

New Voices: Remote Island: livestreaming the arts in Ireland in lockdown and beyond

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To cite this article:

Healy, Paula (2023). Remote Island: livestreaming the arts in Ireland in lockdown and beyond, *Irish Journal of Arts Management and Cultural Policy*, 10(1), 116-127.

Published online:

October 2023

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Abstract

This study concerns the impact of livestreaming the performing arts in Ireland during lockdown, and the potential futures for livestreaming the arts. The research aims to assess how Irish practitioners used livestreaming and how Irish audiences' arts consumption changed during lockdown. A mixed-method approach incorporating desk research, audience and practitioner surveys and case studies was employed. The theme of liveness in streaming the arts recurred in desk research, as such, the concept of liveness was incorporated into survey questions and case study interviews. Three case studies of Irish arts organisations conducted by semi-structured interview, allow for discussion of the impact of lockdown on arts practice, while also looking at liveness, communitas and technology. Analysis of the interviews and survey results finds most practitioners provided streamed content, often unfunded or free, with only a minority continuing to livestream after lockdown. For audiences, physical, geographical, and cost barriers to attending in-person events emerge as a key consideration in accessing the arts.

Biographical statement:

Paula Healy recently graduated with a First-Class MA in Digital Media from the University of Galway. She has 20 years' management, training, and media experience, having worked with the University of Galway's Youth Academy, Community Radio Ireland, and as a freelance sound editor. She currently works as Station Manager at Flirt FM 101.3.

Keywords: COVID-19; livestreaming; liveness; audience.

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Introduction

The live performance industry was one of many sectors adversely affected by lockdowns, government restrictions and social distancing requirements during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media define this sector as the artists and musicians of all genres, performers, technicians, and other support staff in the live performance sector. Two years on, it is timely to reflect on how livestreaming in Ireland developed throughout the pandemic and its possible futures.

The focus of this research is on music livestreaming, while placing this within a wider context of all arts performers in Ireland.

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The global pandemic necessitated a pivot to remote and online life. What has been the impact of livestreaming the performing arts in Ireland during lockdown? And since in-person performances have returned, what are the potential futures for livestreaming arts? Analogue television and radio broadcasts are outside the scope of this study, as are gaming and sports streams.

The state of the art

Livestreaming specifically, in its liveness, facilitated and fostered community in a way that personal arts consumption did not. Laura Risk wrote that livestreaming functions within an ‘economy of human connection, newly constituted by the pandemic’, where creators can convey intimacy and audiences finely-tailor their own experiences by regulating mood, shaping their social interactions and online personae (Risk, 2021, p.2). Erin Sullivan also noted the financial and time barriers to attending event cinema, such as caring for children that livestreaming helps mitigate (Sullivan, 2020, p.105).

Gotthardt et al. (2022) noted that while normally consumed solo, ‘digital cultural offerings’ do allow a connection with others, through real-time commenting. They found that the best buffer against worries and stress during the pandemic were feelings of connectedness facilitated by those online offerings (Gotthardt et al., 2022, p.6). Risk placed this connectedness into a third space, in what she called a ‘trebling’ effect – the occurrence of an event in (at least) the physical location of the performers, the audience location and the virtual third space where the audience can chat and create community (Risk, 2021, p.5). She touches on the voyeuristic qualities of the experimental and relatively young practice of livestreaming and continues that we are all ‘co-creating the norms of livestreaming’ during the pandemic. Sullivan considers this ‘parallel social track’ something that should be encouraged so audiences can discuss and extract meaning and value from performances and argues that this dialogue ‘is arguably the most paradigm-shifting form of aliveness made possible by online broadcasting’ (Sullivan, 2020, p.107).

Livestreaming had and continues to have marked benefits and provide a public good, but creators need it to be practically and financially sustainable in the long term. For audiences, livestreaming may have helped abate negative emotions, distract, and entertain, especially at the start of the pandemic. This was not universally true, for some it may have held the opposite as livestreaming allowed distant connection and community ‘yet accentuated the absence of sensual social interaction’ (Peirson-Hagger, 2020).

The Irish Context

The Irish government introduced several financial measures to support businesses during the pandemic, such as the COVID-19 Business Support Scheme, Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), and the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS). Creative Ireland, a government initiative, aimed to support Ireland's creative and cultural sectors during the pandemic. They provided funding opportunities for artists, performers, and cultural organisations through schemes like the Creative Production Supports, the Creative Places Ireland program and #IrelandPerforms which was a short-term scheme to specifically supporting online performances by Irish artists during the pandemic.

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The Arts Council of Ireland offered various funding opportunities for artists and arts organisations, including those involved in livestreaming performances. These funding programs included the COVID-19 Crisis Response Award, Arts Grants Funding, and Festivals Investment Scheme, among others. The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland also responded to the pandemic by announcing a number of special Covid-19 support rounds of the television licence funded Sound & Vision 4 scheme. Along with traditional broadcasts, online arts events were funded, such as Clare FM's series of Virtual Concerts. (Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, 2020).

Key surveys were conducted in Ireland in 2020 and 2021 by the Arts Council of Ireland/An Chomhairle Ealaíon on the impact of the pandemic on the arts in Ireland, along with headline figures on audience impact. The Arts Council's quantitative surveys, focused variously on organisations, creators, financial implications, and audience impact. To date there has not been any qualitative audience data in Ireland on remote viewing of the arts, and its impact on peoples' lives. This survey of 265 arts organisations from the 23rd–27th March 2020 reported:

- Over 12,000 activities cancelled – including 3,700 performances and 195 exhibitions.
- Over 112,000 tickets already for activities that will not now take place.
- 269 staff have lost their jobs.
- No evidence as yet that insurance cover will provide relief.
- Over €3.85million invested to date in activities now cancelled/postponed
- Potential income of €6.4million lost from activities now cancelled

Figure 1: Arts Council of Ireland. Findings in Response to Survey of Arts Council Funded organisations on Impact of COVID-19, 2020.

According to Arts Council Ireland, over 2.4m Irish audience members were affected by the pandemic, with 91% of organisations reporting cancelled or postponed events since March 2020. By late August 2020 a massive 58% of arts sector employees were the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) or the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) (Arts Council *Employment and Economic Impact Assessment*). Arts Council Ireland's Economic report from March 2021 showed that the arts and entertainment sector activity decreased by 54.4% in 2020 – more than the combined declines in construction, professional, transport and hospitality sectors combined. This was devastating for the arts sector, but there was some respite in the form of social welfare schemes, special support grants and the blossoming of Irish livestreaming.

Early in the pandemic *The Irish Music Industry Podcast* dedicated six episodes to the Irish reaction to Covid-19, the Music Industry Stimulus Package (MISP) and three of the main organisations that helped to inform Arts Minister Catherine Martin's structuring of the €50 million Live Performance Sector Support Scheme (LPSSS). Separate from grants and funding, Louth band The Mary Wallopers' audience of close to 4,000 for their St. Patrick's Day concert was highlighted as a remarkably successful Irish Covid-19 livestream event.(Graham, 2022, 00:36).

David Teevan (2021) has written on Irish festivals and their response to Covid-19, noting increased collaboration with the communities where the festivals are based, and beyond the festival dates. He also notes that few Irish arts festivals had livestreamed events prior to Covid-19, mentioning Galway International Arts Festival's First Thought Talks which have been hybrid events for some years (Teevan, 2021, p.137). Galway's Cúirt International Festival of Literature became the first fully online literature festival in the world after their adept pivot to livestreaming events over Easter 2020.

The Other Voices Courage series (April-May 2020) was a cultural flashpoint and high-water mark in Irish livestreamed events. Funded by the Department of Culture, Heritage, and the Gaeltacht and Intel, the series of streams had an 'overall reach 2.7 million, with over 1.15 million live views'. (Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport, and Media, 2020). Both author surveys had a free text entry for respondents' most-enjoyed Irish livestreaming events. Combined, the five most common responses were; The Mary Wallopers, Other Voices, Denise Chaila (Other Voices Courage 2020), CMAT and Druid at Home, (combined Audience and Creator Survey results, June 2022).

Methodology

Arising from desk research, three research aims were established. The first, to assess how Irish practitioners used livestreaming and second to understand their experiences. The third was to examine Irish audiences' usage patterns over lockdown and their consumption of livestreamed events.

The project took a mixed-method approach, with desk research, surveys, case study interviews and the presentation of information in a livestream. Axial coding was established as the most appropriate analytical method as it is particularly suited to 'studies with a wide variety of data forms' (Saldaña, 2013, p.218). Axial coding also allows that themes, theories and paths for future investigation may be developed during the reviews, comparisons, and assessments of both selected answers and respondents' free text entries.

A timeline of technological developments and research on livestreaming was established to frame the rapid expansion the format of communication experienced in a short space of time. Much of the research on streaming the arts consulted at the literature review stage was preoccupied with liveness. As such, the concept of liveness was incorporated into survey questions and case study interviews.

Two discrete online surveys were constructed with closed, open, and free text responses to investigate the Irish experience of livestreaming the arts during lockdown. These were designed to supplement the information touched on in early Arts Council artist surveys and develop an understanding of audience habit changes and sentiment. The creator survey focused on practicalities, such as platforms, funding, monetisation, and production. Audience survey questions centred on genres, devices used to watch, payments, sentiment, media consumption changes, current interest in livestreaming and a free text entry that raised themes for further exploration. Iterative enquiry, familiarisation with responses and reflexive thematic analysis assisted in establishing 'which [codes] in the research are the dominant ones and which are the less important

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ones' (Boeije, 2010, p.109). All work was prepared in compliance with research ethics guidelines, and the material covered was not considered sensitive in nature. Discarding off-topic, bot and nonsense answers reduced the sample size from n=226 to n=132 (audience) and n=139 to n=41(creators) but delivered higher quality datasets.

Given the rich text entry data and the indication by creators of their willingness to be contacted, three Ireland-specific case studies across a broad representation of the arts in Ireland were conducted. One was DIY and community-based, the next an established, funded local arts festival and the last a professional film company that created some of the most high-profile Irish arts livestreaming of the pandemic. Semi-structured interviews allowed for open discussion of the impact of lockdown on each interviewee and their practice, while also looking at liveness, communitas and technology. The desk research, case studies and survey findings were presented in a public livestream. Ultimately the mixed-method research approach and livestream results presentation were chosen due to my previous journalistic, broadcasting, interviewing, livestreaming, and teaching experience.

Discussion

While livestream fatigue had set in for many, as of June 24th, 2022, 21% of practitioners were still streaming, (see Figure 7 below) and there remains an audience for livestreaming, as indicated by the survey data.

What made Irish arts livestreams so special specifically during the pandemic? Creator, audience, and case study sentiment coalesced around the idea that liveness and event-ness was created by variously; more intimate access to artists and locations, behind the scenes insights, a feeling of unmediated/edited content, DIY aesthetic and the possibility of things going wrong. This has been enabled by practitioners' increased comfort with technology, bandwidth availability, and portability of equipment.

Survey Findings

The jump in usage across livestreaming arts events, subscription streaming video and podcasts in Ireland tallies with increases of streaming services internationally. In America, for example, total weekly streaming minutes jumped from 81.7 billion in late 2019 to 142.5 billion in the second quarter of 2020 (Nielsen, 2020). Television, newspapers, and magazines decreased more than other traditional media, such as radio and books, however (Figure 2). It was noted in the 2021 Reuters Digital News Report that the number of Irish consumers that 'often or sometimes' avoid the news rose from 32% to 41% between 2019 and 2021, and the main reasons given were oversaturation of politics and coronavirus coverage, closely followed by the news having a negative effect on mood (Park, Kirsty et al. 2020, p.10,14).

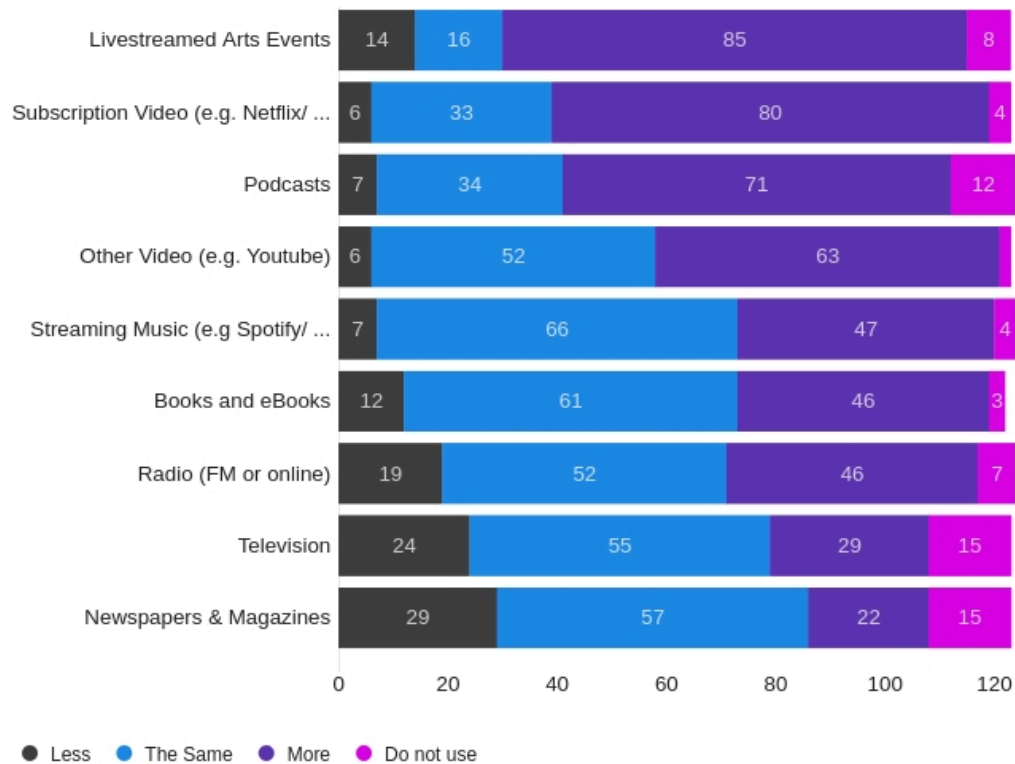


Figure 2: Author’s Audience Survey: media consumption rates during lockdown compared to before Covid (n=132)

Another key finding in the audience survey (Figure 3) was the predominantly positive response to livestreaming reported in the audience survey. The three least commonly selected statements were the most negative or neutral; that livestreaming ‘Lost novelty’, ‘Had no impact on your life’, ‘Overwhelmed you with options’ at sixteen, fifteen and eleven counts each. The more equivocal statement: ‘livestreamed’ arts events made you ‘miss live performances’ was the second most popular answer, suggesting that the positives of entertainment, access and connection were accompanied by a longing for live in-person experiences.

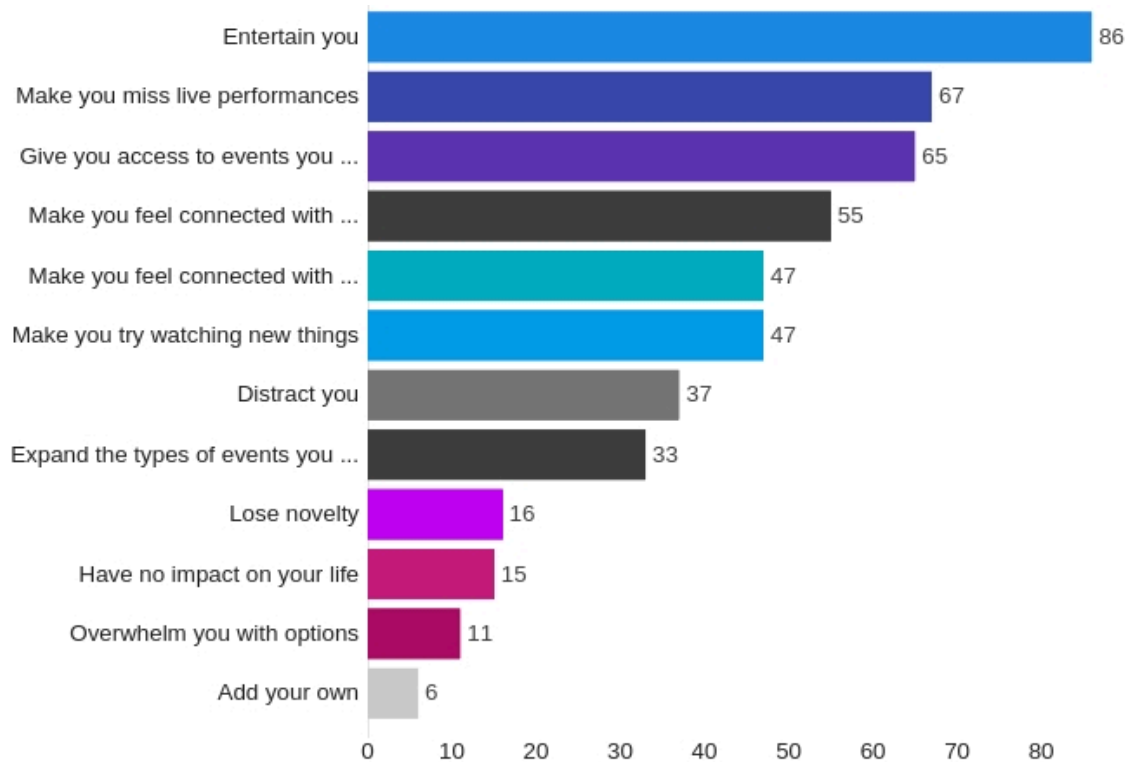


Figure 3: Author's Audience Survey: Effect(s) of livestreamed arts events on audiences during lockdown (n=129)

From the practitioner standpoint, 75% of respondents livestreamed a performance, 15% uploaded edited videos, 3% wanted to livestream, but did not and only 9% said no outright (Figure 4).

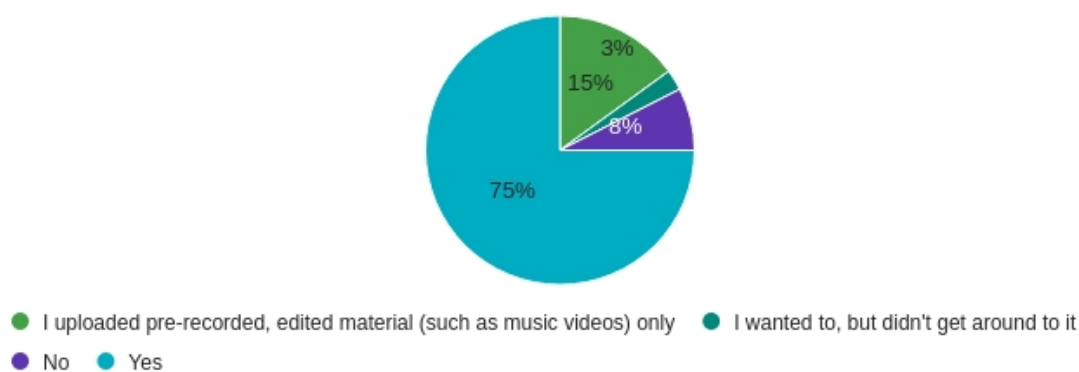


Figure 4: Author's Creators Survey: Creators livestreaming of performances during lockdown (n=41)

Breaking down the funding sources in Figure 5 further, twelve of the respondents provided free content only, eight had single-source funding, seven had multiple funders and ten provided streams both for free and funded.

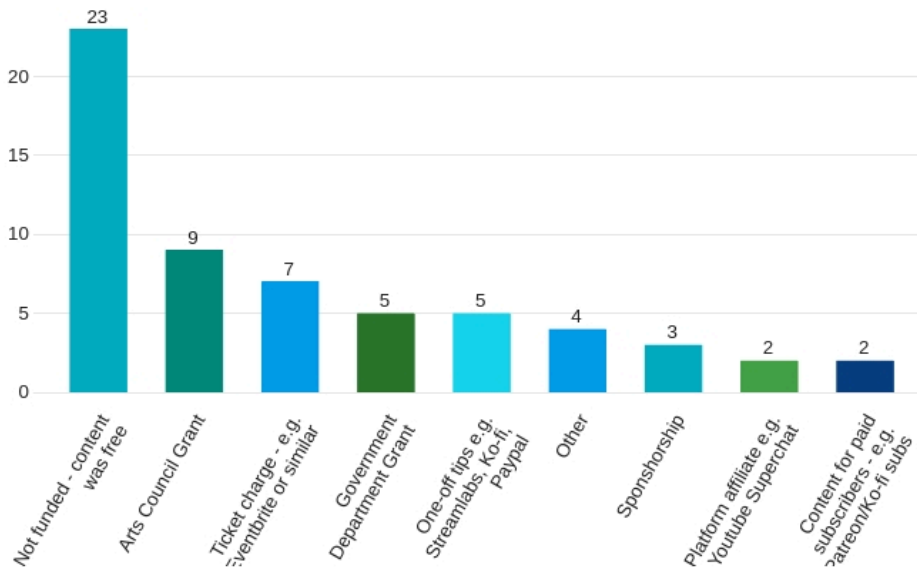


Figure 5: Author's Creators Survey: Creators' livestream funding sources (n=40)

I wasn't a fan of the pre-recorded streams that were presented as "Live", the streams were at their best, when the live audience aspect was recreated. Usually that was the performer interacting with the audience (Audience Survey Respondent).

Audience members that gave positive text feedback tended to prefer live and interactive streams as opposed to pre-recorded and streamed or premiered and available on demand. Similarly, streaming live, with or without an audience was by far the favoured format for creators (Figure 6).

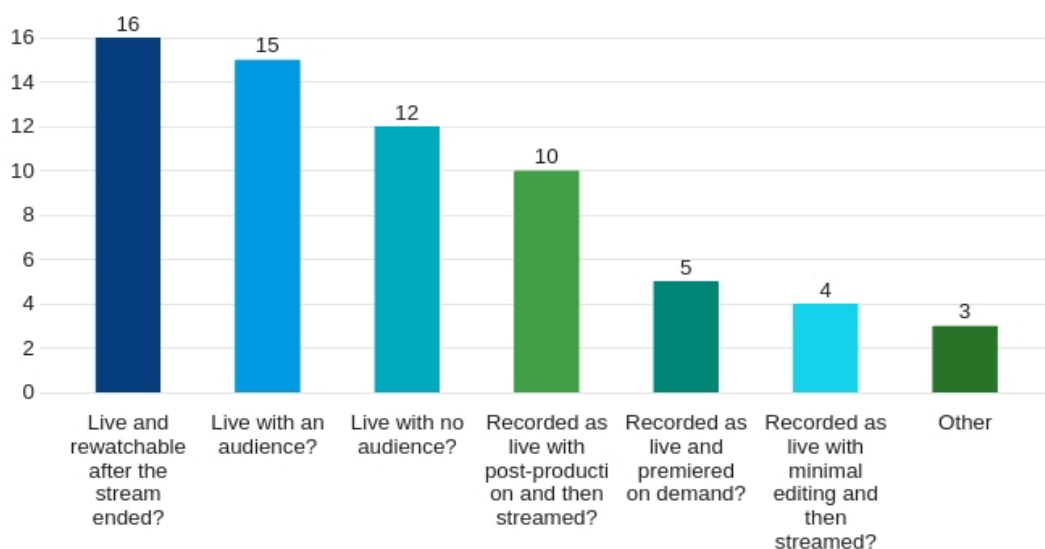


Figure 6: Author's Creators Survey: Creator reporting of live versus pre-recorded streams (n=38)

In terms of liveness, Tiny Ark's Other Voices Livestreams were planned 'with that in mind, with two-way interaction, live, with event-ness, less like pre-records, more like a gig.' (Harkin, 2022). Galway Early Music Festival aimed to return the liveness and event-ness to their streams by hosting Zoom chat rooms after performances and often having performers in the stream's YouTube chat to interact with the audience. (Ó Cróinín, 2022).



Figure 7: Author's Creators Survey: Creators livestreaming performances as of 13/07/2022 (n=40)

While nearly 80% of creators are no longer livestreaming, more than half of those who are not are open to livestreaming again in future (Figure 7). Harkin (2022) concluded in his final thoughts that while he was happy to get back to regular filming, 'livestreaming is not going to go away', continuing:

Other Voices and Dublin Theatre Festival continue to stream. The medium has power and potential, despite the screen fatigue. A lot of people kept going... livestreaming got me through lockdown.

Accessibility considerations

One of my areas of interest prior to the commencement of data gathering was that of accessibility of livestreaming versus in-person events. Two years before the pandemic, Emily King had investigated barriers to attendance at arts events and the highest ranked reasons were: 'Time including work 47.3%, Costs too much 38.3%, Getting there including disability 36.6%, No-one to go with 21.6%, Didn't want to go to that location 9%, Program not of interest 6.6%.' The barriers in this case were resource and accessibility-based, as opposed to disinterest (King, 2019, p.3).

Based on several free text responses to the audience survey, access provided by livestreaming remains paramount for some members of society. Be they carers, parents, have mobility issues, social anxiety or otherwise lacking in time or resources to attend in-person events, lockdown has given everyone a taste of what it has been like to have reduced ability to enjoy the arts on-site.

Live streaming accesses a new audience of the excluded (disability and financially) and worldwide audiences for Irish music. (Bruen, 2022).

Co-founder of Disabled Women Ireland, Maria Ní Fhlatharta, in a 2021 interview with the Irish Examiner voiced her hope that the previous sixteen months of widespread deprivation of in-person events might give the public 'greater empathy for those who experienced that loss and inability to access the Arts long before Covid-19':

As a person with a disability, livestreaming has given me access to so many events I would not otherwise be able to attend, and I fervently hope that organisations recognise that and continue to offer them where possible (McGlynn, 2021).

Respondents to both the creator and audience surveys reiterated this:

Remember there is an audience who cannot attend live events, it may be due to being a carer or other factors.

As a disabled person, many Arts performances aren't accessible to me regardless of COVID-19. In what feels like like [sic] rush to 'normal', and ignoring the ongoing pandemic, my access to community and the arts is lessened again. I have in actuality, been more isolated since dropping of mitigation measures.

Conclusion

It is apparent from the case study interviews and surveys that livestreaming played an incredibly important, and predominantly positive role in Irish life during the outset of the pandemic, and government grants and supports strongly aided this, whether the content required a monetary payment or not. Enthusiasm for creating and watching livestreams has waned since the return to in-person events, and there is bilateral burnout. Nevertheless, the door has been opened, particularly concerning accessibility to the arts for those that cannot attend in person.

This project represents a timestamped, isolated gathering of audience and creator sentiment. While the research aims of this project were met, there are many potential future avenues for research; be it from a technological, mental health, economic, cultural, environmental or accessibility standpoint. A well-resourced longitudinal study with an increased sample of participants - that will likely echo medical investigation in the coming years - could yield fascinating insights and aid deeper analysis. A dataset large enough to meaningfully map the rates of lockdown livestreaming, funding sources, remuneration and current streaming levels across individual fields of arts practice would be valuable. The number of practitioners polled was sufficient to glean basic trends, and the free text entries elicited thoughtful responses, however wider conclusions cannot be drawn in this case. The audience responses were insightful and sincere, suggesting that livestreamed arts had affected some of the respondents deeply.

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