

# Digital Cultural Engagement of Older Audiences

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## Partners

**University of Manchester** (Lead academic: Dr Kostas Arvanitis, Centre for Museology, Institute for Cultural Practices; 6 years since PhD graduation);

**University of Salford** (Dr Anna Catalani and Antonio Benitez);

**Gallery of Costume Platt Hall** (Kate Day, Community Development Officer);

**John Rylands University Library (JRYL)** (Jacqui Fortnum, Public Programmes Manager);

**Manchester Art Gallery** (Ruth Edson, Community Development Manager);

**Manchester Museum** (Andrea Winn, Curator of Community Exhibitions and Steve Devine, Digital Media Officer, Manchester Museum and Whitworth Art Gallery);

**Whitworth Art Gallery** (Ed Watts, Adult Learning & Engagement Programmer);

**Manchester City Library** (Jonathan Ebbs, Service Development Manager).

## Rationale

The ageing of the population is one of the most important demographic changes in history. According to the 2011 census, 16% of the UK population is over 65 years old (Office for National Statistics, 2012). It is expected that by 2035 25% of the UK population will be aged 65 or over (Medical Research Council, 2010). These important demographic changes and the needs of this increasing population group have become a major priority to be addressed by policy makers. There is also strong evidence that suggests that involvement with cultural activities has benefits for people in older age, such as: lower mortality, better physical health and well-being, fewer depressive symptoms and higher cognitive function (Jivraj, Nazroo & Barnes, 2012; O'Neill, 2010). Cultural organisations (such as art galleries, archives, libraries and museums) have demonstrated how they can benefit people's health and well-being (Froggett, 2011; Holding Memories, [website]; Happy Museum, [website]). However, related cultural practice hasn't been fully explored and adopted and there is evidence that this may impact negatively on older people's cultural participation (Nightingale, 2010; LEM 2011). For example, according to the Taking Part survey, older people are still less likely to visit museums than the rest of the population (DCMS, 2012).

At the same time, the cultural sector is increasingly turning to digital media to enhance people's onsite, online and on-the-move engagement with its content (Arvanitis, 2010; Cameron and Kerendine, 2007; Parry, 2007). Anecdotal evidence by reviewing relevant projects suggests that most of this development has either no specific target audiences or focuses primarily on younger audiences. As a result, in the process of developing a more digitally mediated cultural offer, the sector is in danger of alienating older audiences and not considering opportunities that digital media may offer for supporting their cultural participation.

The project's cultural partners have been involved in several initiatives and activities for older audiences and visitors, including outreach and engagement opportunities that are enabled or supported by digital media. Drawing on this work, this project will aim to evaluate the relevance, reception, benefits and challenges of any digital media-enabled engagement practices of Manchester cultural organisations for older audiences and visitors. Based on this, it will aim to provide an initial outline of the relevance and impact of the arts

and cultural sector's adoption of digital, mobile and social media on older people. The research will consider onsite, online and on-the-move visitor engagement opportunities and related digital media applications. Challenges and limitations for the organisations themselves will be also considered. Current and best practice will be investigated with the aim of understanding how cultural organisations in general can use digital media to enhance opportunities for older people's participation in and engagement with their offer.

## Research Activity

- **Benchmarking and Literature:** it aims to map existing theory and practice in both engaging older audiences with cultural content and the use of digital media towards that.
- A **qualitative** investigation of needs, interests and challenges of older audiences in cultural settings, where digital media is used for interpretation and engagement purposes (includes: observation of users of interpretive digital media provided at spaces and activities of the project's cultural partners; and in depth and semi-structured interviews and focus groups with users and non-users of the digital media applications)
- A small number of **stakeholder interviews** to gauge their perceptions and approaches in engaging older audiences with cultural content and the role of digital media in this process.
- **2 round-table project partner workshops:** for current and best practice in engaging older people and using digital media. Workshop 1: '**Catering for older audiences**'; Workshop 2: '**Engaging older audiences via digital media**'.

## Outcomes

- An open 1-day workshop, where the above evaluation and other cases of current/best practice across the UK will be presented and discussed (**July 2013**).
- A session proposal to the Museums Association Conference (Liverpool, **November 2013**)
- A working paper (**Oct 2013**) and
- A research application to develop a digital engagement toolkit and framework for older audiences in the arts and cultural sector (**March 2014**).