogilvie mentioned, another phenomenon of the digital age is a pre-recorded event where the author returns for all or part of the session to interact directly with audience members. Technology puts them there in the past *and* present, their recorded self on screen interacting with an interviewer, their present self, chatting away to fans.

Cove and Kilcreggan Book Festival asked their six authors to return on the air date. I spoke about this, and the decision to pre-record, with Ruth Wishart, Director of Events for Cove Burgh Hall:

“I had watched MyVLF during the Big Book Weekend and thought their set up was impressive. One of the principal attractions was the idea that somebody else would be doing the filming and the editing — and that they had some 20,000 people on their mailing list.

“We gave MyVLF our programme and they contacted everyone and arranged for the Zoom calls. I’ve done mine — all I had to was sit in my office with my laptop.

“Our authors agreed that they would be available at the hour that their event went up online in order to have a live chat with the audience. Because of that we're paying them a double fee. It's more of their time and energy.”

[NB: Ogilvie said participation in the live chat was built into her festival’s fee agreement with their authors.]

As a chairperson, I find pre-recording an event without an audience roughly equivalent to any other digital interview. Whether sitting in a purpose-built studio, or in my flat talking into my laptop’s camera, I have little sense of an audience’s presence and little sense of whether I’m making an impact. I simply pretend I’m making television, and proceed as normal, relying on years of experience to tell me if the conversation’s going well.

The chief differences with a pre-record are the absence of audience questions — and the occasional re-recorded introduction.

As a viewer who dislikes like engaging with chat boxes, I truly don’t notice the difference between pre-recorded and live events. They are equally enjoyable — or not. For me it’s about the quality of the conversation. And not one person, in the many conversations I’ve had about this, expressed a strong preference either way.

As a programmer, I like knowing there are options, since circumstances, and authors’ availability, can change rapidly. Having a Plan B is vital.

YouTube, Vimeo or Crowdcast ?

A tech team will be invaluable in helping you review your best options, but here’s a little background to get you started.

There are no special requirements to be able to embed a YouTube video in a website. To embed a live stream from a YouTube channel you must be a YouTube partner. (More info here: <https://support.google.com/youtube/thread/32175054?hl=en>.)

Channels more than a few years old are often not required to meet these guidelines, which can be confusing. Check in your YouTube channel's setting to see what is allowed. Requirements for embedding are not related to bandwidth. Bandwidth refers to the speed of your internet connection for uploading or streaming, e.g. 720p video requires 2.5 megabits per second, 1080p requires 5 megabits per second. It's possible to invest in bandwidth load sharing, which will help keep a website from crashing and reduces the risk of losing your internet connection.

For The Baillie Gifford Borders Book Festival and Bloody Scotland, Vimeo proved the best broadcasting option. Bob McDevitt said, "Bloody Scotland's decision to use Vimeo was to make use of their unlimited bandwidth. The bigger your audience gets, the more you have to pay for bandwidth. You can't do it in small increments, you've got to do it in thousands, and per thousand, that's about two grand. If you were looking at a big audience, you could quickly go to four or five grand extra. GloCast said, 'Why not go out on Vimeo Live? Because you pay for a year's subscription with unlimited bandwidth and can have as many people as you want.'

"We didn't know how many people were going to sign up. They said if we went up on Vimeo then it didn't matter. We streamed from Zoom, then they vision-mixed it up onto Vimeo Live for us. Having unlimited bandwidth also meant we didn't need the Eventbrite sign up we'd put in place, but it was good to have because it provided data, and enabled us to email people and say, watch out for such and such coming up tomorrow. Also it was another way to get out the Please Donate message.

"We added two chat boxes on the website, one for comments and a second (using Slido) for questions and polls. We couldn't embed YouTube on the website as we didn't have enough views logged. We almost have now, after the 2020 events went out after the festival."

Paula Ogilvie said, "We used Vimeo because of the live Q&A. If we hadn't done that we could have pushed out on YouTube and that would have been fine. I made things difficult for the tech team, because I wanted that live element to it.

"When they were looking at the formats that we could use, it was going to be really expensive. We could buy a system that would allow us to do the live chat feature, but that was a quite a lot of money. They discovered that Vimeo had a package where you could be running it pre-recorded as live and could also have this chat feature. Vimeo was the only platform we could find that could do that, and it was affordable. We were happy with the quality and the analytics on Vimeo."

Crowdcast was used by Hay Festivals for their May events in Wales. Chris Bone, Publicity Director for the festivals, said, “Crowdcast is the broadcasting platform we used to put out our spring events and subsequent ‘Book of the Month’ live Q&As.

“We recorded them using WIRECAST and broadcast that through our Crowdcast platform. Of course we also had a couple of pre-records and broadcast films that went out directly through Crowdcast. We operated a back-up feed on YouTube for anybody that had technical issues accessing Crowdcast.

“For Hay it’s very important to understand who our audience is, and owning that data. Thinking very long term, it’s important that we understand who we’re speaking to and have a handle on where that audience is and who they are. The digital space offers so much opportunity in terms of being open and accessible and having hundreds of thousands of views, but that needs to be weighed against a need to have a committed audience that are going to support you in times of need financially, and when we return to a physical model.

“It was important to us to ensure we had a process of registration, some process of control over who is doing what, some way of comparing the viewership of our digital events with the people who would normally be buying tickets. That has been the main driver for us to now have our own platform behind the festival registration page. Crowdcast does have ways of seeing who and where and how, but we can’t connect that directly into our system because of GDPR — quite rightly, I should add. But it provided a level of that functionality that YouTube and others didn’t.

“For our spring event, we didn’t have time or the financing to invest in our own registration system that we could skin on a Vimeo or YouTube thing, which is what festivals with a bit more time were able to do. So that was one consideration.

“The other thing, slightly tied to that, was that we made a decision early on to make the festival free, because we had just done a big public fundraising drive. And we felt there was a need, given the digital opportunity, to go wide and let people view if they couldn’t afford to, during that really crappy time that we were all in.

“At the same time, we needed to offer an option for people to donate. Now, I know YouTube offers that, and I think Vimeo now offers that too. But there was a constellation of factors that made Crowdcast feel like the right platform for that. There are lots of things that you could control on there that we couldn’t control on YouTube. For example, Crowdcast has registration messages that go out before, to which we could add our own festival fundraising messages.”

A Word About Templates

When you log onto a video conferencing platform the display is basic: people appear in boxes and a coloured line appears around the person speaking. The display can be adjusted at the host's end to eliminate non-participants, such as audience members or staffers working behind the scenes. Webinars show only the speakers and not attendees.

Using a template allows you to give an event a more polished look. It lets you brand the event with your logo or festival colours, and any other info you'd like front and centre, whether that's a sponsor's logo or a link to your festival bookshop or affiliated bookseller. I was impressed by the Bloody Scotland template, which kept large "Donate" and "Buy Books" buttons prominently displayed beneath speakers' faces throughout every session. (And the 10% off deal they negotiated with Waterstones for books sold via that link.)

You can read a little more about templates in the following Case Study.

Case Study: View from the Tech Desk — Purplebox for the Wigtown Book Festival

In 2020, Wigtown Book Festival ran a combination of live-streamed and pre-recorded events of varying lengths, which remained available for catch-up viewing. A safe studio space was set up in The Print Room, adjacent to the festival offices at 11 Main Street, where those chairs and authors able to attend in person filmed their part of the conversation.

Abby Burn, a director of [Purplebox Productions](#), describes the work involved:

"We had a conversation with Wigtown about how they wanted to run their festival. Up to that point, they'd been running Wigtown Wednesdays through Zoom onto their Facebook page. They really wanted to use Facebook [for the festival], but after going through all our research, and based on our experience, we raised concerns. Facebook is a barrier to entry. To be able to see anything you have to have an account. We pushed the festival to look at doing it on YouTube. It's the world's video streaming platform. This is what they do, and they do it well.

"The festival did not want audiences to see events presented as Zoom calls, and wanted the option of filming live in their studio. This set-up was literally two cameras, some lighting, and a backdrop.

"We were still using Zoom as the platform for interaction between host and author, or between our tech team and the author, but we were no longer using it as the platform for the audience.

"Wigtown Book Festival also required the ability to gather information and statistics, the equivalent of ticket sales. We used the basis of their website to create YouTube scheduled live streams. You could sign in from the festival's website, or pop into an event directly through YouTube. We gave them something that was easy for them to manipulate

and wasn't going to fall over. We did have issues, of course. In one case it was YouTube's issue and not ours, but we ran the event later, once the problem was resolved.

"Those are the fundamentals. A lot of technical wizardry goes on underneath, like a duck paddling underneath the water. It had to look smooth. It had to be easy for the audience to understand and use. It had to be stable.

"For the best look, we used templates, which cover up the fact that we're using Zoom. They take away the yellow borders and help even things up — for example, so that people's heads appear roughly the same size. The templates give us the opportunity to physically move people around the screen in order to place them, so both participants look roughly equal. That makes it look more like the participants are face-to-face having a conversations, which was another of the festival's requests. And a template gives you branding and a consistent look across the festival.

"We had one template for the chairperson's introduction. Another template, for the conversation, was two boxes of the same size. A third template was for an author's reading. Each template was slightly a different size, in order to give the effect that something different was happening.

"For live events, where someone was in the studio, we did vision mixing. That's the equivalent of having a small television studio with two cameras, and cutting between them. At the same time, we're making sure all the graphics go out correctly and that everything else happens. It's not a case of sitting back and letting Zoom take control.

"One thing we insisted on was that everyone did a pre-Zoom. We'd go through their setup with them, and as kindly and nicely as we could, might say things like, 'Could you face the window?' 'Could you liven up the space a little bit?' 'Could you put your laptop on a box so it's at eye level?' And we'd explain, 'This is because we want to make you look as good as possible.' We also sent everyone an email with detailed instructions. Of course, not everyone took us up on this. That was a circumstance we could not control.

"But I cannot overemphasise the importance of a tech rehearsal. I wound up with sheets of notes, things like, 'Connection may drop out because they are in Beirut,' or 'Their internet connection isn't the best but they're going to try and improve it, remind them to do this.' It was helpful having that heads-up.

"We had three events with serious tech issues. One was YouTube's problem, as I said earlier. For one of our children's events, the issue was twofold: we were asked to help run it late in the day, and it was going out on Facebook. Their requirements for livestreaming are different than YouTube's, so we did not have the right settings in place. A quick Google solved that and we made the adjustments.

"Another problem was that this event happened on the first Saturday, and literally every festival staff member was in the office above us using the internet for work. The system wasn't capable of handling that and kept dropping out. We made sure another piece of equipment was brought in overnight, which gave us an independent 4G wi-fi connection. The lesson we learned was know your platform's tech requirements ahead of time. Another

lesson was never rely on internal equipment, always bring your own. It meant the festival team could carry on doing their jobs while we did ours.

“With another event the problem was that the speaker’s internet died. Just stopped. They rebooted their router and it crashed out again. I pulled the event. Technically, it wasn’t going to happen. We wound up taping the talk, getting it sent to us digitally, and editing it before transmission. Of course while that was happening, behind the scenes the festival had to put out a blog post explaining the change of plans, and notify everyone who’d signed up to attend that it would go out later.

“YouTube creates an archive of your livestream. We were running what’s called a pre-countdown, a holding screen with a countdown to the start of the event. It automatically notifies anybody subscribed to your channel that you’ve gone live and gives them 5-10 minutes to get themselves a coffee and get set to listen. When you end the stream, YouTube automatically creates a video archive for people to revisit. You can go in and edit these videos, and top and tail them if you want.

“Vimeo is an alternative platform, but to do professional streaming on Vimeo you have to have a professional or business account, which costs money, whereas YouTube is free. YouTube has a built in subtitle feature, which doesn’t often work for Scottish accents, but they also allowed us to provide a URL for Stagertext’s subtitles.

“How Stagertext works is that they are part of the Zoom call, typing live during the conversation. By the time it goes into the YouTube link the timing matches up, with maybe a one- or two-second delay. On average, we were looking at between a 14- and a 32-second delay from when I hit ‘go live’ to actually going out on YouTube. The Stagertext software interacts to make sure that it happens at the right time on YouTube. They take the systems we give them — the equivalent of our address code — and plug it into their system.

“We always acted as Host in order to control everything happening in the Zoom call. Everyone required to take part gets sent the meeting invite — the chairperson, the author, the Stagertext person if that was happening, and any staff members who’d be curating audience questions for the chair.

“To do that, I had to set up my iPad, using another account, which the team sent the questions to. We’d tried doing it using texts, but it looked really strange having a chair look at their phone to try and select questions.

“I was adamant from the start that I didn’t want Wigtown Book Festival’s audiences visible in the Zoom. I wanted it to look as close to what you would have experienced if you were in the main marquee.

“Finally, each night, after everything was archived on YouTube for adult events, and on Facebook for kids’ events, one of the day’s most interesting or successful events was restreamed out to Facebook to see if we could reach more viewers around the world. And it did work!

“One of the pieces of software that I use is called OBS, which is an open broadcasting system. It’s free software, and they have loads of tutorials. We use it because it’s exceptionally stable. I can plug all my hardware into my computer and OBS picks it up and

enables me to manipulate the captured video within OBS. It records the output of the whole 720p stream.

“Limiting ourselves to 720p meant that we used a lot less bandwidth, which is important when relying on 4G rather than, say, fibre internet. This creates fewer issues when streaming. We recorded everything onto our spare hard drive, date- and time-stamped, and with the graphics in place.

“OBS has a great way of changing between systems. One of our templates on OBS was Facebook, one was YouTube. All I had to do was chose one or the other from the hard drive and all the information was there. Then I would go onto Facebook to make sure it was ready, then hit ‘go live.’ With OBS we created an archive for ourselves, as well, which meant if there was a problem transmitting, I had an archive of the event regardless.

“One of our biggest lessons was that we should have ensured we had multiple channels, because there were issues when events ran simultaneously. When there were crossovers we had to put one out on Facebook and one on YouTube. We’ve recommended that if they do this again next year they should have a separate Big Wig YouTube channel.”

Beauty is in the Eye of the Beholder

“I don’t know if people realise it, but I keep changing the posters behind me,” said Ian Rankin, when we Zoomed to talk about this project. Not every author worries about boring fans by beaming into their homes from the same location, and there are some rooms I could navigate blindfolded, even though I’ve never met the author in person.

Many relish the chance to see an author’s home, and it’s part of the lure of a digital event. Entire Twitter accounts are devoted to authors’ shelves.

When I asked Nick Barley why he decided to build a studio, he said, “The first reason was that we wanted to make sure the audience experience and the audience journey was enjoyable, and in some way replicated part of the live literary festival experience. We wanted it to be different from feeling as if you were joining a Zoom call. One way we thought we could make our festival different was by being able to say, ‘Here we are coming to you from our studio in Edinburgh.’

“We did it in a short time, in a certain kind of way, and we’d probably do it differently next year with different kinds of backdrops and more evidence of coming from Edinburgh. [Having a studio] meant that we could anchor the festival from its location and have people coming in from all over the world feel connected to this city.”

Only about 15% of their events featured all the participants broadcasting from the studio, but, he said, “What we did have was that all events were being

broadcast through our studio. We also had a sign language interpreter in the studio, and live captioning streams”

Bearing in mind the adage borrowed for this section’s heading, and factoring in everything I’ve said elsewhere about audience attentiveness, I’m aware that the contentious opinion I’m about to offer is highly subjective.

Until we can deliver cinema/television level visuals for a traditional author interview, I’m not sure how much production values matter to me as a viewer — especially since I can enjoy a digital book event without looking at it.

In some cases I find the visuals actively problematic. One festival uses a branded backdrop and silhouettes participants using some kind of cut-out technology. It regularly chops off nose tips and wreaks havoc with hairlines and I cannot bear to look. Often the participants are silhouetted to face each other throughout the conversation, and it’s disconcerting watching an event whose participants rarely, if ever, glance my way. To be fair, that situation has occurred on other platforms, depending on the speaker’s camera angles. It’s especially vexing when someone delivers a paper. There’s only so long I care to stare at the top of their head.

While I’ve heard complaints about cold, sterile backdrops, there are some that are too busy, which I find taxing on the eyes. In some cases that’s resolved by hitting full screen, which eliminates the dissonance by bringing the speakers to the fore.

And as I say, other opinions are available. No festival can please all the people all of the time.

Case Study: North Cornwall Book Festival At Home: Using Film as a Placeholder, an Entertainment, and an Offering

Despite cancelling their 2020 festival, the North Cornwall Book Festival was determined to signal their intention to regroup and return. They’ve done this via a series of short films featuring authors who would have appeared. They are personal, witty, and enjoyable. I asked the festival’s Artistic Director and Chair to explain how the films came about.

Artistic Director Patrick Gale:

“The process, in theory, has been pretty straightforward. I booked each author for a Zoom interview and used Zoom settings to block my own face and voice. (I had to nudge them occasionally when they forgot to speak as though they weren’t answering a question.) We also got them to give a reading.

“It has been a great success. Viewing and sharing figures get better and better, proving that we’re reaching a wider audience than would come to us in the flesh. It was

squeezed in under our pretty tiny budget, which was puffed out by grants from FEAST in Cornwall, and the Arts Council's Emergency Fund.

"It has also been *a lot* of work. There've been several lengthy edits, and several reshoots and re-records. What I have really liked about the format is that each film has ended up — for better or worse — really reflecting its subject's personality.

"The project has made us realise we must definitely continue with a strong digital and filmed element in festivals to come, post COVID. That will have repercussions on funding, budgets and staffing in a hand-to-mouth festival with no paid staff!"

Chair of the festival, Pippa Hyam:

"Disappointed at having to postpone our festival, I started to look around at what other festivals were doing. Though I think this is going to change dramatically over the next few months, all of the ones I looked at were trying to replicate a festival interview session. That meant 45-60 minutes of people talking on a Zoom video. We decided that wouldn't work, people won't sit and watch a video for that length of time.

"North Cornwall Book Festival is part of a group of festivals that includes two music festivals, and lots of music and art exhibitions throughout the year. That means we have a lot of very creative people whose skills we could call on.

"The initial idea came from the committee member in charge of our children's authors, who came up with the idea of filming authors setting tasks for children. Patrick and I said, 'Yes, that's great. Let's do it with all the authors.'

My daughter works in film production and suggested that we look at vloggers, because there's some really engaging content out there. She said, 'Do interviews, but edit them and get the authors to do some filming.' The Zoom interviews were originally around 30-40 minutes long, and the final films are around 8-12 minutes long, combining interview footage, and B-roll footage filmed by the authors. We produced a very clear brief for them to follow, and a list of suggestions for things we wanted them to film.

"Authors used their phones to show us their working space, the view from their window, or their dog running through the garden. Some went on walks. Petroc Trelawny used his iPhone to track the bicycle journey from his London flat to the BBC. We intercut this with him walking up the stairs in Broadcasting House into his studio.

"Not all the authors were up to that standard, but personally I think the authors' characters shone through. We did have a couple of authors who were incapable of filming, and we ended up doing a B-roll on their behalf.

"My daughter edited the first seven films. We relied heavily on her ability to put it together with the funny little captions, and trusted her to choose the best bits. She reckons each film took her about five hours to do.

"We have another good festival friend, a photographer and editor who worked for the BBC and is now freelance, and he took on the rest. They did it for tuppence. We have a budget, but it's small. There's another very nice friend of the festival who put together the graphics.

“We've got 29 films in total. That includes all the schools films. As for the rest, we're uploading one a week. We discussed whether to do it all at once, in a confined period of time as if it was a real festival, and thought no. People might be excited at first, but they'll run out of steam. We decided to publish one a week, and they will go on till Christmas, when we'll have a bit of a finale, possibly with the musicians. That's another point, because getting the rights to music is important. If you don't, you get into hot water. Again, we were very lucky. The Rowan Tree, one of the local bands we work with, said they'd let us use their music, as did Tom Hickcox and Helen Porter. Again, they're friends of the festival, and said 'just credit us and use the music.' It's been lovely having really nice music to lay alongside the films.

Chatterboxes — A Tool for Boosting Engagement

I confess, I have no great love for chat boxes (I'm using that term interchangeably with the Q&A function that co-exists on some systems). My first digital event, when I was brand new to Zoom, felt profoundly chaotic because not only could I see all the attendees, but the chat box let me see them interacting nonstop throughout the panel conversation.

“Pay attention, we're talking here!” I wanted to scream.

Job one was rejigging my display to eliminate the sight of the man picking his nose, the couple fighting over the popcorn, and the person scrubbing their dishes. But as the chair, I *had* to engage with the chat box, using my periphery vision to make note of audience questions to pose to my writers.

It turns out my misanthropy is wide of the mark. It turns out the chat function is beloved of audiences and festivals alike.

The conversation you had while queuing for an event? That's the chat box. The enthused post-event discussion held en route to the signing queue? That's the chat box. The collective gasp of amazement, the ripple of laughter? That's the chat box. The encounter with someone visiting from overseas about how much you love the same writers? You know what I'm going to say.

That first digital event I did was for Carolyn Jess-Cooke's Stay at Home Literary Festival. She's a passionate advocate for chat boxes:

“Feedback from our festival drew attention to the audience participation aspect via the chat box. It was lovely seeing the way they'd use it to have a conversation while the event was going on, a parallel conversation not about irrelevant things, but a dialogue opening up amongst the audience while the event was happening. The Q&A would emerge from that, and there was an organic discursive interaction. Digital events that don't facilitate interaction run

a risk of [making audiences feel like they are] eavesdropping on someone else's phone call.

“There's something to be said for the digital space. In the chat box over and over again I saw people saying they were tuning in from far away, and having conversations about the event that you can't have in a physical event. I never got the sense that people were using chat box to have a chinwag. They were actively thinking and unpacking what was being discussed. It made me feel like this offers a lot to people.

“With a Zoom room you are in the space, you're part of it. You don't have the speaker up on a stage in the distance, as you would have in a physical event, but have this levelling experience of everyone being part of it. I loved the informality of my festival. There was something very human about it. People seem to respond to that. Maybe it was of the moment, but those are some of the things I would take forward.”

It's also worth mentioning that someone who's too shy or intimidated to raise their hand during a live event might feel comfortable — and more seen — engaging digitally. In terms of inclusion, that's another bonus.

Author Ian Rankin said he noticed the lively ambience of the chat box at Two Crime Writers and a Microphone: The Locked Up Festival, which took place 2-4 July.

“It was great because you had people from all around the world who felt very connected to this and to each other. All the sidebars where people were getting to chat while the events were going on were full of friendships being formed, not only people commenting on the events themselves, but just chatting to each other. It was very collegial, very open, very democratic.

“People's brains have been changed by cell phones and social media. They're used to watching or listening to something and also texting or tweeting about what they're watching. It doesn't mean they're not focused on what's happening on the TV. When you're on stage at a book festival, you don't look at the audience think for a second that every single one of them is 100% focused on what you're doing. They'll be drifting in and out of the conversation. I think [the chat box] is just an extension of that.”

At Edinburgh International Book Festival, the team used chat boxes to conduct nonstop audience interface behind the scenes. According to Director Nick Barley, “The web team who built it also operated the festival platform, which included the chat room and the Q&A function.

“There were two groups, one was our front of house team of moderators, usually two or three people per event, who’d be talking to people. For instance, if someone had a problem, say their sound wasn’t working, our team would troubleshoot. Or if someone said, ‘I hate this speaker,’ they could answer, ‘Thanks for your comments. It’s really great to hear from you.’

“At the same time our Q&A moderators were responsible for selecting the questions we fed through to the interviewers. They’d select the best questions coming in that hadn’t already been asked.”

He added, “There’s a second part of this, which is about the interactivity, or the participatory quality of what we’re doing. During the festival BBC journalists said, ‘What you’re doing is different from what the BBC does, because the BBC broadcasts to viewers, while you’re doing interactive broadcasting to participants.’ Obviously, there’s a fine line between when a viewer becomes a participant. If you’re watching a football match on TV you probably are a kind of participant because you’re cheering. But we were adding in as many participatory elements as we could, bringing people into the process. I think the future lies in how we can find imaginative ways to enable people to be participants and not just viewers.”

Ruth Wishart —like me, both a frequent chair as well as programmer — also feels chat boxes can be distracting, but recognises their value.

“Audience participation is a huge part of a book festival. It’s why you find 750 people packed into a tent in Edinburgh. In the digital realm, the chat function is the only way they can interact. It’s far from perfect, and it can be distracting, but at least the audience has a small chance to be involved. It’s a great joy to me [for Cove and Kilcreggan] that MyVLF moderate the chat. Because the author talks directly to the audience, the chair can concentrate on their questions without having to worry about anything else.”

For my part, when attending events I keep my camera off and rarely participate in the chat. From a chairing perspective, I’d say the ideal scenario is a curated set of questions to pick and choose from. Yes, it involves more technology (and the ability to use it) but it means an end to hearing (or scrolling past), “This is more of a comment than a question,” and orations from members of the audience certain that they know more about a subject than the bona fide expert who’s written an actual book about it.

Lyndsey Fineran, of The Times and The Sunday Times Cheltenham Literary Festival, developed an appreciation of the curated Q&A. For their

blended festival, some events had live audiences, but they couldn't use a roving mike, for safety reasons. "We came up with two methods of asking questions. If you were in the venue, you could use the digital platform [Slido](#) to ask questions. If you were watching at home, we used a live Q&A function, with someone behind the scenes collating all the questions. The chair would be handed an iPad in the final 10 minutes to take audience questions.

"This is something we might keep in future, even if life is completely normal. It stopped all that fumbling of passing the mike around, or people saying, 'This is more of a comment than a question.' The energy was better and the chair could pick which question they wanted to end on, and ignore those that had already been covered."

Chat boxes were a key part of the experience for visitors to Hay Festival as well, said Chris Bone: "The comment thread is incredibly important for the user experience, at least for the festival's experience, and we had to resource that well. At every session we had someone dedicated to interaction within the comments. That was separate to our social strategy, separate to our digital marketing, just them in the comments — because it's a sales pitch. If you have sponsors, you can add their messages. It's also answering tech issues, making funny remarks and trying to make it chatty, encouraging that kind of engagement. It was by far the most fun part of the festival. Sometimes you would have an event taking place, and the comments became its whole own thing.

"We kept it separate, so our speakers and our chairs do not see the public interface at all during their event, and questions are fed to them. And some sessions always get a lot of heat. Anything about women and gender, and equality? The comments can get quite nasty. You have duty of care to your speakers not to have them bombarded with those kinds of things.

"Logistically it was a big resourcing issue, because that's someone just doing that one job for the entire time, and it's an investment."

Case Study: Personalised Signings at Edinburgh International Book Festival

Edinburgh International Book Festival made it possible for some fans to get their books personally signed, face to face — albeit digitally. The festival bookshop delivered signings with 22 UK-based writers, where the first fifty book purchasers were offered access to short, private Zoom sessions that they were able to record. Authors involved included Ian Rankin, Val McDermid, Ali Smith, Maggie O'Farrell, Amelia Gentleman, Gavin Francis, Philippe Sands and Hallie Rubenhold.

Festival Director Nick Barley explained how it worked:

“There were two different streams. First, if the author was able to come to the studio at the Assembly Rooms on George Street, we had the books in a special room upstairs after their event. People who had registered to have their books signed with the author would be sent a Zoom invitation. It was very specific, for example, ‘You’re invited to meet Ian Rankin at 7:48 pm on Thursday night, to have your book signed.’

“They’d arrive and be put into a waiting room, along with all the other people. It was essentially a digital version of the signing queue. When their time arrived, a member of our bookshop team would let them into the Zoom call with the author. We also had a third screen, an overhead camera with a light that shone down on the book, and enabled the audience member to see the author physically signing their book.

“The sales receipt was an important part of this process. When you bought the book you would write down the dedication you wanted, for example, ‘*To Nick, Happy Birthday, with love from Lee.*’ Or whatever dedication you wanted. The author would see that on their screen. It’s not unlike the way we use post-its at signings, because that helps with spellings of names. The signed book was then put in a pile with the receipt inside for dispatch.

“The slower, harder way of doing this was when an author could not be with us in the studio, and that is why we limited the numbers. We had to send the number of books needed for the signing to the author’s home, and afterwards, organise getting those books back to our warehouse to get them dispatched. It was a slightly longer process, and a bit more problematic.

“With these signings there was no overhead camera, so you couldn’t see the signing happening. Nevertheless, the audience member had the Zoom experience and was able to speak to the author.

“I think some people were confused about what exactly this experience was, which probably inhibited the demand a bit. Those who did understand realised that it was just like a signing at a festival. And how long do you get with an author when there is a signing queue? We didn’t impose a time limit. We don’t say, ‘You have a *maximum* of exactly one minute.’ We say, ‘You can see lots of people behind you, so be reasonably quick, but get a selfie, have a chat.’ People would have between one and three minutes with the author.

“It partly depended on the author. For example, Rob Biddulph, the children’s author, had 50 people in his signing queue, the maximum allowed, and it took *four* hours! He was obviously spending 10-15 minutes with each person.”

Sign Up or Rock Up?

There are a variety of ways to access free digital events, from signing up directly through the festival’s portal for specific events or a block of events, via an intermediary ticketing agency such as Eventbrite, or simply rocking up on the day, hitting the link on the website or YouTube channel (or Facebook, Instagram Live, etc.).

Sometimes it requires a combination of these steps, which can confuse even the computer literate. I ran afoul of Eventbrite more than once, finding access tricky. I'd register for events and receive a confirmation email, only for the system to fail to recognise me, despite using the link provided. It meant the palaver of re-registering for the event all over again to gain entry.

At another festival I registered for free access across all their dates, only to get so tangled in the system that it was easier to leave the site up, muted, as an open tab on my browser. I would toggle in and out to see what was on — a bit like leaving the television or radio on in the background. One festival asked visitors to build an itinerary as an access route to events. You could add new events at any time, even right as they began, but again, it felt a tad fussy to me.

The drawback to rocking up is that you do not have access to the chat function. (Though some festivals also import queries from their social media channels, offering another way to participate.) No sign up means no reminder email, so the responsibility for remembering what you want to see rests entirely on the viewer. Then again, if you hate a cluttered In Box, this is a plus.

From a festival perspective, getting people to sign up allows you to build your mailing list and collect data. It allows you to repeat the “Please donate” message and send follow-up questionnaires, which provide valuable audience feedback. That mailing list can keep working hard, helping you generate fresh income *after* the festival. For example, Cheltenham got in touch offering me a chance to purchase on-demand viewing rights for all their events for the reduced price of £15, down from £20.

For free events, then, it feels as if this either/or option has a lot going for it, since leaving the options open maximises your potential audience.

The Tech Dry Run

If you read the case study with Purplebox, you have some idea of the importance of a tech dry run for a livestreamed event. It's worth emphasising.

Joe Vaughan, who ran his own Publicate Festival and came on board in the new role of Digital Production Liaison for Edinburgh International Book Festival, explained that the production team played a much bigger role in the creative process this year, and he was there to keep the lines of communication open between the tech team, authors, and their publishers.

Much of July was devoted to liaising with everyone who'd be using Zoom, and then conducting a pre-check about a week beforehand. It was a mammoth scheduling job, coordinating time zones and availability.

“The time spent was really worthwhile. We'd start with an internet speed test. If their internet speed was lower than we want it to be we had several options: we could ask them to plug a cable directly into the router, to change rooms, and to make sure that partners or children weren't using the internet at the same time.

“We'd also talk about lighting and camera angles. A lot of it was about putting people at ease. I'd explain that we were possibly doing things differently than they've done before. We knew that by the end of July some authors would have done five or six Zoom events. We had to say, ‘I know you know what to do, but we have our systems in place.’”

In addition to these pre-checks, participants were initially asked to log in two hours ahead of their event, though that dropped to one hour after the first weekend passed without too many issues. “One of the main reasons we had that much time set aside was to account for people arriving late, and people logging in who hadn't done the pre-check. In the end, for 80-90% of our events we didn't need that amount of time.

“Part of what we did in the pre-check was prepare authors for what they would see at every step of the way, for example when we moved out of the digital green room and into the studio. With a live event there might be 5000 people watching, but you're in your bedroom, completely alone. I think some people feared that as soon as they logged in they'd be live.

“A common question was ‘What should I do if my internet drops out?’ We had a process for getting people back into the event quickly, but that required the authors to follow several steps, and we had to talk them through that process. We sent them that information at first contact, by email, and went through it again at the pre-check. It was a phone number which would bring them into the Zoom call. It's simple, but the thought of the internet going down makes people very scared.

“It's a feature of Zoom that you can use your mobile or landline to phone into a Zoom call. It means you can have no internet at all but can still phone in and appear on screen. It would sound like mobile phone call into radio, a little bit grainy. I think that happened twice across all our events this year. There were troubles across the whole industry.

“Another question I was asked quite a lot was, ‘Where should I look on my screen when I’m talking?’ Some people say you have to look directly into the camera, but that’s really unnatural. When I’m talking to you now, my instinct is to look at your face in the box. Even though if a third party was watching, neither of us would be looking at the audience, we’re having a more natural conversation.”

Vaughan’s job never existed before because this situation never existed before in the book festival sector. “We were asking authors to do something different from what they are used to. A majority were very adaptable and accommodating. Some authors who have been doing this for decades, rightly or wrongly, are used to a certain kind of event, where you turn up, meet your chair, someone gives you a glass of water, you have a conversation, you sign books and you go home. This year, I had to have their phone numbers and email addresses. Suddenly, it doesn’t work to go through publicists all the time, because we’re going into people’s homes.

“In an ordinary year, working with a publicist is fine and very efficient, but when you need to get back to an author in their house and say, ‘I’m really sorry, but your background doesn’t look right. And your lighting is bad. And your internet’s bad . . . ’ People aren’t used to being spoken to like that — and we’re not used to speaking to people like that.”

WHERE MIGHT WE GO FROM HERE? **Towards a game plan for best practice**

“Culture is not a solid, it’s a liquid.” — Jerry Seinfeld

The impetus for this report was a global pandemic that forced the arts community to react fast, almost before it had a chance to think things through. Many months on from the government’s original UK lockdown, the book festival sector has much to congratulate itself for, and much still to refine.

The hope is that this paper, by gathering many of the sector’s pandemic achievements and lessons in one place, and by asking questions about fresh innovations and approaches we might take — as well as things we may have overlooked — will provide inspiration for a range of communities as we head into a dramatically altered future.

Creative Scotland’s goal is to reinstate a network of Scottish book festivals as a safe place for communication, commiseration, and creative collaboration. With that in mind, I asked the festivals I spoke to what they might hope to gain from a revived network. Here are some of their answers.

Ann Landmann, CYMERA: “It would be helpful to talk to other people about what they’ve done and what’s worked. I’ve been to some webinars, but no one seems to have really concrete answers, beyond the obvious ones. It’s good to have real-life examples, and for people to be happy to share. For technology, it would be great if someone had found a tech package they could recommend. It helps just knowing that other people are out there struggling with the same things, and that you’re not alone.”

Eleanor Livingstone, StAnza: “Resurrecting the book festival alliance digitally could prove successful because in the past the travel to meetings was a stumbling block. The main thing I got from it then was the connections I made. To have someone to ask questions of and to speak with people facing the same issues you are. Support.”

Joan Michael, of Ullapool Book Festival, said she’d welcome technology sharing, but “my number one” would be bilingual interpretation equipment, maybe housed at Creative Scotland, with funding for it to be transported to whoever needs it. She would also welcome a way to ensure there were no date clashes across Scottish book festivals.

Jess Orr, Paisley Book Festival: “This conversation [we’re having] is a good example of how a network would be useful, because every time you have

articulate what's in your head with people facing the same kinds of issues and problems it is useful and affirming. It helps, when you're stuck in your head, trying to figure out if you're making the right decisions. It's nice to talk to someone else in the same boat.”

Katrina Brodin, Glasgow Life: “It’s got to be about propositions. The solutions we had up our sleeves to problems we experienced before don't work for this one. What would be useful is something that stimulates shared experiences, developing good practice, connections and co-production, and maybe co-hosting of content between festivals, which doesn't feel threatening, so that one festival doesn't dominate the other. If it made sense for a consortium bid for a money to invest in a tender to get the right supplier of a platform that worked for everybody across the year. A degree of honesty around the table around issues of money and other things. Joining forces has to be about how we help everyone have the best chance of coming through this, and our audiences ultimately all care about this space, so we should be getting together to deal with that.”

Isla Rosser-Owen, speaking for Islay Book Festival, said she’d welcome peer support and help, because smaller festivals don’t have the same kind of people resources or skills to hand. Ideas about how to upskill volunteers were also on her list of benefits. We could also ask ourselves “Are the smaller festivals getting lost?”

Adrian Turpin, of Wigtown Book Festival said he’d like to see the following issues on the table:

“If this is an audience development opportunity what does that actually mean? And a lot of that’s talking about diversity — but in a digital sense, it’s no use saying we can talk to the world, without saying how we’re going to find the world and make that work. It would be great to come up with a few constructive ideas for doing that. It’s a skill.

“There will be a new degree of technical know-how among everyone. There’s a fear of working in silos. We need to ask each other ‘How did you do this?’ Ask the hard questions.

“Shared resources and shared information. I’m not a great believer in sharing in the sense of let’s all use the same system, but there are probably modules we can use within that. Is there a toolkit for smaller festivals for using digital? Does Creative Scotland need an external tech team working on demand with festivals? Or would they feel that’s preventing supporting the supply chain? Let’s talk about it.

“Monetisation is another obvious thing to discuss. Do we need a survey: ‘What have you been paying? What would you be prepared to pay?’ Does monetisation include fundraising? It’s usually thought of as something separate.

“We can get lost talking about the tech details, but shouldn’t we step back and say, what *is* this actually, what does it mean?”

Let’s Brainstorm

Ideas for best practice pepper this report but here, again, is a collection of possibilities, some repeated, others new. They are my own suggestions and suggestions from others.

Thus far our sector has been reactive. We were caught on the hop and plunged into crisis. We’ve done our best and it’s been darn good. Now we have the opportunity to look to the future. It’ll be a challenge, with everything in turmoil and endless uncertainties. Technology evolves rapidly. COVID-19 regulations alter every few weeks, and region to region. Recent headlines say a vaccine might be with us sooner rather than later, altering the terrain yet again, though what it will mean for public gatherings remains to be seen. Programmers working on their 2021 projects are scenario-planning like crazy, second-guessing delivery options and different ways to make them happen. Every version leads to a different outcome and targets a different audience. This requires us to stay alert and flexible.

We can’t solve everything here and now, but we *can* think about the questions that need asking, such as:

- What do good events really require? And how does that change, delivering them live versus digital?
- Are we cultural importers, bringing incomers to our cities, towns and villages, or cultural exporters, using the internet to beam our ideas across the globe? Can we be both?
- How can we help one another? How might a Scottish Book Festival alliance work? What do we want it to achieve?
- What opportunities should we seize over the next 12 to 18 months? How should we prioritise them?
- What *could* we be?

In that spirit, here's a collection of ideas and questions to get the conversation rolling. (NB: Some of these things are already underway, some may be too fanciful.)

GENERAL

- Let's take the points made in this article on board:
<https://ashmann.medium.com/cultural-sector-digital-after-the-storm-72eab62acfde>
- Use the new Scottish Book Festival to share experiences, talk shop, brainstorm, collaborate, and share resources. Use it to communicate, collaborate, and co-programme.
- Adrian Turpin offered the following suggestions for opportunities our network might explore:
 - A digital toolkit, which includes a streaming toolkit. Something clearly laying out the issues and choices, with case studies. We should ask why people went down a particular route and what happened as a result.
 - Ask ourselves about the relative importance of our existing audiences and our international audiences. What's the relative importance of age groups? What's the relative importance of young people's and children's audiences?
 - "We worked with The Bookshop Band, who have built up streaming partnerships. They did their morning talk show; it would go out through our website and their Facebook page, then through our Facebook page, through the booksellers Association, and something like 30 or 40 other partners, largely bookshops, across the world. Partnerships are something we're always encouraged to talk about later, but streaming partnerships are really interesting. How do we make those work? How do we piggyback on other people's digital streams without cannibalising our own, and while also maintaining our identity?"
- Create a mentoring programme around festival programming, production, to complement the new chairperson mentoring programme.

- Organise opportunities to set up conversations and workshops with television and filmmakers, since digital events are effectively broadcasting. Once we understand the intricacies of broadcasting rights we will be better placed to review our fee structure for appearing authors and chairs, to determine if they are fair and in keeping with industry standards.
- Do we need a legal fact sheet and checklist (akin to recommendations on Scottish Book Trust’s website) highlighting permissions and copyright issues for all music, film clips, and readings used during digital events? Ex: if your technology collects IP addresses, that information needs to be incorporated into their privacy policy. Permission must be given for a festival to share any recording showing someone’s home or location.
- When events are pre-recorded there is usually a quick post-event conversation to ensure that nothing needs to be re-recorded. Livestreamed sessions might also funnel into a space where the participants can debrief and say a proper goodbye, and festival staff can say, “Great job, thanks.”
- When travel is safe and permitted, an international travel bursary scheme would enable programmers, especially those from smaller festivals, to visit their peers around the world to forge alliances in order to see what they do and how it’s accomplished. These relationships and new friendships could lead to fantastic international collaborations.
- In lieu of a green room, some festivals hold an authors’ tea or cocktail party to make them feel part of a festival community. (Send them snacks, drink, branded merchandise ahead of time, and meet in a Zoom room.)
- Festivals are places where audience members connect with one another. Can we expand on the spirit of the chat room, involving them more in our digital events? What possibilities exist?
- Explore outdoor options, such as drive-in festivals (see the Appledore case study), though it’s worth questioning whether Scotland’s notoriously variable weather makes this a viable, reliable opportunity.

- Taking a cue from Reading is Magic: provide branded merchandise to participants ahead of time, encouraging them to decorate their filming space to differentiate an event from other digital fare living online. (This entails expenses that might be problematic for some.)
- Offer digital-pivot support sessions to less well-resourced book festivals. This might include specific, centralised assistance in elements of production (for example: editing a pre-recorded event; creation of templates).
- Events need to be monitored/hosted. This is a new aspect of the job for festival staffers, which should be recognised in terms of training and financial compensation. In fact, if the future is hybrid, this raises staffing issues, as the work involved is enormous on its own, and an extra burden in conjunction with the renewal of live events.
- In the interests of fairness to authors and festivals, how long should digital content remain available online?
- It's worth remembering that digital events are more tiring for authors and chairs than live events. In addition to the attention required to connect down a camera lens, we need to be aware that we're now asking participants to dress the room they're in to look good, worry about microphones, cameras and lighting, and do their own hair and makeup. These are not things they've had to worry about, or were things that a publicist looked after on their behalf. On top of all that, we're often asking them to work at odd times of the day or night, to coincide with international time zones.
- Make websites as simple as possible, including FAQs about how to access events, or even videos demonstrating the process. Be explicit about which events will not be available for catch-up viewing.
- Per Chris Bone: "Hay Festivals held a digital press conference to launch the programme, which felt like a good way to give journalists the rundown of what was happening. We also ran through the tech we would be using for the festival, so we flushed out all of the journalists' tech

problems. It meant they were invested and registered to then watch the sessions and do the same level of reporting they would have done for our live events. One of the opportunities now for smaller festivals is that national arts correspondents can attend them digitally if there is something attractive on the programme.”

- Think hard about that pre-show trailer, is my recommendation. They get old, fast. Chris Bone said, “The pre-show reel got incredibly repetitive for people that watched more than four events, and we had to mix it up. It had our sponsor messages and our please donate message, so for the winter weekend we’ll make sure each one is slightly different.”

PROGRAMMING

- Encourage greater creativity and experimentation. Ex: Do digital events have to be an hour long? Might they be shorter, like the Tea with Words events at Wigtown, or *longer*, like CYMERA’s live (and simultaneously live-tweeted) Dungeons and Dragons session, or Bloody Scotland’s tour of Tartan Noir, featuring dozens of authors in short bursts over the space of three hours. Do they have to be conversations? This year Edinburgh International Book Festival ran a Scrان and Words event, and Wigtown Book Festival ran a whisky tasting.
- We might seek out advice and inspiration about author-led walking tours, interactive events and performances. Let’s collaborate more with other art forms and see what grows.
- How can we make digital events more theatrical, cinematic? Might we create opportunities for our sector to liaise with filmmakers to create unique content? How might the sector facilitate this?
- Would it be possible to offer mailing list subscribers personalised recommendations based on their previous purchases/attendance?
- My feeling, echoed by several others I spoke to, is that panel events sometimes suffer online. They are visually taxing. There’s little opportunity for organic give and take of a live conversation. The chair has to work harder to integrate each element into a cohesive whole. Several people I interviewed said, “I prefer single author events.” Could

our sector put its heads together to figure out how to make panels truly effective in the digital realm?

- Janet Smyth points out: “Marketing used to be all front loaded. It was about selling tickets, so everything was pre-event. With events that stay up on line for a few months, there’s incredible freedom to do post-event marketing. You can take the time to reach out to different people and think slightly differently about how to approach it. For example, we're using things like children's hospital charities, letting them know that there is material sitting there for kids who might have iPads in hospital.”
- Make the most of social media, recommends Chris Bone: “The festival, in a digital space, means all of your other channels become more important and should be seen as an add-on to your programming. If you're on Twitter, Instagram, Facebook, etc., curate content for that in the same way that you would curate what happens on your stage. We found that an overwhelming number of people were doing really fun things at home, like setting up their own festival sites with their own Hay signs. Not only did our content strategies try and rally them more, but it became a part of the experience as much as what was happening in the event.”
- CYMERA’s Advent Calendar for 2020, offered free on their website, features short films with authors that include readings, tours of their workspace, and much more. Labour intensive to create, and done on zero budget, therefore requiring a lot of good will on the part of the authors, but a terrific way to keep this festival’s specific audience engaged. (NB: As I explained earlier, I am a festival trustee. This was not my idea.)
- Might funding be found for a group pitching session enabling festivals to travel to London and engage with the publishing community as a group, with an introductory greeting, followed by one-on-one meetings throughout the course of a day?

AUTHOR CARE

- As we’ve said, though digital events don’t require travel and overnight stays they are still fatiguing. That’s worth being aware of as we build

programmes, especially if we would like an author to do multiple events across a festival.

- In the absence of a green room or other hospitality, could we find fresh ways of making authors feel welcome and engaged with our festivals?
- This also applies to the kinds of industry interactions that don't exist within the digital realm. Can we bring authors together with their fellow authors, and with publishing professionals, in a way that doesn't feel forced and does appeal to all involved?
- It can be useful for panellists to have a chance to meet ahead of their event. How can this be built into the digital experience? (Or the hybrid experience, where some authors are "live" and some are beaming in?) Should the festival facilitate this, or the chairperson? If the latter, is that extra step being considered in their remuneration?
- As Ever Dundas points out, digital may feel like an easier way to include disabled authors, but should not be the *only* way we include them in future. Physical spaces must always be accessible and welcoming. Perhaps we will offer a variety of ways for *all* authors to attend, and the decision about which to choose will be arrived at with, rather than on behalf of, each author.
- Authors love meeting their readers, and it would be great to investigate more options around digital meet-and-greets, whether that's via a digital signing queue or another innovative approach.
- We might examine how we can serve mid-list and lesser known writers, many of whom are getting lost in the digital shuffle with the rush to book big names and big name debuts. This will also create the much-needed programme variety that engages audiences. In partnership with publishers and bookstores, we need to address the problematic nature of book sales following online events. That might mean special festival discounts, special festival editions or extras (a special book plate, extra content. . .). All of which has to be factored into our schedules and budgets. I include this point again here as it's of special importance to authors because

bookstore orders (and publishing contracts) are directly linked to past performance. In 2020, even bestselling authors took a hit in their numbers, a problem that's compounded, and more serious, for less well-known writers.

INCLUSIVITY

- Can we do more to provide content free to the digitally excluded, via memory sticks, DVDs, by combining forces with libraries, care homes, schools, cinemas, etc.? Content could be borrowed, like audio books, as well as aired live in accordance with appropriate social distancing rules in effect. (NB: Permissions and rights issues must be taken into account.)
- It would be fantastic to source funding for simultaneous translation, or post-event translation for recorded events. This would help us reach Gaelic speakers, as well as new residents of Scotland, such as the refugee communities and our Polish friends, and encourage them to feel welcome at book festivals. It would also open up the world of Gaelic literature to those who don't have that as a second language. As Adrian Turpin suggested: "We need to think harder about the different languages of Scotland and how we can provide for them, whether it's through subtitles or something else. And figure out how to pay for this."
- At the same time, we can discuss how to build inclusivity into our programming, with events that are specifically targeted to different communities, whether that means events featuring dyslexic writers, special audio events for the visually impaired, multi-sensory events, and so on.

CHAIRING

- More support for chairs would be ideal, including increased fees commensurate with the work involved. Chairing is even harder in the digital realm, and there's a strong argument for festivals creating green room or other opportunities for a pre-event chat. (NB: Some of us already contact authors ahead of time as part of our prep.)
- It is helpful having a question screener/curator to interact with the audience in the chat room, and cut through the chaff to feed the chair the

best and most relevant questions. This requires more human resources, as well as hardware and the training to use it.

- This comes from Julia Wheeler via:

<https://www.gaolf.org/blogs/post/virtually-the-same-or-is-it>

“If it’s possible to reduce the number of things you need chairs to remember to say — sponsors, website, crowdfunding address, bookshop, etc. — especially at the beginning of an event, they will love you. And so will the audience: even more than at an onstage event they are there to hear what the author thinks, but now other entertainment is only a click away. Captions and graphics can be used for essential information and again, borrowing from telly, branded ‘bumpers’ at the top and tail of each event make for clean starts and stops. A simple static logo can work or, even better, a brief ‘festival feel’ film of last year’s highlights.”

- We are already in the process of widening the pool of chairs in Scotland, to promote greater inclusivity and diversity. Here’s hoping the new mentoring programme continues beyond the first intake of mentees.
- Training for freelance and staff is at the heart of this idea, written about in Lit Hub’s *What Happens When Literary Events Move Online*: “Victoria Chang, chair of the low-residency MFA program at Antioch University . . . [said] ‘For every event, we had hosts, emcees, co-hosts. We trained every person giving a seminar, reading, or workshop, not only on how to use Zoom, but also on how to bring their presentations alive.’ She recognizes how difficult it is for presenters to maintain their energy and keep the audience engaged when everyone is staring at a screen. ‘We also shortened all presentations by just a little to avoid as much Zoom fatigue as possible.’”

TECHNOLOGY

- Pre-checks are vital. Everyone must understand how to use the technology. This is the time to advise about lighting, camera placement and backdrops; check sound; broadband speed; ambient noise, etc.. If the author is reading a paper or doing a long reading, gently suggest where to place the text so audiences are not left staring at the parting in their hair.

It might be necessary to ask that other members of the speaker's family stay off the wi-fi to ensure a strong signal.

- Integrate your digital production person into the team. Let them attend planning meetings and offer input from the start about how to structure things. Build their experience into the fabric of your programme and there should be fewer problems down the line.
- At the tech dry-run it is worth reminding writers and chairs broadcasting from home to remove anything that could reveal their location, the identities of their children or other vulnerable people, or photos that infringe on another person's privacy.
- As an audience member, I like seeing participants' names on screen throughout an event, much as they appear projected onto backdrops during live events. This would benefit less well known writers enormously. If you join a digital event that's underway it can be baffling knowing who's talking.
- Could we create a database of Scottish tech services to encourage working with companies and individuals based here? Using local companies benefits the Scottish economy and our national skill set.
- Could we create ongoing digital skills development opportunities to keep pace with evolving technology, prioritising assistance to festivals without the resources to hire in a dedicated tech team, and those in the sector who wish re- or upskill to improve their employment opportunities?
- Digital costs are significant and we'd benefit from a central hub for sharing information. Adrian Turpin said, "There will be a new degree of technical know-how among everyone but there's a fear of working in silos. We need to ask each other, 'How did you do this?' Ask the hard questions. It's harder the smaller you are."

MONETISATION

- How will the sector deal with audience expectation that digital events will be offered for free?

- With the advent of digital streaming, will there be an expectation for year-round programming? If so, what does that mean for festivals reliant on seasonal, freelance, or volunteer staffing?
- How can we increase book sales through festival bookshops or our affiliated booksellers at digital events? Can we create added-value merchandise only available to those buying through a festival's web shop or bookseller?
- Could the sector investigate income-generating models, such as subscriptions, friends of schemes, memberships, etc.? (NB: CYMERA and other festivals already have such systems in place, and might be able to kick-start the conversation.)
- Additional ideas can be found in the discussion beginning on page 41.

APPENDIX A: RESOURCES AND FURTHER READING

- Cultural sector + digital: After the storm:
<https://ashmann.medium.com/cultural-sector-digital-after-the-storm-72eab62acfde>
- The Space's guide to live-streaming options:
<https://www.thespace.org/resource/live-streaming-arts-lo-fi-and-low-cost-options>
- The Space's *Digital Rights Toolkit*:
<https://www.thespace.org/resource/spaces-digital-rights-toolkit>
- The Space's *Online Audiences Toolkit*:
http://assets.thespace.org.s3.amazonaws.com/Toolkits%20%28on%20the%20webste%29/The%20Space%20Online%20Audiences%20Toolkit_031212.pdf
- The Audience Agency's *Digital Engagement With Culture Exploring the Act Two Survey*: <https://www.theaudienceagency.org/asset/2347>
Contains lots of stats and useful talking points. NB: Does not primarily address literary festivals.
- The Audience Agency's Digital Audience Survey Findings:
<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/bouncing-forwards-digital-audience-survey-findings>
- The Audience Agency's report: *Understand the impact of lockdown on the behaviours of different Audience Spectrum groups*:
<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/bounce-forwards-audience-spectrum>
- *Audience Development is Dead, Long Live Audience-Centred Design*:
<https://www.theaudienceagency.org/resources/audience-development-is-dead-long-live-audience-centred-design>
- Equality and Human Rights Commission:
<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en>

- Making social media campaigns accessible:
https://gcs.civilservice.gov.uk/guidance/digital-communication/planning-creating-and-publishing-accessible-social-media-campaigns/?utm_source=The%20Audience%20Agency&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=11705385_Digital%20Snapshot%20112&dm_i=1X00,6YVXL,1WQH1Y,S1WF6,1
- Beyond the mandates: The far-reaching benefits of multimedia accessibility: <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1002/leap.1153>
- Creative Scotland: Covid-19: Public intentions on returning as audience members <https://www.creativescotland.com/resources/professional-resources/research/creative-scotland-research/covid-19-audiences>
- Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre's *Ten Reflections on the Consumption of Culture In Lockdown*: <https://pec.ac.uk/blog/ten-reflections-on-the-consumption-of-digital-culture-in-lockdown>
- Creative Industries Policy & Evidence Centre's *How Are Our Habits of Cultural Consumption at Home Changing*: <https://pec.ac.uk/policy-briefings/changing-habits-of-cultural-consumption-at-home-as-the-uks-covid-19-lockdown-insights-from-the-six-week-study>
- Scottish Book Trust's advice about online workshops: <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/reading-and-stories/how-to-run-an-online-workshop>
- Scottish Book Trust Live Literature Remote Event Guidelines: <https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/writing-and-authors/live-literature/live-literature-remote-event-guidelines>
- Age UK Report on Digital Inclusion, circa 2018: https://www.ageuk.org.uk/globalassets/age-uk/documents/reports-and-publications/age_uk_digital_inclusion_evidence_review_2018.pdf

- Connecting Scotland, *Supporting the Most Vulnerable to Get Online*: <https://connecting.scot>
- Article about an Edinburgh International Book Festival event discussing the digital divide: <https://www.edbookfest.co.uk/news/we-need-to-treat-connectivity-as-a-water-supply-digital-connectivity-discussed-at-the-book-festival>
- Good Things Foundation Report, *Blueprint for a 100% Digitally Included UK*: <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org/sites/default/files/blueprint-for-a-100-digitally-included-uk-0.pdf>
- NESTA report *Data or Dinner?*: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/project-updates/data-or-dinner/>
- NESTA report *Shift + Control The Scottish Public and the Tech Revolution*: <https://www.nesta.org.uk/report/shiftctrl-scottish-public-and-tech-revolution/>
- *Elle* Magazine piece on digital exclusion: <https://www.elle.com/uk/life-and-culture/a34201759/no-internet-in-lockdown/>
- Office for National Statistics 2019 report on the UK's digital divide: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/householdcharacteristics/homeinternetandsocialmediausage/articles/exploringtheuksdigitaldivide/2019-03-04> NB: there are good links to additional studies in their resources section.
- Lloyd's Bank UK Digital Consumer Index, 2018: https://www.lloydsbank.com/assets/media/pdfs/banking_with_us/whats-happening/LB-Consumer-Digital-Index-2018-Report.pdf
- For more advice and ideas about effective digital outreach: <https://scvo.org.uk/support/digital>, <https://scvo.org.uk/support/digital/guides/digital-inclusion>, <https://www.goodthingsfoundation.org>

- <https://www.gov.scot/collections/scottish-index-of-multiple-deprivation-2020/>
- *7 Inclusive Principles for the Arts in Covid-19:*
<https://disabilityarts.online/magazine/news/uk-cultural-organisations-join-up-to-promote-seven-inclusive-principles-for-disabled-people-in-arts-culture/>
- The Equality Act, 2010: <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance>
- Indigo's *Slump in disabled audiences' confidence presents major problem for the arts sector:* <http://s3-eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/supercool-indigo/Disabled-audiences-Act-2-wave-1-Andrew-Miller.pdf>
- Via Spot-Lit project, *An Overview of Literary Tourism in Scotland:*
<https://www.spot-lit.eu/an-overview-of-literary-tourism-in-scotland/>
- Virtual Tourism:
<https://www.theguardian.com/travel/2020/may/05/helsinki-huge-vr-virtual-reality-gig-potential-virtual-tourism>
- Global Association of Literary Festivals session notes from *Who Do You Think You Are, 5/2:* <https://www.gaolf.org/conference-programme>
- Via LitHub.com, *What Happens When Book Events Move Online:*
<https://lithub.com/what-happens-when-literary-events-move-online/>
- Scottish Book Trust's Reading in Scotland: Reading Over Lockdown:
<https://www.scottishbooktrust.com/uploads/store/mediaupload/3552/file/Reading%20in%20Scotland%20-%20reading%20under%20lockdown%20FINAL.pdf>

APPENDIX B: LINKS TO FESTIVALS CONTACTED FOR THIS PAPER

<https://www.appledorebookfestival.co.uk>

<https://ayewrite.com>

<https://bloodyscotland.com>

<https://bordersbookfestival.org>

<https://www.boswellbookfestival.co.uk>

<https://www.cheltenhamfestivals.com>

<https://www.colonsaybookfestival.com>

<https://coveburghhall.org.uk>

<https://www.edbookfest.co.uk>

<https://www.islaybookfestival.co.uk>

<https://margatebookie.com>

<https://www.ncornbookfest.org>

<https://paisleybookfest.com>

<https://www.readingismagicfestival.com>

<http://www.StAnzapoeetry.org>

<https://stayathomelitfest.co.uk>

<https://festivalofauthors.ca>

<https://www.waywordfestival.com>

<https://www.wigtownbookfestival.com>

<http://www.ullapoolbookfestival.co.uk>

For a more complete list of Scottish book festivals:

<https://literaturealliancescotland.co.uk/events/find-a-book-festival/>

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