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## *Culture is Digital* and the shifting terrain of UK cultural policy

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### ABSTRACT

In this paper, a change to the remit and title of a UK government department provides a starting point for reflection on the growing role of digital technologies in the re-imagining of UK cultural policy. An early strategic report produced by the re-named DCMS was entitled *Culture is Digital*. Identifying the UK's cultural and technology sectors as 'the ultimate power couple,' this report directs the cultural sector towards the use of technology to enhance public engagement and to improve technical skills through the development of collaborations with technology companies. Reflecting on the place of DCMS in UK cultural policymaking and drawing on analysis of this report and associated strategic documents, including responses and updates produced in the light of the Covid pandemic, the paper analyses the claims made about the elision between culture and the digital and their consequences for the status of cultural policy within the British state.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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Culture; digital; technology; data; government

## Introduction

The paper uses the change of name of the UK's DCMS – the Department for Culture Media and Sport up until 2017 when it became the Department for *Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport* – to reflect on the increasing centrality of digital infrastructures and platforms for cultural policy and cultural policy research. The emergence of 'the digital' as a concept evokes a range of imaginaries encapsulating the rise and spread of data-generating devices and the logistical power of computing technologies and their role in macro (i.e. governmental) and micro (i.e. individual) modes of organisation. In the specific context of cultural policy, the term also concerns forms of cultural distribution which have, over the last two or three decades, shifted the ways in which culture is produced and consumed and transformed the business models and associated regulatory regimes of the creative industries. Digital technologies have also shaped how art, the theatre and literature are made and experienced and how the museum sector curates or narrates the past and engages with its public. The potential relationships between 'culture' and 'the digital' then are manifold. We argue that by focussing specifically on the meaning of 'digital' for the UK government we can highlight the kinds of problems that digital technologies are thought to solve for cultural and other forms of policy.

The aim of the paper is to weave together reflections on three related topics concerning the place of digital technologies in cultural policy, using the addition of the word 'digital' to DCMS's name as its starting point. First, to ask what the name change revealed about the place of DCMS and 'culture' – as traditionally understood by cultural policy scholars – in government. We provide some detail about what the name change meant for the responsibilities of the department and reflect on how it helps to illustrate the changing understanding of the role of cultural policy as it has developed since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, from a policy domain principally concerned with the support of individuals and

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institutions engaged in artistic production and display (including museums, art galleries, theatres etc.) to a more variegated field which incorporates media and communication policy as significant responsibilities including, in the case of DCMS, for the technological infrastructure that is considered fundamental to the future prosperity of the UK. In this regard, the paper is a contribution to debates inspired by Mangset about the 'end of cultural policy' (2020). Our contention is that the elision of culture with the digital in early 21<sup>st</sup> century cultural policymaking has made DCMS – the UK's 'Ministry of Culture' – at least temporarily, more strategically significant to the UK government than it has ever been, but also, paradoxically, made the arts and culture, as traditionally understood by cultural policy makers, even more marginal than had previously been the case.

Second, we use the *Culture is Digital* report – published, in the wake of the name change, in 2018 – as a focus for this discussion, not because there is any causal link between the publication of this document and the implementation of specific strategic policy changes. Our suspicion is that this document, like other similar position papers regularly produced by contemporary governments, is not widely read within the sectors that are its focus. Instead, it is of interest because it contains some revealing evidence of what DCMS – or at least the cabinet members, policy advisors and civil servants who were engaged in its production – thought about what the relations between the cultural and digital sectors – and by extension the relations between the concepts of 'culture' and the 'digital' – were. The report emerged at a specific time and under a specific government (the short-lived Conservative premiership of Theresa May) and as part of a broader 'whole of government' industrial strategy for the UK formulated in the light of the referendum decision of 2016 to leave the European Union. We argue that it reflects and instantiates longer term trends in the development of the policy imagination of the relationship between 'the cultural' and 'tech' sectors, reveals what is at stake in the re-imagining of culture as digital for policymakers and represents a specific manifestation of a longer-term relationship between the state and technology as a route to administrative efficiencies. Finally, we attempt to place these reflections in the context of older and broader debates about the relations between digital, data-collecting technologies and the state to consider how such technologies are changing the 'problem of culture' for policymakers.

### **What's in a name? Putting the *digital* in DCMS**

The name-change of DCMS in 2017 is the latest manifestation of a degree of uncertainty over what a UK culture ministry might do and be for which stretches back at least until the founding of DCMS in 1997 and to its predecessor the Department for National Heritage (DNH). It is an uncertainty captured by the narrator in the satirical mockumentaries *Twenty Twelve* or *W1A* about the Olympics/BBC who always adds the '... and, for some reason, Sport' to any references to the department's name. This sense of a rather ad-hoc and disparate, even incoherent, range of responsibilities has been with DCMS since its founding and reflects a general uncertainty within the structure of the UK government about its Ministry of Culture. Gray and Wingfield (2011) explored this uncertainty in their article about the relative importance of culture ministries for governments. Drawing on various quantitative and qualitative indicators of political significance (including levels of expenditure, numbers of pieces of legislation, the numbers of cabinet committees attended by ministers and the amount of press coverage) they identify DCMS as a department at some distance from the centrality of UK policy decision-making. Sketching the various departmental homes that the elements of cultural policy have had across the 20<sup>th</sup> century, they point out that broadcasting, in UK policy terms, was initially a concern of the Post Office and that responsibility for the arts has historically moved between the Treasury itself, to a brief dedicated ministry in the Wilson government of the mid 60s and then to being considered part of the Ministry of Education. The symbolic significance of having a cabinet level secretary of state for culture from 1992, when the Department for National Heritage was founded, is slightly undermined by the level of budget applied to this post and by the relatively low levels of direct responsibility accompanying the much-vaunted 'arms-length' model of UK cultural policy making (Hetherington 2017) intended to separate the state from

direct concern with the production of culture itself. This latter point is significant in revealing the breadth of the department's range of responsibilities. As of writing, in the Spring of 2022, by the government's own measures of the involvement of departments with 'agencies and public bodies', DCMS works with 45, the most of any government department. These range from executive non-departmental government bodies with direct responsibility for art and culture (such as the Arts Council of England, the British Film Institute, UK Sport), those concerned with broadcasting, including media policy (the public broadcasters B.B.C and Channel 4 as well as the media regulator Ofcom), specific museums (such as the Imperial War Museum and the Wallace Collection) and other more miscellaneous but related interests and organisations (the Gambling Commission, the Churches Conservation Trust, the Phone-paid Services Authority).

While connection with these disparate organisations might indicate the strategic centrality of the department to several different elements of cultural life, it also reflects some longer-term debates. First about the measurement of 'the creative industries' themselves. The semantic shift towards the 'creative industries' and away from the arts has been analysed as reflecting both an acknowledgement of the central place of commercial forms of popular culture in the symbolic lives of the significant majority of the British population but also as a means of continuing the re-framing of the problem of cultural policy towards the maximisation of the economic contribution of these industries to UK exports, employment and urban regeneration that originated in the 1980s (Myerscough 1988; Garnham 2005). Part of the Creative Britain agenda that followed the re-naming of the DNH as the DCMS (2018) was an inflationary tendency in the measurement of the economic contribution of the creative economy caused initially by the bureaucratic sleight of hand which led to the addition of the software sector to the creative economy – immediately making it the single biggest contributor in terms of jobs (Ross 2009). A version of this plays out in the elision between the digital and the creative industries as illustrated in this graphic (Figure 1) of the relative contribution of the digital sector to the Gross Value Added (GVA) by the sectors for which DCMS is responsible to the UK economy in 2017.

There are overlaps in the definitions of the digital, the creative industries and cultural sectors but, around the time of the name-change, the *digital* sector was by far the biggest of these, making up

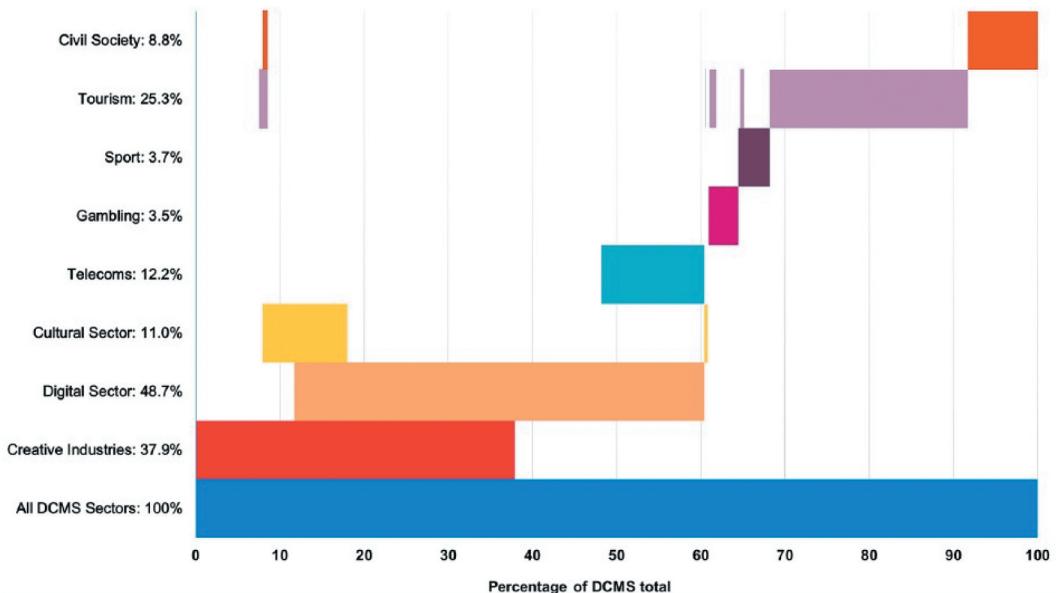


Figure 1. From DCMS Sector Economic estimates of GVA 2017 (DCMS 2017, 7).

slightly less than half of the whole GVA of DCMS's contribution. It included the manufacturing and wholesale of electronics and computers, publishing (excluding translation and interpretation activities), software publishing, film, TV, video, radio and music, telecoms, computer programming, consultancy and related activities, information service activities and repair of computers and communication equipment. The Cultural Sector itself made up just over a tenth, incorporating arts, film, TV, and music; radio; photography; crafts; museums and galleries; libraries and archives; cultural education operation of historic buildings and similar visitor attractions (DCMS 2018).<sup>1</sup>

The name-change also reflected and acknowledged the accumulation of related responsibilities by the department. DCMS inherited responsibility for the Office for Civil Society (including responsibility for the charity and voluntary sectors in the UK) in 2016 and took over specific responsibility for data policy – relating to how government used data in its day-to-day work in informing and communicating its policies. This reflected broader and established imperatives within the UK state relating to the administrative efficiencies assumed to emerge from the use of digital technologies (Bellamy 2000), given impetus by the post-financial crisis spending review in 2011. These will be discussed in more detail below.

The increased significance of 'data' as an imagined resource, exemplified by the 2017 Industrial strategy (DBEIS 2017) which highlighted data and Artificial Intelligence (AI) as key future sources of UK prosperity, hints at a potential increase in the strategic importance of DCMS. A related debate pertains to the changing significance of the 'tech lobby' compared to the 'copyright lobby' – that is the traditional cultural industries as creators and rights holders – in shaping DCMS's remit. In the New Labour period (around the final relevant policy intervention of that government – the *Digital Britain* report of 2009 (DBIS 2009)) copyright holders still held the upper hand in the sympathy of government as the generators of economic revenue through culture. Arguably that equation has subsequently changed with the tech lobby – and the accompanying disruptive potential of digital modes of cultural production and distribution – becoming more powerful, first with the coalition between 2010–15 and then with the Conservative governments since 2015<sup>2</sup>. In all this, though, DCMS retains a sense that it is, as Chris Smith described it to a Parliamentary Select Committee, as reported in Hesmondhalgh et al. (2015, 60) in their account of its founding and early years, more than a traditional culture ministry such as might be found within the states of mainland northern Europe. In its conception and aspiration, it remains 'the department of the future.' The following section outlines how this future was beginning to be imagined in the early 2010s, culminating in the *Culture is Digital* Report itself.

## Becoming digital

The *Culture is Digital* Report was published in March 2018 as DCMS's response to the UK government's Digital and Industrial Strategies, launched in 2017, as part of a series of reports setting out the strategic direction of the recently elected Conservative Government under Theresa May in the context of the UK's decision to leave the EU in 2016 and the on-going negotiations about the terms of the withdrawal. These reports built on insights from equivalent strategic documents from the preceding Conservative-Liberal coalition government (2010–2015). Of specific relevance among these documents was a 2012 Digital Strategy report from DCMS, subtitled, *Becoming Digital by Default* (DCMS 2012), which was the department's response to the Cabinet Office-led *Government Digital Strategy* (Cabinet Office 2012) which mandated all government departments to review how their practices could be improved by the application of digital technologies. This specific imperative followed both the 2011 spending review in which efficiencies in government were identified as a key element in the coalition's goal to reduce both public spending and the government deficit following the global financial crisis of 2008. The quest for such efficiencies was enhanced by the appointment in 2010, by the then Labour Prime Minister Gordon Brown, of entrepreneur Martha Lane Fox (founder of the online travel company lastminute.com) as the 'UK digital champion' and by the recommendations emerging from her report to the Cabinet Office minister Francis Maude. These

recommendations were informed by an aspiration to 'empower and make life simpler for citizens and at the same time allow government to turn things off' and emerged from discussions with an advisory panel that 'included brains from the BBC, Google, M&S<sup>3</sup>, YouGov, academia and venture capital' (Lane-Fox 2010).

In *Becoming Digital by Default* (DCMS 2012), while there was acknowledgment that digital technologies could make the policymaking process more accessible and inclusive (exemplified by the generation of social media, blog and video content relating to its own practices and decision-making) there was also acceptance that, unlike other departments, these technologies could not be applied to the direct delivery of services by DCMS itself. In the absence of such applications, the report emphasised instead the department's mediating role in the strategic development of the UK's broadband infrastructure and identified a clear aspiration for an increasing role of digital technologies in DCMS's partner organisations. Exemplars of this aspiration include reference to the planned inclusion of numbers of website visitors as one of the key performance indicators in the Museums and Galleries sector in 2013, the welcoming of increased on-line applications to the Arts Council and the further investment and development in the platforms to facilitate that, the provision of support for libraries to correct problems of digital exclusion (notwithstanding the broader cuts to library services instigated in the same period), the development of on-line payment platforms for the TV license fee, as well as the development of innovations like the B.B.C *iPlayer* and Channel 4's *4OD* video on demand platforms. A series of case studies gave more detailed insight into how digital technologies could be incorporated into the practices of the sector, including English Heritage's development of iPhone and Android apps in the light of 'user needs' and 'user testing', the British Library's digitisation of its newspaper archive, building on its existing partnerships with Microsoft and Google, and the Equality and Human Rights Commission's deployment of Google Analytics in 'tracking customer journeys' in relation to its research publications. Exemplified by its opening sentences in which the then minister for Cultural Communications, Ed Vaizey, described the relative conveniences of the on-line submission of a tax return, this report identifies digital technologies as an ally in the on-going development of DCMS's work more generally but also importantly contrasts existing attempts to integrate such technologies in the practice of government as rather flawed, at least in comparison to the smoother processes and interfaces of named platforms such as those of Amazon, PayPal and Facebook. Perhaps unwittingly, while the label is intended as indicating an innovative embrace of the rhetorical possibilities of digital technology, 'by default' also points towards emerging tendencies in the relations of interdependency between the state and technology outlined by scholars of 'the platform society' (Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018).<sup>4</sup>

### The 'ultimate power couple'

The *Culture is Digital* report itself, as a successor digital strategy document, develops this vision and extends it more directly onto the production and management of the arts and cultural sector specifically. It can be difficult to discern the audience for these kinds of outputs which, we suspect, are not widely read beyond their accompanying press releases. Implicit in the text of the report are at least two different targets. First there is a general audience of inward investors to the UK who are likely to be persuaded by references within the introduction, to various forms of rankings or metrics (including for innovation, destination, and soft power). This is very much a version of culture as exploitable resource that echoes the UK Industrial Strategy, which, when it refers to the creative industries, does so principally through their role in ensuring the UK, 'contains some of the world's most attractive places to live, work, invest and be entertained' (DBEIS 2017, 18). Alongside this there is the audience of the very many arms-length bodies which DCMS supports. While there is a general sense that the report responds to a consultation with the cultural sector about its needs, it also directs that sector towards what is likely to be expected, especially if it is to align itself with the abiding aim of DCMS to contribute to the broader strategic aims of the government to create and cement the digital economy. We provide examples of these expectations below but together they

can be interpreted as a continuation of the gradual shift 'from arm's-length to hands-on' identified by Taylor as starting in the late 1980s (1997).

The three themes which structure the report reflect this strategic intention. The first, an emphasis on using digital technology to *engage* audiences – nominally through taking advantage of what the report identifies, drawing on Ofcom data, as increasingly universal smart phone ownership (measured at 76% of the UK population) and ONS numbers on daily internet use (80% of the UK's population) to enable access to culture for an on-line audience of over 50 million people. These assumed advantages apply especially to people with mobility issues, or the elderly who cannot easily visit venues, or to young people for whom smart phone content is assumed to encourage engagement with the arts. For these groups, digital technology offers the opportunity to 'turn up the dial on audience engagement' enabling 'more interactivity, with users able to curate their own experiences and generate their own content' (DCMS 2018, 18). Linked to this possibility is the encouragement of the further development and wider adaptation by sector organisations of data-oriented audience analytics which are interpreted as allowing organisations to *know* their audience more intimately in ways which will help them strategically in shaping future programmes and content, 'so that they can create with audiences in mind' (DCMS 2018, 25). This aspiration builds on and extends existing currents within the policy-makers' conception of the audience for arts as 'knowable' through the developing methods of data-oriented 'market segmentation' (Arts Council England 2011) exemplified by the Audience Finder tool developed through the Audience Agency which 'brings together data on all UK households with data from over 800 cultural organisations: over 170 million tickets, 59 million transactions, approximately 280,000 surveys and web analytics from all the UK's major arts and cultural organisations as of January 2018.' (DCMS 2018, 25) The relative practical strengths and weaknesses of this kind of insight for the cultural sector have been usefully reflected on by Ashton and Gowland-Pryde (2019). For our purposes it is interesting to note that the 'data on all UK households' here referred to is the MOSAIC consumer segmentation tool from the US-based consumer credit rating company Experian, and is part of an emerging data infrastructure of what the legal scholars Citron and Pasquale (2014) refer to as the 'scored society', in which firms of this kind generate and mine data to underpin the ranking and rating of individuals. The Audience Agency's associated Audience Spectrum segmentation tool combines this proprietorial data with the long-standing publicly funded DCMS survey of cultural participation *Taking Part* to produce 10 audience profiles which cultural organisations can use. The policy commitments associated with this theme commit arm's length bodies such as the Arts Council and the Heritage Lottery Fund to collect and understand data through Audience Finder, 'so that all businesses in the sector can better understand digital and physical audiences.' (DCMS 2018, 25). There is an elision here, typical in discussions about the place of technology in cultural life, between engaging audiences that use digital devices for various forms of 'interactive' participation and the forms of data gathering and analysis that these same devices allow and produce.

The second theme concerns an emphasis on improving the digital capability of cultural organisations – both in terms of the digital skills of the people within the organisations themselves and to enable organisational efficiencies. This is framed as a significant part of the cultural sector's contribution to the broader strategic aims of government to, 'improve the digital skills of UK business and citizens in order to make the UK a world-leading digital economy' and is associated with broader planned investments in 'maths, digital and technical skills' (DCMS 2018, 31) in England. Within the cultural sector itself, the 2017 Arts Council Review and research from Nesta (an 'innovation foundation' that emerged from a National Lottery endowment in 1998, the National Endowment for Science Technology and the Arts and transformed into a registered charity in 2012) is cited as having identified deficiencies in digital capabilities within the organisations that the Council supports. Correcting these will enable efficiencies in 'back-office operations' as well as the possibility of increases to both commercial revenues and fundraising through improved and extended 'audience reach.' To achieve this there are, through analogising with a Lloyds Bank study on small business and charities (on the basis that 'Most cultural organisations are charities and there are very similar

characteristics between these sectors' (DCMS 2018, 32)), further identified policy commitments to implement a 'digital maturity index', supported by a 'Digital Culture Code' to 'enable organisations to 'benchmark their own digital capability and set plans in place to make improvements' and to 'demonstrate a commitment to developing their own digital maturity and the maturity of the wider cultural sector' (DCMS 2018, 34).

Both commitments represent extensions of an existing requirement for Arts Council National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) receiving more than £250,000 to have a digital policy and plan to identify how engagement with digital technology can 'make savings, transform business models, and reach audiences' (DCMS 2018, 34) and signal further responsibilities for ACE to nurture and develop the digital skills within the sector. This is to be achieved through partnership with tech organisations, with the principal exemplar in the report being Google's Digital Garage programme of short on-line courses developing digital skills. The report identifies an aspiration for ACE to work with Google Arts and Culture (an initiative from Google launched in 2011 based around the digitisation the collections of significant global museums) to develop a sector specific version of Digital Garage for arts organisations. Such encouragement is coupled with the policy directive that, in an expansion of the existing requirement, every Arts Council funded organisation will be expected to produce a digital strategy for how their organisations will improve their position in relation to technology.

The identification of the possibility of strategic partnership with Google is also implicated in two further 'digital skills' elements of the report. First the concern, reflecting a central theme of the Industrial Strategy, with data and artificial intelligence as routes to increased productivity within the UK's digital economy, in which,

Collecting data not only allows cultural organisations to understand their audiences better but the data collected – audience demographic data, commercial transactional data, metadata, crowdsourced data, locations-based data, and machine-generated data – can all be used to help develop business plans and organisation strategies. (DCMS 2018, 38)

Related to this, reference is made to the Intellectual Property Office's 2015–2020 strategy document which had identified a paucity within UK business of knowledge concerning how intellectual property regimes were developing in the light of new technologies and associated findings from ACE and Nesta about the specific lack of knowledge within the cultural sector of issues relating to rights clearance. The impact of this lack of knowledge is that,

Cultural organisations often fail to realise the benefits of their digital assets, missing out on opportunities to extend audience reach and brand awareness via non-commercial distribution or not pursuing commercial exploitation. They may limit access to certain types of content or fail to exploit the revenue generating opportunities of other content. (DCMS 2018, 41)

The policy commitment in response to this encourages partnership between the IPO and the cultural sector, 'to develop guidance and training for the cultural sector so that cultural organisations can better understand the Intellectual Property framework and its relevance to them' (DCMS 2018, 41) – although intriguingly, given the tensions around the *Digital Britain* report of 2009, there is no mention of the extent to which the business models of tech giants, including Google, through its subsidiary video platform, YouTube, have actively disrupted intellectual property regimes in relation to cultural production.

The third and final theme of the report concerns an aspiration to 'unleash' the *creative* potential of technology. Explicitly referring to the UK's strategic ambitions relating to 5 G internet as spelled out in the Digital Strategy, the report describes an ambition to create a 'digital infrastructure for culture', reflecting that 'Our consultation and research have shown that the cultural sector currently lacks the infrastructure and the operating and funding models needed to thrive in a digital landscape' (DCMS 2018, 45). In response to this, the report identifies a strategic ambition to speed up the digitising of collections and archives, showcasing as part of this examples of Google Arts and Culture, the National Lottery funded cultural education charity Art UK which has a significant digitisation programme and the National Gallery's summer 2017 initiative in livestreaming, via Facebook, an

augmented 3-D virtual reality gallery exhibition of Van Gogh's Sunflowers. Relatedly the report reflects on initiatives that enable 'Live to Digital' transmission of performances which can 'reach into "closed communities" including community centres and care homes and, through live streaming platforms reach harder to reach audiences' (DCMS 2018, 51). Acknowledging the costs of developing this kind of activity for smaller organisations, as a concern identified by stakeholder discussions, the policy commitment here is for ACE to provide a platform to co-ordinate and enable collaboration between organisations engaging in this activity and to provide models of best practice.

Finally, again reflecting the Industrial Strategy, the report aligns the cultural sector with the UK's ambition to be an innovative economy, reporting the Government's commitments to raise research and development investment and specifically investing £725 million in a New Industrial Strategy Fund programme. The relevance to the sector here is that, 'Creating with new technology allows artists to push the boundaries of what's possible and create transformative experiences for audiences, for technology to inspire cultural production, and for creative content to *test the applications of technology*.' (DCMS 2018, 53, our emphasis) Reflecting this, the report identifies and seeks to showcase and encourage investment in forms of creative practice – such as immersive reality forms of theatre and film production – which depend on computing technologies. These include Google Tilt Brush (a virtual reality 3D painting platform) being showcased on the Edinburgh fringe, Google Arts and Culture working with the National History Museum on the Rhomaleosaurus exhibit of a re-imagined pre-historic sea creature and a B.B.C radio play, *The Inspection Chamber*, in which Amazon's Alexa smart-speaker technology is deployed to allow the audience into a piece of interactive theatre.

The notion of the cultural sector as a testbed for the applications of technology is reflected in national and regional forms of funding that facilitate this. This includes higher education establishments re-orienting their programmes to include 'creative tech' and re-orienting the practices of artistic training:

In practice this means: graphic design and architecture students learning to code so as to produce designs for brands, buildings and beyond; game design and film students learning to code to develop on screen and immersive narrative experiences; fashion and interaction design students using physical computing to prototype new haptic interactions that respond to the body; fine art and performance students using technology to develop large scale and interactive artworks and performances that explore and expose the techno-social world we now inhabit. (DCMS 2018, 54)

In all these aspects the report is characterised by both congratulation for the sector in the innovation that it has shown in the past but also by the implication that future support is likely to be dependent on specific forms of orientation to digital forms of technology as the *sine qua non* of the innovation of the future. The digital is imagined primarily as a new force here, to which the sector – exemplified by the key national institutions through and to which funding has been distributed historically – is required to adjust to play its role in the broader strategic aims of government. Even in this emerging new world of technology, 'culture' remains tied to these kinds of institutions and the identified tech companies – which are, in Google, Facebook and Apple some of the most significant and powerful firms in the world and central to what Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018) refer to as *The Platform Society* – are the neutral<sup>5</sup> conduits through which changes to them, and the broader sector can be achieved. The following section reflects both on this appearance of 'novelty' of the digital in the machinery of government and on its implications for the practice of cultural policy.

## Technology and government

The *Culture is Digital* report serves as a useful reflection of a specific moment in time in which DCMS is tasked with re-orienting its own practices in the diverse fields for which it has responsibility to reflect both the increased significance of digital technologies within them and the more general strategic significance of such technologies for the UK economy. While the tone and aspiration of the report is distinctly future-oriented, these strands also connect with older stories about the potentials

of technology and its relations with the state. Both these new imperatives and these more established stories intersect with cultural policy scholarship in revealing ways, specifically in the relation to debates about the role of evidence in informing policy (Selwood 2002, 2019; O'Brien 2014) including the kinds of evidence – commonly narrated as ‘big data’ – that emerge from digital technologies (Oman 2021).

One telling intersection relates to the longer history of data-gathering and associated technologies in the practices of the UK state. As scholars such as Ruppert, Isin, and Bigo (2017) have outlined, the state has always existed as the primary gatherer of data, and the emergence of data sciences and the technologies that support them is, ‘not because they have merely quenched our curiosities but because these sciences have been useful for the objects and subjects they have brought into being for the purposes of governing and/or profit’ (Ruppert, Isin, and Bigo 2017, 1). For millennia, the state had a monopoly over the gathering of population level data. It was the only body that would need such data in its work of population monitoring, management, tax collection and resource distribution and was the only organisation large enough to perform these roles effectively. These kinds of activities are given specific momentum by the logistical capabilities of computing technologies, and the state’s monopoly is broken by the rise of big tech, now capable of producing fine-grained population level, behavioural data in real time.

While the accounts in the reports described above emphasise such technologies as *external* to government and emblematic of an innovative private sector, here it is important to remember the historic role of the state as *investor* in making the tech sector (Mazzucato (2013) and Castells (2009) both emphasise the amount of public investment in the US and UK that went into creating the contemporary technological infrastructure) but also to recognise that these technologies were designed primarily as organisational, administrative tools through which government could be improved. The historian Jon Agar (2003) for example identifies the affinities between the developing ‘machinery of government’ underpinning the information processing activities of the British civil service across the twentieth century and the development of computing technologies, given momentum by the military and strategic demands of the Second World War. These affinities allow, as Ward (2020) suggests, the computer to be both a tool and symbol in the post-war re-invention of technocratic government – including generating anxieties among strategic policy thinkers. For example, the Head of the Post-Office’s long range planning department in 1969 refers to the ‘bleak mechanistic prospect’ of an individual who need not leave his (*sic*) home, ‘but merely manipulates the knobs and dials and screens around him in order to obtain his education, conduct his business, do his shopping and get his entertainment’ (J. S Whyte, quoted in Ward 2020, 854). In the practice of government itself, though, the increased exploitation of computing technologies was, by the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, a boon to attempts to ‘modernise’ government. A Government green paper in 1996, for example, re-imagined public service provision in line with still emerging on-line banking or insurance systems, specifically piggy-backing, as Bellamy (2000, 34) described, ‘the introduction of e-government on the infrastructures, business practices and social behaviour associated with the increasingly widespread use of e-commerce transactions.’ Similar thinking of an increased role for technology in the administrative work of government that mimics or draws from the logic of the emergence of computing systems is developed in the US later this century. The publisher and technology advocate Tim O’Reilly coined the idea of government itself as a ‘platform’ (O’Reilly 2011) that provides a basic infrastructure through which services are delivered but which is built on and extended – in the manner of open-source software development – by others. These kinds of visions of the pragmatic deployment of technology in addressing the complex problems of contemporary government, and the associated dependency on the tech sector to deliver these solutions, provide the foundations for the development of the ‘platform society.’ This term describes the rise of Google, Apple, Microsoft, Facebook, and Amazon (and an equivalent set of firms in the Chinese context) and the technical ecosystem that has become increasingly central to public and civic life. As Van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal (2018, 12) describe it, ‘it seems neutral and agnostic, but its architecture carries a particular set of ideological values; it appears to replace “top-down” “big government” with

"bottom up" "customer empowerment" yet it is doing so by means of a highly centralised structure which remains opaque to its users'. This has huge implications for the cultural sector and the creative industries – including those outlined in the *Culture is Digital* report, pertaining to cultural participation, the re-shaping of creative production, the organisation of the cultural sector and the challenges to established regimes of intellectual property. But these are sector-specific manifestations of more extensive relations established between privately owned, and opaquely governed, platforms and the state.

### **'Progress' and the pandemic**

Since the publication of *Culture is Digital* by DCMS in 2018, the direction of travel for UK those aspects of UK cultural policy for which the department is responsible has become more firmly established. This can be illustrated through the contents and emphases of two further documents. The first, a progress report detailing how the specific developments instigated by *Culture is Digital* were being operationalised (DCMS 2019) and the second the *Boundless Creativity* (DCMS 2021) research report published in 2021 detailing the cultural sector's response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

The progress report was published in June 2019. In keeping with the government's strategic ambition to use digital technologies in its communication, it is accompanied by a YouTube video in which the then Secretary of State Jeremy Wright details the progress made. And perhaps in keeping with our general observation that the audience for these strategic policy interventions is not especially extensive, in the three years since its publication in 2019, at time of writing, this video had received 221 views.<sup>6</sup> Beginning, again, with assertions from Ofcom evidence about the scale of internet use, hours spent on-line and percentages of smartphone use that reveal the 'ordinariness' of digital activity in contemporary British life, the document echoes the structure and themes of *Culture is Digital*, reporting identified progress on questions relating to audiences, skills and innovation.

In relation to audiences, alongside reporting the volume of web-traffic to the sites of the 15 DCMS-sponsored UK museums, notable claims for progress include the building of the capacities within organisations to gather and analyse audience data, reflected in the appointment of new 'digital directors' to the Arts Council and a new 'digital lead' to the National Lottery Heritage Fund. A relative shortening of the arms-length approach to cultural policymaking can be detected in the reporting of the Arts Council's decision to mandate all its National Portfolio Organisations from 2018 to contribute to the Audience Finder tool, as first set out in *Culture is Digital*. A 'viral' tweet of an Exmoor Horn ram from the Museum of English Rural Life is used to illustrate the potential application of a social media-oriented approach to audience development, measured in the language of impressions, engagements, and followers as metrics of success. Evidence from the evaluation of Hull's time as the UK City of Culture that their digital strategy 'enabled a reach of 37.3 billion people and an advertising value equivalent of at least £450 million' cements a relationship between audience development and the attention economy, mediated through technology. The designation of the subsequent City of Culture, Coventry, as a '5G test bed city' confirms a view that digital engagement with audiences is imagined to be central to the transformative, regenerative role of culture in that initiative.

The aspiration and encouragement, expressed in *Culture is Digital* for organisations within the cultural sector to improve their digital skills is reported as met through the allocation of a relatively small amount of funding (£200, 000) to the Arts Council and National Lottery Heritage Fund to develop their Digital Culture Code and Digital Maturity Index, allowing organisations in the sector to use a toolkit to assess their own digital capabilities as well as feeding data back on these capabilities to funders.<sup>7</sup> ACE's Digital Culture Network was also launched in 2019, based around 9 regional tech champions employed to support ACE supported organisations with developing their own digital capacities. Reported activity here includes the delivery, in partnership with Google Arts and Culture, of digital marketing masterclasses in Manchester and Bristol, with the ambition to work with Google to extend the training throughout the network. This initiative is reported as exemplifying the sector's contribution to the

Digital Skills Partnership, a strategic initiative to improve the UK's digital skills more generally, with board membership from Google and Microsoft, established as part of the UK's Digital Strategy in 2017.

Alongside further investment in digitising museum and heritage collections of various kinds, progress in relation to innovation focusses primarily on the development and application of immersive technologies. This includes reporting the establishment of partnerships between significant national organisations and platforms or technology firms. This includes the National Gallery's partnership with Google Arts and Culture in the creation of the National Gallery X experimental space, the Royal Shakespeare Company's Immersive Fellowships, working with Magical Leap (a US-based Augmented Reality company, with significant investment capital from both Google and the Chinese tech giant Alibaba (Ewalt 2016)) and the Royal Opera House's Audience Labs initiative, working with a range of partners, including Google Creative Lab to produce opera and ballet performances away from the stage, including in virtual reality settings. Reflecting in a DCMS blog-post on this final initiative prior to its closure in August 2021, its director Annette Mees describes technology as a Trojan Horse 'for new ways of thinking and working', and echoes the elision between technology and the search for new audiences set out in the initial report by emphasising that, 'if we want to make great art that is meaningful to new audiences, we need to think in new ways about the art itself and work with new people.' (Mees 2021).

The Coronavirus pandemic had specific impact on the cultural sector, including through the closure of cultural institutions and venues and, in response to this, gave momentum to the translation of some forms of cultural production, notably live performances, into digitally sharable content to enable institutions and artists/performers to attempt to compensate for lost revenues. Governments around the world responded to the impact of the pandemic on their cultural sector in various ways (Betzler et al. 2021). The policy response in the UK focussed on a recovery fund or bailout – alongside the partial application of a job protection/furlough scheme to maintain levels of employment in the sector (Banks and O'Connor 2021). The pandemic also served to cement the relations between technology platforms, the state, and the management of life more generally, in the UK and elsewhere.<sup>8</sup> The *Boundless Creativity* report, published in July 2021 reports the results of a consultative research project conducted by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council in partnership with DCMS, based around round-table discussions with representatives from a range of prominent culture sector organisations and academics reflecting on these changes and the lessons that could be drawn from the pandemic to sustain the sector in the future. Six of its nine recommendations focus on aspects of digital technology, and in terms which explicitly echo the *Culture is Digital* report. These include recommendations relating to research and development in the sector ('where creative meets tech is where great economic and cultural value is going to be derived in the next 20 years' (DCMS 2021, 6)), using digital technologies to extend audience reach (principally through monetising digitally produced content for international audiences), broadening access to modes of digital production and distribution (through incentivising 'the bigger players to make their platforms open source' (DCMS 2021, 6)), increase data sharing and to continue the work of digital skills development within the sector.

Both documents confirm the direction of travel which the *Culture is Digital* report sets out. Inasmuch as the policy problems of culture – related to issues of access and accessibility, the efficient use of limited funding to maintain institutions, and the future development of sustainable modes of cultural production – can be identified and understood in the contemporary UK, then digital technology and the infrastructures, platforms and companies which enable and maintain it, is central to solving them.

## Conclusion

The DCMS name change reflects both longer term uncertainty about what a Ministry of Culture is for in the UK context and a more contemporary belief about what digital technologies might contribute to the task of government. The *Culture is Digital* report and the various strategies that it responds to and policy commitments which it informs give a good indication of what 'digital' and 'culture' meant to the UK government in 2018 and what they continue to mean in the post-pandemic context. For

'culture,' there are continuities with recent decades in which, while lip-service is paid to the significance of the arts and culture for national life, this significance is mostly narrated in relation to contributions to the economy and to making the UK an attractive site for international investors – and specifically in the post-Brexit search for competitive international advantage. The contemporary iterations of this story, in relation to digital, are augmented by the incorporation of responsibility for data policy and technical infrastructure into DCMS's diverse policy responsibilities, giving the department a concrete stake in the UK's industrial strategy focussed on exploiting data and artificial intelligence and developing the skills and technologies to do so. The relation between those aspects of the cultural sector that have more been the traditional focus of cultural policy research and the digital can be summarised as twofold. First, there is the claim that digital technologies can at the same time provide organisations within the cultural sector the kinds of fine-grained data about preferences and behaviours they provide for the emerging platform cultural producers, and the administrative and organisational efficiencies they are assumed to provide for government. Second the elision between artistic production and innovation allows emerging forms of digitally enhanced creative work to act as a *testbed* for new technologies. While assumptions about the tastes and preferences of specific audiences for the consumption of culture through digital media allows technology to be claimed as a 'trojan horse' for culture, the reverse is also true. Strategic policy commitments and the promise of future investments within the sector are explicitly linked to encouragement to collaborate with powerful international technology firms and platforms, embedding such organisations in new modes of cultural production and distribution and augmenting their role in the management of cultural life more generally. In relation to the broader history of British cultural policy and the career of the DCMS, there is a paradox here. Because of its responsibility for technical infrastructure and for data strategy, as a department, DCMS is now far *more* significant to government than it has been in the past given these things underpin broader national strategic goals. At the same time, 'culture' as articulated by cultural policy makers is increasingly marginalised. As the *Culture is Digital* report makes clear, to maintain its significance for government, the cultural sector is encouraged to align its contributions with those of an increasingly influential technology sector that has its own strategic concerns with and interests in the management and understanding of the UK population.

## Notes

1. We are unsure – and would welcome insight into – whether this figure would include all the investment and expenditure by government on its own digital resources or activities, such as all the activity undertaken by the Ministry of Defence and the security services in terms of cyber-warfare, cyber disruption, cyber-defence, hacking, and by the police in terms of more mundane versions of cyber-crime. Each of these will be extremely expensive activities in both revenue and capital terms.
2. A crude indication of this shift might be revealed by the fact that the *Digital Britain* report contained just one reference to a named platform or tech firm – Google, still understood primarily as a search engine.
3. The British food and clothing retailer *Marks and Spencer*.
4. We are grateful to one of our anonymous reviewers for highlighting this revealing ambiguity.
5. This is not to say that tech firms are not subject to state concern and regulation entirely. As van Dijck et. al discuss, in the EU, such regulation has included GDPR legislation on the use and management of data and on-going debates about the role of platforms as 'publishers' of problematic content. See Kretschmer, Furgal, and Schlesinger (2021) for a review of emerging forms of platform regulation in the UK.
6. #CultureisDigital Progress report: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXcrnD4vKBo> (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022).
7. This tool has subsequently been launched, in February 2020, as the Digital Culture Compass <https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/blog/guiding-your-digital-journey> (accessed 8<sup>th</sup> April 2022).
8. By way of illustration of this point we might consider the use of Apple mobility reports at government press briefings or the use of apps, distributed through Apple and Android App stores, to enable proximity between Bluetooth enabled devices to act as proxies for virally infected bodies in the management of 'track and trace' systems.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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