

Coronavirus: As culture moves online, regional organizations need help bridging the digital divide

April 7 2020, by Indigo Holcombe-James



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Museums, galleries and artist collectives around the world are shutting their doors and moving online in response to coronavirus. But engaging with audiences online requires access, skills and investment.

[My research](#) with remote Aboriginal art centers in the Northern Territory and community museums in Victoria shows moving to digital can widen the gap between urban and regional organizations.

Local spaces are vital. They ensure our national story is about more than the metropolitan, allowing artists to create—and audiences to engage with—local art and history. These art centers and museums bring communities together.

This cannot be replicated online.

Australia's digital divide influences the ability of museums and galleries to move online, and the ability of audiences to find them there.

Cultural organizations that cannot produce digital content risk getting left behind. If we don't support regional and rural organizations in their move online—or relieve them from this pressure entirely—we run the risk of losing them.

More than metropolitan

Community museums are critical in collecting, preserving and enabling access to local history. Across Victoria, these community organizations

hold around [10 million items](#).

Aboriginal art centers produce some of Australia's best contemporary art, generating [A\\$53 million in sales](#) between 2008 and 2012.

Digital platforms can make these contributions to our cultural life more accessible—particularly in these times of physical distancing. But artists in remote Aboriginal art centers and volunteer retirees running community museums are the most likely to experience digital disadvantage and the most likely to be left behind.

A digital divide

Australians are [more likely](#) to be digitally excluded when Indigenous, living in remote areas, or over the age of 65.

Community collecting is [under-resourced](#) and so regional museums rely on [retiree volunteers](#).

Over 30% of Indigenous artists practicing out of art centers [are over 55](#), and are most likely to be earning from their art [over 65](#). These remote centers have poor access to web-capable devices and have low-quality internet connections.

The [digital divide](#) also exists for local audiences with access issues of their own.

Although most art centers and community museums have active websites and [social media accounts](#), these are unlikely to be truly engaging or interactive.

Art centers tend to focus their [digital platforms](#) outside the community on commercial sales. Community museums focus on information about

opening hours and events. They rarely have the expertise or capacity to create detailed online catalogs for audiences.

Exclusionary consequences

Cultural participation is [fragmented](#) along demographic and geographic lines. Cities house the majority of our major institutions, with [city dwellers](#) dominating visitation.

Digital inequality ensures barriers remain even for online collections. Regional and rural organizations are unlikely to have the specific skills, resourcing and devices to move fully online.

Under social distancing, cultural organizations that cannot produce digital content risk being left behind. This will disproportionately impact regional and rural organizations.

These organizations are critical for preserving the diversity of Australian stories. Aboriginal art centers and community museums provide spaces where the local is solidified. Communities are formed, documented, responded to and shared.

If these organizations cannot host the same web presence as major metropolitan institutions, even local audiences could divert their attention to the cities. Our local cultural organizations might go the way of our disappearing regional newspapers.

To survive the coming months, these organizations need targeted support to move online. Or a reprieve from the pressure to be completely digitally accessible: not all cultural consumption can happen online.

These physical community spaces will be more important than ever once social isolation rules are lifted.

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