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Festivals and the COVID-19 pandemic: creative responses, threats and opportunities

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1. Summary

The COVID 19 pandemic severely disrupted the workings of the festival and event sector in Ireland during 2020 and into 2021 as government regulations prohibited gatherings of people, and public health advice advocated social distancing. Many festivals and events were forced to cancel or postpone their plans, but others were able to devise a variety of creative responses to sustain their activities throughout the pandemic. This case study examines how festivals adapted by embracing digital technologies. It goes on to discuss the challenges faced by the sector in doing so, as well as the opportunities that were generated.



2. Background to the case

This case study was developed using research undertaken as part of two projects. Some of the data comes from the Sustainable Industry Event Knowledge (SEIK) project, (www.seikproject.com) funded by TU Dublin Impact, The National Forum of Teaching and Learning and The Higher Education Authority. The case study draws on data generated from interviews with a number of industry practitioners. It also draws on data gathered through the Humanities in the European Research Area (HERA) funded Festspace project (<http://festspace.net/>). Primary data were gathered through focus groups involving festival practitioners and from observation data gathered at a series of group conversations with festival practitioners hosted by the Arts Council of Ireland during 2020.

3. Methodology

The primary research informing this case study was conducted between March – September 2020. It involved virtual interviews and a number of virtual focus groups as well as attendance (as observer) at a number of virtual conversations with festival practitioners organized by the Arts Council.

The case focuses on festivals in Ireland and discusses the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on the sector. While the effect of the pandemic was exceptionally disruptive, the case study underlines the creative ways in which many festivals reacted to the crisis as they pivoted to the digital arena and experimented with new ways of staging their events. The case discusses the opportunities and the threats that seem to be on the horizon as literary festivals look to adopting digital and hybrid formats into the future.

The empirical research informing this case was supported by secondary research.

4. Setting a context

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 generated the wholesale cancellation and postponement of festivals in public and private spaces of all kinds. The Irish government introduced a system with 5 levels of public restrictions. According to this system, when restrictions were set at levels 3, 4 and 5, indoor gatherings, sports events and social gatherings outdoors were banned. At level 2, fifteen people were allowed to congregate outdoors. However, with the exception of a short period over summer /early autumn 2020, the country was effectively devoid of festivals as we commonly recognize them.

Undoubtedly, COVID-19 represented a crisis for the sector. For Rosenthal, Boin and Comfort (2001), ‘crisis’ represents an urgent threat to core values or life-sustaining functions which must be dealt with under conditions of uncertainty. In a sense, festivals and events are well used to uncertainty in that publicly funded festivals often rely on annual funding calls, deliver within tight timelines, and are often more hopeful than certain that funds will be found to underpin their next creative idea. Meanwhile, commercial festivals schedule activities for very large crowds, often in outdoor environments, in ever changing conditions. However, the level of uncertainty posed by the onset of the pandemic in March 2020 was unprecedented.

Brinks and Ibert (2020) say that in times of crisis, inactivity and non-decision are simply not an option because they will only make matters worse. When the crisis hit, festivals were completely unprepared and many had no option but to cancel or plan to reschedule. Dublin’s St Patrick’s Festival, scheduled to happen within days of the first imposition of COVID-19 related public health guidelines was the first major festival forced to cancel <https://www.stpatricksfestival.ie/blog/cancellation-of-cultural-programme-2020>. However, as the weeks passed and the crisis showed no signs of waning, festivals with the capacity and know-how, acted quickly to reinvent their programmes in the interest of ‘keeping the show on the road’ and sustaining at least some form of artistic delivery and audience engagement. Throughout the pandemic, the uncertainty associated with how the virus was affecting the population and how the government was constantly updating public health guidelines generated the need for intense scenario planning to make provisions for the unforeseeable public health guidance contexts that might / might not emerge in the weeks and months ahead.

Timing was of the essence for festivals in 2020. Dublin International Film Festival which happens late February – early March was staged completely as normal, but only five days later, the city’s St Patrick’s Festival was cancelled. If a festival was scheduled to take place when public health guidelines were sufficiently loose, then it was able to scale back audiences and offer some events outdoors. However, a majority of festivals were not permitted to do this.

5. How festivals responded

Instead, a great number of them showed creativity, agility and determination by re-inventing their programmes in a variety of digital and hybrid formats. Some festivals e.g. the Galway International Arts Festival, had already been working in the digital space, but a major impact of the pandemic was to encourage festivals to begin to use / increase their use of digital technologies. Many began using a range of digital platforms (e.g. Facebook, Instagram, Zoom) to broadcast performances into people’s homes or to stream events live or on demand. Some of these digital events enabled audience participation through chat and Q&A functions, others operated more as broadcasts. Sometimes these events involved producing work in public space without audiences, making every effort to deter audiences from gathering, and digitally sharing the performance at a later point. The Dublin Fringe Festival devised events that asked audiences to download an app and experience a piece of work alone or in a socially distanced manner with others in a location and at a time appropriate to the audience member. Other events like Culture Night, asked ‘festival goers’ to record themselves creating or participating in content, using private spaces (homes and back gardens) and local public spaces (parks) as stages. This material was then curated and shared digitally.

There were other kinds of creative responses too. Cork midsummer Festival worked with Corcadorca to bring performances to where people live: <https://www.creativeireland.gov.ie/en/event/contact-theatre-performance-midsummer-festival/> Other festivals, including Waterford Walls, extended the length of their festivals and spread their activities over a longer than usual time frame. Several, like the West Cork Literary Festival, produced and staged work outside of the usual festival period. Dalkey Book Festival was forced to postpone its programme in 2020 but instead inaugurated the Dalkey Literary Awards, distracting audiences from the disappointment of missing the annual festival and celebrating Irish writing.

6. Challenges

Having to adapt to the new circumstances created by the pandemic was full of challenges and it is important to note that some festivals did not have the resources or the capabilities to adapt given all the pressures. These did not appear in 2020. Those that did sustain their activities, faced having to:

- identify the skills that were needed for the digital transformation of their festival and enter onto a steep learning curve to quickly acquire those skills
- develop new business models to ensure that income was being generated to cover the costs of engaging artists and other skilled practitioners to produce all the material that was being digitally offered to audiences
- find new ways of generating the excitement and atmosphere so important to the festival experience and of generating a sense of the social connectedness so strongly felt in physically staged festivals

- work very hard to ensure that their festival maintained its niche, distinctive appeal at a time when so many festivals were becoming accessible digitally from anywhere in the world. This concern was particularly strong for smaller festivals.
- develop content that was distinctly appealing and different to the hugely increased digital content that emanated from all kinds of producers (galleries, museums, theatre, opera houses, venues of all kinds) during the pandemic.

7. Opportunities

In spite of the crisis and the challenges faced, there were many opportunities. The pandemic acted as a catalyst for reflection and many festivals decided to evaluate and make changes to how their organizational processes and activities were run. Festival staff were forced to upskill and became technologically proficient in a relatively short period of time. Many festivals noted that digital engagement led to increased audience size and reach. Working online meant new opportunities to connect with international artists. This was particularly important for smaller festivals. Wexford Literary Festival, for example, were able to work with New York based Colm McCann. It also meant new ways of working with partners. Limerick Literary Festival (2021) livestreamed an event staged at the Irish cultural centre in Paris, in collaboration with French embassy in Dublin. Going digital often meant creating a 'life beyond' for work, for example, the concert or performance that would normally have ended on the last night of the festival was now available for downloading.

8. Focus on literary festivals

There is a very wide range of festival types in Ireland, and all of them faced a crisis once the pandemic occurred. This next section places the spot light on one type - literary festivals – to give deeper insight into how organisations in the sub-sector reacted. Ireland is famous internationally for its writers and poets, and so it is not surprising that the country has a strong and vibrant literary festival sector. According to Rossetti and Quinn (2019: 95), the first literary festivals in Ireland were Listowel Writers' Week (1970), Cúirt International Festival of Literature in Galway (1985), and the International Literature Festival Dublin (1998). It is difficult to know exactly how many literary festivals now exist in Ireland, but it is in the region of 60. In 2020, as many as 32 of these were cancelled or postponed. They were more likely to be postponed or cancelled if they were scheduled to happen in the earlier part of the year. Fortunately, the later part of the year (especially October & November) is particularly busy with literary festivals, and it was these that were more likely to be able to reinvent their programmes and pivot to the digital arena in 2020, and again in 2021. In 2020, it is estimated that 13/14 literary festivals in Ireland went fully online, while 5/6 held some events online.

Cúirt International Festival of Literature was the first literary festival to happen after the onset of COVID-19. The 2020 programme launched as normal, but 3 days later, public gatherings were banned, physical mobility was strictly curtailed and the programme could not be implemented in person as planned. Very quickly, Cúirt pivoted online and managed to stream a good portion of its planned programme, for free, on its YouTube channel. All artists were paid. Cúirt introduced new and creative ways of keeping audiences engaged outside of the usual festival time. For example, it began a reading hour on Twitter and Instagram and introduced an initiative called 'Bookmarked', a weekly roundup of entertaining literary-related recommendations.

The agile and decisive actions of this festival were very important in terms of offering a role model for other festivals moving online. In effect, it showed great leadership for the rest of the literary festival sub-sector. Literary festivals held after Cúirt became involved in the digital arena by e.g.

- Pre-recording events in regular venues so as to give audiences a sense of the normal festival, and then live streaming them (Dublin Book Festival)
- Engaging authors to pre-record and provide materials and then making them available online (Towers & Tales, Lismore)
- Commissioning new artistic work to reflect on/document their host place during pandemic (Waterford Writers Weekend)
- Helping their audiences upskill technologically to help engage with them online (The Big Scream)

9. Conclusions:

When the COVID-19 pandemic began in March 2020, festivals were completely unprepared for the shockingly changed circumstances that followed. Many had no option but to cancel or postpone and plan to reschedule at some later point. This was especially the case if festivals were due to happen in the months immediately following March. However, many festivals were able to adapt to their changed circumstances. They acted quickly, were very agile and flexible in how they operated. They made practical decisions about reallocating resources and upskilling staff; and creative decisions about how their programming could work in different ways. Boin and 'T Hart (2007) explain that in both Chinese and Greek, the term 'crisis' refers to a critical point, a fork in the road of development. Thus, if the word 'crisis' implies threat, then it also presents opportunity. We can see this clearly from analysing how the festival sector responded to the pandemic. It faced serious threats and some festivals struggled to have a presence in 2020, possibly because of factors like their size and scale, organisational type, length of establishment, reputation, resources, and capability to adapt. However, for many, the crisis acted as a catalyst, propelling them towards the digital arena. This represented a huge learning curve but it yielded multiple opportunities once festivals acquired the necessary confidence, capabilities and resources. It seems very likely that the digital arena will remain very important in the future.

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Further reading

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Questions for discussion

- What can governments do to help prepare the festival sector for crises like the pandemic?
- What can individual festivals do to help prepare themselves to withstand crises?
- What can policy-makers learn from this crisis?
- What can individual festivals learn from this crisis?
- What do you understand by catalyst? And how it can affect change within a sector?
- Is the festival sector facing into a digital future?
- What, if anything, might be lost if festivals go digital in the future?