Industry perceptions of potential digital futures for live performance in the staging and consumption of music festivals.

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INTRODUCTION

Festivals are an important expression of human activity that contribute much to our social and cultural life (Allen, O'Toole, Harris & McDonnell 2011, p. 15) and are also 'big business' (Webster & McKay 2016). Festivals form part of the growing events sector, and, as the Eventbrite Pulse Report noted in 2016, 'this is still an industry with many more opportunities than challenges.' (Eventbrite 2016). Festivals may focus around various art forms or cultural activities, but often have a particular association with music. For example, Shuker (2012, p. 130) defines a festival as 'a concert, usually outdoor, often held over several days … sites where commerce and popular ideology interact to produce historically significant musical meanings'. Music festivals are fluid environments; subject to change and re-invention, so that, for example 'participative arts, audience theatricality and themed environments are increasingly popular within what may be described as the 'boutique' festival sector.' (Robinson, cited in McKay 2015, p. 177).

This chapter will look at those environments, and will consider the current and potential future changes in technology, demand, and innovation that are likely to impact the staging and consumption of live performances at music festivals.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The 'world of work' is changing rapidly so that machines are already undertaking tasks which were 'unthinkable – if not unimaginable- a decade ago.' (Andy Haldane, Chief Economist, Bank of England 2015). Potentially this process could influence both the availability/conceptualisation of 'leisure time', increasing demand for festival experiences, and innovation in festival delivery. Following innovation around marketing, box office functionality and other event technology, industry experts have identified technology bringing 'digital audiences ever closer to the actual experience' as a consistent theme (Walker 2017). Furthermore, trends around festival audiences utilising mobile technology at festivals by, for instance, viewing performers through hand-held devices whilst filming their live performance, could potentially influence their live experience. 'Technology is expanding the ways in which we make and experience culture; the digital dimension is becoming a 'place' in itself' – (DCMS, Culture White Paper 2016).

Commercial pressures to differentiate exist in an arguably oversupplied festival market (Robertson & Brown 2014). Furthermore, existing customers who have grown up with festivals are 'looking for something different' according to Stephen Colegrave, writing in Access All Areas (2017); they realise 'the best festival experience wasn't the headline band but the quirky, thought provoking aspects.' Technology offers opportunities to improve ticket sales for early adopter festival organisers and could transform both objective and subjective leisure experience elements, enhancing the festival experience as a whole (Calvo-Soraluze & San Salvadore del Valle 2014, p. 175)

Currently, professional engagement with technology varies, so that 'social media continues to grow in popularity, as do event apps; while VR/ AR and big data / analytics are creeping towards wider adoption.' (Eventbrite 2017, p. 4). Emerging digital event technologies may challenge festival organisers and audiences, in part because 'the sense of what is real and what is fantasy will become less profound […] driving much event and

festival experience into the realms of liminality' (Yeoman 2013, p. 257). Despite potentially positive digital futures, financial, technological and motivational barriers to engagement may exist, so the availability of technology does not necessarily mean it is being utilized evenly across live performance or festival contexts. As Steijn (2014, p. 141) notes, 'new technologies have seldom been used in connection with physical, spatial and aesthetic experiences in relation to live performances of classical music.'

Streaming of live content, defined by The Oxford English Dictionary (2017) as a live transmission of an event over the Internet, appears to be growing. Apple, Facebook, Google, Instagram and others all provide affordable live stream technology. For festivals, live streaming of performances has occurred both direct from festivals and via media partnerships; for example entirely digitally with Red Bull at Demon Daze festival https://www.redbull.tv/channel/festivals and in a mixed terrestrial and digital format with the BBC and Glastonbury Festival https://www.bbc.co.uk/events/ec584f . According to industry observers, this trend is growing and will have a major impact on the events industry in 2017 and beyond.

Audiences for communal screenings of live performances in secondary venues also appear to be rising. These events are referred to as 'livecasts' and originally emanated from the theatre arts sector, concentrated mainly in opera, theatre and (less so) ballet (Barker 2013). In particular, livecasting of theatrical content to cinemas has demonstrated significant growth with the National Theatre broadcasting to over 5.5 million people in over 2000 venues around the world (Nationaltheatre.org.uk 2017). Furthermore, livecasting may have influenced broader music industry practice, with for example Billboard noting in 2013 that Robbie Williams' show at Estonia's Tallinn Song Festival 'will be filmed and beamed live into select theaters across 27 territories, including U.K. cinemas' (Kemp 2013). Conversely, the Elvis Presley/Symphony Orchestra 'The Wonder of You' tour in 2017 projected film footage of Elvis behind live musicians on stage. Thus, the potential for engaging communal audiences with 'mediatized' live content from festivals, or incorporating 'as live' content in performances may be significant.

In an era of rapid technological change, the idea of networked performances is relatively old, with Gabrielli & Squartini (2015, p. 10) reporting an event in 1985 where musicians played simultaneously from two venues in NYC. Lazzaro & Wawrzynek (2001, p. 157) describe a Network Musical Performance occurring when 'a group of musicians, located at different physical locations, interact over a network to perform as they would if located in the same room.' Despite an evident challenge around achieving tolerable levels of latency, or time lag of the audio signal between different physical sites, networked performances have evolved to incorporate a variety of art forms and meanings.

Holograms, described by the Oxford English Dictionary as 'a photograph or an interference pattern which, when suitably illuminated, produces a three-dimensional image' have been used across the music sector for live and festival performances include the Tupac Shakur 'performance' at Coachella in 2012 'with' Dr Dre. Despite this, the future for holographic technology at events remains unclear, with Eventbrite, Pulse Report (2017, p. 20) describing them as 'a more futuristic technology […] the least likely to be used at events in 2017, with only 4% looking to definitely include it in the event experiences, and 78% definitely not going to use it'.

Industry commentators are increasingly identifying potential immersive futures for events. The Eventbrite blog describes Virtual Reality(VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) as becoming increasingly mainstream. VR offers the chance to provide a richer event

experience to those tuning in remotely and AR lets organisers layer digital enhancements onto the immediate event environment, which can be shared out online. Magic Leap have developed AR eyewear and such devices could potentially supplement visual information in a shared festival experience; providing users with a personalised view on a collective experience (Robertson 2017). However, there is an apparent 'time-lag' in implementing innovate practice, with Eventbrite reporting an evident 'gap' between awareness and deployment of VR & AR in 2017; with 31% of organisers actively considering it for their events, but just 7% deciding to invest in it. Furthermore, VR & AR prompt questions around the achievability of communal interactions between audience members wearing individual headsets and performers. Robertson & Brown (2014) acknowledge the need for interaction of the audience member with the performance but note that there is limited acknowledgment of how it can be applied to the festival/live event environment.

Some commentators view the nature of festival audiences as being conducive to technological enhancements. According to Sadd (2014, p.213) 'festivals will always be gatherings of people, yet these people are continually seeking ever more stimulating experiences and so technology is being used more and more to provide this'. Webster & McKay (2016) noted that festivals can be sites for musical experimentation and hybridity. Holograms may become more prevalent and entirely virtual artists could potentially play festival shows to audiences sharing a celebratory experience. For example, in Japan, Hatsune Miku (a humanoid persona / vocaloid, created and shared under creative commons to encourage fan led content creation), is popular and has performed in holographic form to live audiences.

Robertson, Yeoman, Smith and McMahon-Beattie (2015) suggest that future technology will bring about a virtual experience trend, but audiences and festival promoters may relate to more a 'live' experience. This is because, as Van Es (2017, p. 161) points out, 'liveness matters to people because it promises them the experience of something (made to seem) relevant'. Liveness has been considered by academics with Baker (2013) identifying its five aspects as 'immediacy', 'intimacy', 'buzz', 'learning' and 'being'. Liveness itself represents a 'moving target', as new models for communicating are emerging in the media landscape, and as a result new forms of liveness are also likely to surface Van Es (2017).

Festivals have been ascribed the capacity to engender a sense of euphoria and even utopia: 'At the height of the festivity, we step out of our assigned roles and statuses – of gender, ethnicity, tribe and rank – and into a brief utopia defined by egalitarianism, creativity and mutual love' (Ehrenreich 2007, p. 253). Employing technology to enhance or generate performance based content in ways which are sensitive to and supportive of liveness and capable of stimulating euphoria represents a significant challenge. Visions for the future vary and the opportunity to act as pioneers in a 'brave new world' of digitised festivals may not appeal to all established professionals. Robertson et al (2015) recognise that the notion that live performance takes place at a specific time and location and can be listened to only once will be challenged as technology allows live moments to be recorded and/or played elsewhere.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter responds to a range of theory and industry reporting, to provide an informed narrative around (some) emerging digital formats for performative activities at festivals, and their potential impact on audiences.

Primary research in the form of unstructured interviews was carried out with a sample group of five influential UK based industry professionals with a range of roles in relation to festivals. These were Melvin Benn (Managing Director of Festival Republic), Paul Hutton (Director of Cross Town Concerts), Ian Biscoe (Producer, studiobiscoe.com), Steve Strange (booking agent, clients include Eminem and Coldplay and co-founder of X-Ray Touring) and Teresa Moore (Director of A Greener Festival).

Open questions were used to elucidate qualitative information around technological influences on marketing / sales for festivals in recent years; the value of streaming / filming of performances; Tupac Shakur's (holographic) performance at Coachella in 2012; perceptions of how festivals might develop streaming, holograms and networked performances; current programming which incorporate significant levels of additional digital content in some form; opinions on entirely virtual artistes; possible digital futures for existing (and/or new) festivals; and the concept of 'liveness'.

A range of ethical principles were considered including the author's professional relationship with the interviewees in relation to the researcher's responsibility to the academic community to remain objective. Interviewees gave informed consent to be named in this chapter.

The limitations of this case study include the small sample size and limited scope.

FINDINGS OF THE CASE STUDY

Marketing and sales

It seems that technology and consumer attitudes are changing the way that live performances are being marketed and sold. As Melvin Benn highlighted, 'in the past, you could really only identify your audience […] via relatively targeted music magazines; NME, Smash Hits or Kerrang […]. Digital allows you to identify who your audience are and what they like and how much they like the acts that you've got on or the festivals that you run'. Paul Hutton agreed, noting that 'box office software is a huge change; everything is online… it changes everything because we can really get stuff out there effectively for nothing'. However, as Paul points out, this is not necessarily entirely a good thing: 'there's so much data going out, so it's very hard to analyse what part of your marketing strategy is working, because you can't be in control of other people's data flow'. This comment highlights one of the recognised difficulties of big data. On the positive side, however, social media can be used to promote positive messages – Teresa Moore suggests that festival organisers have an opportunity to influence behaviour: 'On the social marketing or social media front, there is a lot more that could be done with audiences to persuade (them) to act more sustainably, to act greener, when they come on site. One of those is to try to encourage people not to bring as much stuff with them […] You know you've got your audience's attention, when they buy a ticket'.

On-stage screens

The increased screening of live footage and other visuals on and adjacent to festival stages was commented on positively by two interviewees. Steve Strange suggests: 'Screens are an

extension to the vibe that you are adding to the event […] (they) create a more intimate atmosphere in such a big place. …'. According to Paul Hutton, screen usage is now normal: 'As a standard, I think that people expect it, if you put on a show anything above say, 15,000 people.' However, Paul suggests that the popularity of screen usage can prompt performers to take an alternative 'stripped down' approach by not using screens: 'Sometimes when people don't do anything that's almost like the new black and white; in a sense; they are trying to make some kind of point 'we don't need all this'.

The use of screens can alter the live experience, by distracting audiences from the stage itself. Paul suggests: 'Quite often when you stand there you've got three lots of people; one looking at one side of the stage, one looking at the stage and the other looking at the other side. After a while you can't stop yourself looking at the screen and that's all you end up doing.' Screens could represent a gateway to increasingly digitised experiences; Ian Biscoe states 'At festivals it's always just one or two big screens but I (like) the idea of positioning remote performers and taking people remotely who can't be there or from a location relevant to the performance and inserting them visually […] to build up more complex worlds in physical environments'.

Televising or streaming performances

Televising festival content and streaming of performances has gained in popularity, facilitated in part, by content produced for on-site screens. Melvin Benn welcomes this as a promotional opportunity: 'Of course, I stream the shows and I broadcast them […] and so relaying a live performance; there's a great merit to it'. Commenting on his previous work with the BBC, Melvin explains: 'Glastonbury is a sell-out show, it can't get any bigger, and I love the idea of shows being televised and of course, my principle aim is those that are buying tickets for the real performance'. However, Melvin disputes that televised content creates a virtual alternative to physically attending a major festival: 'People do (make an event of it at home) very much so, and that's great, but TV has always done that, it isn't about music; football matches do it, and big episodes of a soap opera do it. Nothing about that is related to a festival or a music audience per see, it's related to a television happening.' Nevertheless, Paul Hutton thinks Glastonbury is an exception to 'pretty much every rule that's out there'. 'I don't think every festival could televise live content […] if people knew that other festivals were going to be televised they might consider not buying tickets. A number of them have been televised before but generally it's a delayed broadcast'

Whilst some artists do not want to be filmed, Steve Strange identifies that 'most of them do these days. It becomes part and parcel of the overall profile and gains that you get from a festival. Rather than sitting in the press tent for three hours you get a hell of a lot more done by being filmed and screened, or filmed for later broadcast.' Steve values editorial control, 'just say there's some problem, it's good to be able to have the ability to say well we don't want to use that one' Potentially, the increasingly mediatised environment at festivals may itself encourage official filming: 'Everyone's got the ability with mobile phones these days to film anything and when they put them up on YouTube they're there for ever anyway [...] I think given that option most people will obviously go for the big camera shoot.'

Streaming can be a two-way process; Ian Biscoe described a three-day event in Falmouth: 'we ran a live stage with music and digital artists from different places jamming but we also had remote artists performing (including) musicians in London, Paris, Frankfurt, Scandinavia and New York, and a dancer (in Falmouth). The dancer was captured in motion capture and that data was sent to (the musicians) and they used that to modify the composition they were playing and then we streamed the resulting music, with video and projected it onto the façades

of several buildings.' Finally, there may be potential environmental benefits to streaming, as Teresa Moore recognises 'If you can stream the performance out to other locations to some extent you are ameliorating for example the CO2 footprint of transport.' However, considering the 'intensely private experience' of downloading music more generally, Teresa suggests that 'what would seem to be a more sustainable way in terms of delivery of music actually had the opposite effect in that, if it's true, we've seen a huge growth in the live sector because people want to live the experience.'

Livecasts

Music Industry recognition of the growth of commercial livecasts was confirmed by Steve Strange. 'There have been exclusive shows that have been sold to cinemas where people go to the cinema to watch a show because they can't be there.' Livecasting could unlock innovation in a festival environment. Paul Hutton speculated that a very big artiste might decide 'we are going to do a huge spectacular show on top of Machu Pichu […] there won't be an audience there because you can't get there kids but we can, and we will do this show and we will film it (and) play to the world; this huge thing where everyone will watch it.' Paul also identified a specific opportunity 'I'm amazed actually when you think about it, obviously U2 would be the prime suspects for this one, why they haven't done that […] maybe I should take that idea to them!'

Networked performances

Music industry interviewees demonstrated limited awareness of networked performances, which Ian Biscoe defined as being 'about trying to get the same type of quality and immersion in a performance that involves performers in multiple places, and normally audiences in multiple places, that you would do in a single live venue'. According to Ian, they are potentially less logical, exploring 'new areas of what is real, what is virtual, what is remote what is physical, what is augmented, what is tangible'. Ian perceives that networked performances could be applied to festivals 'It is possible to do this, it's having enough people who understand artistically and dramaturgically how to connect people in these contexts'

Holograms

Steve Strange attended a 'seminal' holographic performance; 'I was at Coachella and saw the Tupac thing, that was the first example I've ever seen and I was quite amazed by it. It looked so real, but at the same time it was part of a proper live, human show.' However, despite acknowledging some financial potential, Steve remains un-convinced, 'I know it sells, I can't argue with that, maybe for an older audience who are a bit more open minded about what they are going to see.' Paul Hutton is also unsure; 'It obviously has some merit because people are going to see it. I know there's talk of an Amy Winehouse one at some point. It's difficult I think […] people like Elvis, who nobody in Britain ever saw play, that's as good as it's ever going to get.'

A 'novelty factor' around holograms could positively influence a percentage of audiences according to Teresa Moore, who references a drive for 'authentic experiences'; 'in a way using holograms to recreate stars from the past may not be viewed as an authentic experience, but it may be that the hologram experience itself is the thing that takes us into the future.' The complexity of holograms is currently self-limiting according to Ian Biscoe, 'it's very fixed so it's still kind of a screen, there's no such thing as the holographic projector which can move images about freely in space and time.' However, there could be 'traction' here and further developments around holographic content at festivals may be expected.

Immersive futures

The potential use of VR headsets at festivals was not popular. Melvin Benn stated: 'Virtual reality headsets isolate people … you get an incredible experience when you are enjoying it, but it's in a very singular fashion'. Conversely, Melvin perceived Silent Discos, deployed to overcome noise restrictions, as being 'entirely the opposite; it is the most collective thing that you can possibly do, it's incredibly fun and people do that together, it is absolutely not an isolating experience'. Noise and the challenge of interactivity were also commented upon by Paul Hutton: 'If everybody had headphones on then we would never have any noise problems in that sense. (But) if you take that out to a whole festival based on that then there's no interaction between people, so then you've just got 20,000 people wandering aimlessly around haven't you!' As Ian Biscoe notes though, removing the need for headsets could alter things; 'There could be nothing worse than getting together with a group of people and then visually occluding them. I think augmented reality, which is the idea of projecting things into space, holographs, is more interesting.'

Working with an entirely virtual artiste

The concept of programming or representing a virtual artiste also proved contentious with Melvin Benn commenting that Digital is 'absolutely not about, for me, providing a virtual performance in front of a live audience. I think people are trying to develop it for the sake of it, it's just not happening, and it becomes very problematic.' From an agency perspective, Steve Strange said that he is a 'rock and roll' person at heart and that 'I like things to be as real as they can. I'm a musician […] and that chemistry thing is very important for me and I wouldn't personally want to represent something that wasn't real.' However, Paul Hutton was more amenable, stating 'I don't think it's impossible ... Look at silent disco; who would have thought that something that was 300 people wearing effectively headphones in the same room but listening to three different types of music would be having so much fun? Now you go to these things and there's 3000 people doing it, more sometimes. So, I guess it's like everything there will always be room for it, whether people want it or not, they will vote with their feet.'

Possible digital futures

Pioneers like Ian Biscoe feel the market for digital performances is already developing and the potential for innovation is significant 'There are endless possibilities still, we've still seen very little of what's possible using networked performances and digital technology.' Teresa Moore believes that technology will change festivals in unforeseen ways 'I do think that we are not going to step back from being technologically driven and there are new things coming on stream all the time.' However, Ian considers that the optimum conditions for innovation predominantly exist at festivals 'like Festival Number 6', who foster an artistic activity, that isn't just 'a bunch of headline acts'.

A potential reaction to technology from audiences who want an authentic, less technologically driven, 'stripped-down' experience is proposed by Teresa Moore: 'we've seen this in the record industry (with) a resurgence in vinyl and my own view is that we will see a resurgence in the traditional values of festivals.' Senior professionals appear firmly aligned to these 'traditional rock and roll' values, with Melvin Benn stating 'A festival is a live activity, it is not a virtual activity and I'm not at all interested in anything being virtual.' This view is broadly shared by Steve Strange 'I don't believe in a virtual festival experience, you can really only experience a festival by being there.' However, Steve does expect that the

visual side of festivals will keep updating 'Every artist these days wants to programme their set into a video wall.'

Steve also re-iterated the competitive nature of the festival market place 'there are a lot of festivals out there and every year one or two of them hit the wall because there's too much competition.' Paul Hutton agreed that Britain in particular is saturated with large-scale camping festivals, and that 'sales for some of these events are terrible […] because there are just too many of them.' However, this 'churn' in the market may also create opportunities for new formats aimed at more technologically inclined festival-goers.

'Liveness'

Most interviewees championed a traditional sense of 'liveness'. Melvin Benn stated categorically that 'It's entirely about the live performance … people go to a festival to see the live performances and to enjoy the community of people that also want to see the live performances'. This was supported by Paul Hutton who commented 'I often wonder why people do go to shows or keep coming back […] they were part of a crowd, it was loud, you can feel the music, they were part of something that was happening, it was a shared experience. Whether you can replicate that in any other form I don't know and if you talk to 99 out of a 100 people that work in the live industry they probably give the same answer that you can't replicate a live concert. But you can do it sometimes, maybe...' However, whilst accepting that people want to be part of the 'live experience', Teresa Moore suggests that audience behaviours involving stepping back and channelling a live festival experience through a digital medium are a 'really interesting phenomenon'. She goes on: 'We may already be on our way there, that we are not really experiencing live anymore because we are so wrapped up in reporting it and photographing and channelling it through our phones, that already we are once removed.' This aligns with the findings of the DCMS White Paper around 'making and experiencing culture' and represents an interesting focus for future research.

CONCLUSION

The narrative approach in this case study has provided useful reflections from generous expert commentators on a spectrum of potential technological developments and emerging digital formats for performative activities at festivals, and their potential impact on audiences. Interviewees concurred with Robertson & Brown's (2014) finding that the market for festivals is over-supplied; however, this may represent a stimulant for digital innovation, as creatively, it appears that the digital arena opens up new opportunities across a range of artistic and operational process.

Video walls and live streaming are well established amongst festivals and were, perhaps unsurprisingly, the least contentious of the formats under discussion. Most interviewees were relatively open to the concept of 'livecasts', but 'music industry' interviewees did not have personal experience of networked performances, perhaps evidencing the 'time lag' in adoption of new technologies identified by Eventbrite, or a lack of commercialise application to date. On balance, and despite their nascent 'traction' in the marketplace, even interviewees who had experienced holograms in a festival setting were less than enthusiastic about the incorporation of holographic elements into live performances. Virtual artists were unpopular amongst music industry professionals, who exhibited a clear passion for the purity of the traditional live 'rock and roll' experience; a festival model which celebrates a pure form of liveness and delivers a recognised commercial impact. However, the apparent ubiquity of mobile device ownership amongst festival attendees, combined with an increased tendency

for audiences on and off site to interact with festival performances using technology, may suggest that significant change is already underway.

Further research opportunities clearly arise around both; 'liveness' in the making and receiving of festival content and potential applications of commercially available technologies in festival environments.

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