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Tales of temporary disruption: Digital adaptations in the first 100 days of the cultural Covid lockdown

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ABSTRACT
This paper describes and analyses how the live performing arts sector in Norway adapted to the abrupt change that affected most European countries in mid-March 2020. Based on a mid-pandemic empirical analysis, it argues that the sudden lockdown due to Covid-19 created a real-time laboratory for digital adaptation within the culture sector. In light of this digital adaptation, I ask whether this rapid digital turn represented a disruption in the cultural sector, and whether the sudden digitalization challenged the structures of cultural production. The paper argues that the digital adaptations to Covid-19 in central parts of the cultural sector have represented a temporary disruption. Rather than fast-forwarding a digital development, the pandemic digital turn has even more than illuminated the innovative and transformative potential of the digital, accentuated the value of the analogue. Still, it will be a continuing task for research in the years to come to assess the potential lasting implications of Covid-related digitalizations in the cultural sector.

1. Introduction
This paper describes and analyses how the live performing arts sector in Norway adapted to the abrupt change that affected most European countries in mid-March 2020. It argues that the sudden lockdown due to Covid-19 created a sudden need for digital adaptation within the culture sector. From one day to the next, quite literally, artists, cultural producers and intermediaries had to find new ways to distribute their cultural products and make a profit out of them. To a large degree, the preferred solution turned out to be digital. In short, the first weeks and months of lockdown saw more digital innovation and change than the previous five, eight or ten years of development. From being a buzzword having variable actual impact, digitalization became a description of the primary mode of distribution in the live performing arts. From being generic ideas of possible development, digital performances, streams and concerts became the chosen standard. But how profound were the changes and adaptations?

To help shed light on this digital cultural laboratory, this article tells the story of the first 100 days of the cultural Covid lockdown in Norway, which started on March 12 and ended on June 19. These dates are not coincidental. On March 12, one of the most remarkable and ominous press conferences in recent Norwegian history was held by Prime Minister Erna Solberg and selected public health officials. The prime minister started the press conference with the following statement: “Today, the Norwegian government implements..."
the strongest and most intrusive measures we have had in Norway in peacetime.”

The measures included the immediate prohibition and closing of cultural events/stages/institutions. On the other end of the first 100 days, the school holidays started and a generation of pupils taking part in a digital pedagogical experiment, being digitally home-schooled, got even more time on their hands. More importantly, it was also the last ordinary day of sittings in the Norwegian Parliament before the summer break. This was used as an opportunity to take stock of the situation and assess both the months that had passed and the months that lay ahead. There were elements of sighs of relief in the parliamentary session. The leader of the opposition, Jonas Gahr Store, stated that “Norway has passed the test”. The prime minister herself presented the work of her government by saying, “The efforts have paid off. We have been able to take back the everyday [...]”

She added that we most likely were moving towards a different version of the everyday, in which she might have been right. But that is a different story. The story in this paper is about how the sudden digital adaptation in the cultural sector unfolded in initial phase of the coronavirus pandemic.

The vantage point of the empirical story of this paper is that such an adaptation indeed took place in this initial phase of the viral lockdown. At the same time, as I will show, the nature, speed and relevance of this adaptation is not unambiguous; not one and the same. Firstly, there are evident differences in the way different actors adapted to the situation. Artists, audiences, cultural entrepreneurs and NGOs have had different takes on the sudden importance of digital distribution. The same was the case with public cultural policy. The artists have tried to learn to communicate with an audience in a way that has been unfamiliar for most of them. The audience have been exposed to and tested out different ways of being a digital audience, with the opportunities and limitations inherent in this kind of cultural experience. Cultural entrepreneurs have introduced different kinds of platforms and business models to find the best way of selling cultural events. Furthermore, NGOs – artists organizations and collecting societies – and public cultural policy entities have tried to manoeuvre in unfamiliar digital waters to find the best way to ensure artists’ rights, relevant public support schemes and rescue packages to a sector that lost most of its income overnight. Secondly, different parts of the arts and culture sector have used digital solutions in different ways.

The fundamental question for this paper is to what degree the Covid-19 adaptations in the cultural sector can be understood as disruptive. In order to operationalize this rather ambitious question, I use the following research questions: How did artists and entrepreneurs within the live performing arts sector in Norway respond to the abrupt change in circumstances due to the Covid-19 outbreak? What role did digital tools and platforms play in their responses? Did the situation challenge the existing structures of cultural production?

There are both advantages and disadvantages of trying to analyse a cultural phenomenon in real-time. One evident advantage is a temporal proximity to events, giving ample opportunities for rich and thick empirical descriptions. I have attempted to use this advantage as an analytical strategy in this paper. An equally evident disadvantage is that there are no benefits of hindsight. The analysis is written in the midst of a situation with an outcome that is unclear. Any indications of lasting consequences are necessarily deemed to be speculative, which leaves room for exciting research in the months and years to come. This includes a possibility to revisit, revise or re-evaluate some of the fundamental theories of cultural production and cultural policy: hierarchies of taste, autonomous and heteronomous cultural production, division of labour, digital innovation etc.

The general significance of the digital turn has been thoroughly recognized for the cultural sector (e.g. Bakhshi & Throsby, 2012, Gauntlett, 2011, Suhr, 2012, Valtysson, 2020). This significance has been analysed as changing the business models and building blocks of entire industries and sub-sectors, with the music industry being the primary example (e.g., Hughes, Evans, Morrow & Keith, 2016, Jones & Bennett, 2015, Kjus, 2018). Furthermore, the digital turn has been read as a central driver of change both for creative work as such (Hearn, 2020) and for cultural commodities in general (Nieborg & Poell, 2018). The twin concepts digitization and digitalization represent different kinds of transformation, both relevant to describe the content of this turn. As defined by e.g. Brennen and Kreiss, “digitization” of converting analogue information into digital bits (Brennen & Kreiss, 2016). “Digitalization”, on the other hand, is defined as the restructuring of different domains of social life around digital communication and media infrastructure (ibid.). As Brennen and Kreiss also emphasize, these two processes are intertwined. This intertwine will also be illustrated by the empirical examples in the article, while the concluding argument will show that digitization not necessarily leads to digitalization.

There are several analytical terms used to describe changes in the cultural sector fuelled by digital development and innovation, like transformation (Massi, 2020) or transition (Hracs, 2012). A third, increasingly popular term to describe the changes fuelled by digitalization and/or digitization, is disruption. To disrupt literally means to break apart, or to break asunder. The concept of disruption has come to be inextricably tied to innovation, after business scholars Clayton Christensen and Joseph Bower coined the terms disruptive technology and disruptive innovation some 25 years ago (Bower & Christensen, 1995; Christensen, Raynor & McDonald, 2015). The concepts have become buzzwords for business analysis, though some observers have questioned their explanatory powers (cf. Markides, 2006). In this context, the particularly relevant uses of the disruption concept has been the pairing with digitization and digitalization. For example, the idea and concept of digital disruption has been employed to describe business-changing digital innovations (Skog, Wiemelius & Sandberg, 2018), to describe societal transformation in general (Kenney, Rouvinen & Zysman, 2015), to analyse changing power structures in democratic states (Schmidt & Cohen, 2010), to look more closely at online subcultures (Lindgren, 2013), and to describe challenges faced by national cultural policies (Davis & Zboralska, 2019). More specifically, the disruptive nature of digitization has been pinpointed in a number of studies on changes in the music industry, using

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2. Cf. https://www.regjeringen.no/no/aktuelt/nye-tiltak/id2693327/ [Read 18.09.20] My translation.

3. Translated by me. The quotes from the debate are from https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2019-2020/refs-201920-06-197/m = 1 [Read 18.09.20]

4. Cf. e.g. https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/disrupt [Read 22.12.20]
disruption as a pivotal analytical term (e.g., Dolata, 2011, Barr, 2013, Moreau, 2013, Hughes et al., 2016, Nordgård, 2018).

What the varying usage of the concept has in common, is that it describes some form of fundamental change spurred by the use of digital technology. In this paper, I am interested in analysing potential digital disruption of the cultural sector in the making, with the Covid-19 situation providing us with the relevant conditions to do so. The available studies of Covid-related digital culture is so far very sparse, with a notable exception being a recent article by James Rendell: «Staying in, rocking out: Online live music portal shows during the coronavirus pandemic» (Rendell, 2020).

I use a combination of empirical sources in this paper. The common perspective for the use of sources is the question of how changes are interpreted by different actors involved. Furthermore, a central ambition has been to trace and describe impressions of newness, as events unfolded from mid-March 2020. I have attempted to follow the development in real-time, and media texts have been an important source to document this. I have systematically read two daily newspapers with national coverage (Aftenposten and VG) online in the period between March 13 and June 19, in addition to two online journals on the music and performing arts (theatre, dance) sector (ballade.no and scenekunst.no). When I refer to the live performing arts sector in this text, these two sub-sectors are included. Another part of the media text data consists of press briefings and news reports from the Ministry of Culture. An additional category of data is collected through digital ethnography, through online observation of digital concerts and social media activities at these events (cf. Murthy, 2008). The concerts to be observed were chosen from the three most established digital concert platforms in this initial period. The method employed can be described as netography: “participant-observational research based in online field-work [which] uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 60). Lastly, I have also conducted interviews with 12 different cultural workers, which included two entrepreneurs or organizers of digital platforms and ten artists, mostly musicians, from different musical genres. Partly as a consequence of the very situation that was to be analysed, four of the interviews were conducted as telephone interviews and eight as e-mail interviews. The interviewees were selected from the array of performers or organizers that staged digital performances in the first weeks of lockdown.

The adaptations and responses analysed in this paper take place within a field of cultural production anchored in a Nordic model of cultural policy (Mangset et al. 2008, Duelund 2003). This model is characterized by a high level of public subsidies, and, partly as a consequence, a relatively low level of private investment in the cultural and creative industries. Another common trait, as identified by e.g., Vestheim (2018) and Bakke (2005), is the cultural policies of the Nordic countries, which are marked by a certain welfare orientation, on two levels. On the one hand, there is a cultural policy towards artists, aimed at securing the working and income conditions of cultural workers. On the other hand, there is also a welfare perspective in the policies on the distribution of culture, treating access to culture as a common good that should be available to all citizens. A third characteristic of the Nordic model of cultural policy is that artists’ organizations, part labour unions and part lobby organizations, have played an important role in moulding the infrastructures of cultural policy in the Nordic countries. This model is a necessary context for the empirical narrative and subsequent analysis in this article.

In Norwegian cultural policy, there is a rather clear divide between the institutional and non-institutional part of the cultural sector. A substantial part of government spending on culture is dedicated to supporting an array of cultural institutions – museums, libraries, archives, the national opera house (including the national ballet), national and regional theatres and orchestras. These are regularly funded organizations. By contrast, we have the non-institutional part of the cultural and creative industries, which include the many self-employed musicians, artists and writers, independent performing arts groups and a variety of cultural workers and businesses in support functions – booking agents, managers, light technicians, sound engineers, galleries, private stages etc. This part of the cultural sector is not regularly funded, and has an economy that is based on a combination of selling their cultural product and/or service and ad hoc public support. The division and distinction between these two major parts of the cultural sector seems to have been even more visible and important during the Covid-19 pandemic.

The structure of the article is as follows. The main, upcoming section, is a section with a chronological description of selected events and developments after March 12. This part of the text is concentrating especially on the first three or four weeks, when the most important changes and events took place. This section – the Covid chronicles – is followed by a discussion of how the documented adaptations and changes are interpreted by artists and organizers. How was their immediate reaction and understanding of the situation, and how do the potential disruptive changes look in what is a kind of mid-pandemic hindsight? Finally, the concluding section points to the primary results of the analysis and to the need for further analysis of a development that still is ongoing.

2. The first 100 days

2.1. March: performances go digital overnight

The general lockdown in Norway was introduced on the 12th of March, on the day of the ominous press conference mentioned above. The day after, on Friday the 13th, the first historic measures were implemented. This included a general ban on cultural and sports arrangements, including any kind of live performance and festival. The discussion on the potentially dire consequences for the cultural sector started immediately. One of the first suggestions on how to do something about the situation came through a campaign on social media, called #ingenrefusjon (“no refunds”). The idea was that no organizer of performances should demand a refund from

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5 All Norwegian quotes are translated into English by me.
6 Cf. https://subjekt.no/2020/03/12/foreslar-a-ikke-kreve-pengene-tilbake-fra-kulturarrangorene/ [read 23.09.20]
the artists who had to cancel their shows because of the lockdown. After a day or two, this became the standard practice, also including public actors like Arts Council Norway, different cultural funds, the cultural administration in the counties etc. The campaign was also extended to encourage the audience not to claim a refund on their tickets for cancelled shows. The concept of *dugnad* (“communal work”) was frequently used, a common word to denote a joint, collaborative effort for a common goal.

In the course of these two first days, two separate digital platforms for cultural performances were established: *Brakkesyke2020* (“Cabin Fever 2020”) and *DigitalScenen* (“The Digital Stage”). They were based on the available infrastructure from Facebook, and came to be two of the most widely used digital platforms, especially for concerts. One of the initiators behind Brakkesyke2020 explained their motivation for the platform in an interview from March 13: “This is not an attempt to “solve the problem” with the dramatic situation that a large number of musicians find themselves in. This demands a huge effort, you typically need to be a “state”, not a “dude with a Facebook account and home office” to be able to help.”

The first concert streamed on the platform was a concert with jazz pianist Arthur Kay on the evening of March 12. Between 15 and 20 concerts and performances followed on *Brakkesyke2020* over the next three days. In the meantime, *DigitalScenen* had been established, and streamed around 20 concerts in the first weekend after the lockdown. After two days, *DigitalScenen* had 50,000 members/subscribers, with this number later increasing to over 150,000 members.7

Initially, it soon became very clear that this was new, uncharted territory for the artists, entrepreneurs and audience. A number of the first concerts were examples of pure digital amateurism, even from established artists. Let us look closer at an example: A digital concert from pop artist and singer-songwriter Sondre Lerche, one of the most acclaimed Norwegian artists of his generation. The concert was held on March 18, and the venue was Lerche’s living room. The following are excerpts from our field notes during and after the concert:

*Lerche was sitting, seemingly very relaxed in his own sofa, against a backdrop of a couple of potted plants and a candle, later to be referred to as a scented candle. He addressed the camera directly between the songs, communicating with his virtual audience in a manner that was similar to what you see at an ordinary concert. Every now and then he took the time to look quickly at some of the messages that were sent in the Facebook-feed of the concert, which included comments, song requests and a lot of emojis. Lerche had prepared for the concert through writing down the titles of a number of songs on some sheets of paper. He regularly leafed through the sheets and showed them to the camera. The audience was approximately 3500 people through most of the concert. […] Towards the end of the show, a new technical challenge emerged: How does one end a digital concert in an elegant manner? “Where is the off-button?”, Lerche asked, fumbling with the camera on the living room table. He gave up the search for the button, and stated “Well, let’s do one more, then”, and finished off with a cover – Stardust (in a Willie Nelson-esque version). After the song, the concert was ended by Lerche by turning the lens of the camera down into the table top. The concert was reviewed very positively in Norwegian media, but it was also evident that the reviewers commented upon a performance genre that was unfamiliar to them. The reviewer in *Aftenposten*, one of the largest daily newspapers in Norway, wrote that “Lerche has a special ability to create energy, even when he sits alone and strums in his sofa. […] A highlight is “If Only”, where Lerche is struggling somewhat with the key of the song and changes guitar a couple of times along the way. It is charming and underscores the potential of this loose format.”8

Economically speaking, the first digital concerts after the lockdown were very profitable for some of the artists. A jazz instrumentalist that I interviewed held one of the very first concerts after the establishment of the new digital platforms. He told us that it had been the most economically rewarding concerts he had ever played, without specifying the actual amount. He was not alone. The media reported that other artists had experienced the same: Singer-songwriter Erlend Rogstad told the newspaper *VG* in an interview that he had made 118,132 Norwegian kroner on his first digital concert, which was an all-time high for him.9 Other household artists, like Sigvart Dagsland and Odd Nordstoga, reportedly earned more than half a million kroner on their concerts, an amount which they both donated to charity.

The immediate response and exponential growth of both concerts and audience in the first few days turned out to represent an immediate challenge for the administration of the digital platforms. On the platform *DigitalScenen*, the administrators saw the need for some ground rules for the digital concert arena, three days after the opening:

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This page is dedicated to LIVE performances of scenically related art. … We just want to maintain an arena for artists. Let us keep a positive tone in here. … We will organize and clean up the page in due time, but as many other things this week, everything has hit hard and massive. Please keep comments to a minimum if it is not relevant to a performance.
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The comments to the post from the moderator show what some of the challenges turned out to be: Some people had used the page as a general debate forum on culture and cultural policy, some wanted to post pre-recorded talks on other subjects and some had posted links to pre-recorded songs and performances. Amateur YouTube videos of someone singing a cover song were frequently posted, to the annoyance of other users: “Are we posting YouTube videos now?” one user commented. A short time after the start-up of the digital concert arenas, it became clear that a lot of emerging and/or striving artists saw the new platforms as useful arenas to draw attention to their projects and potential careers. This created heated discussions on who should benefit from the platforms and potential income.

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7 https://nattogdag.no/2020/03/brakkesyke/ [read 23.09.20]  
8 These numbers should be read in relation to the size of the population of Norway, which is 5,4 million people (2020).  
9 https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/jdAqtb/tre-koronakonsenter-onsdag-et-herlig-opplegg [Read 24.09.20]  
10 https://www.vg.no/rampelys/musikk/i/GGA1y9/erlend-roopstad-fikk-inn-118132-paa-nettkonsert [Read 07.10.20]  
11 From the DigitalScenen Facebook page: https://www.facebook.com/groups/615519919290299/permalink/617514549090836 [read 08.10.20]
generated, generally along lines of separating between amateurs and professionals. Amongst the rules established after a few days for DigitalScenen, we find the following, thus illustrating the discussion:

In these times, when everybody has to stay at home, and regarding the freelancers, artists and musicians that depend on an audience for their income, we should all have solidarity for those whose livelihood is arts and culture.\(^\text{12}\)

The boom of digital concerts and performances in this first period also turned out to be a new situation for a digital audience. Looking at the comments and responses to some of the first concerts, there is a combination of emojis, song requests, general positive comments (sometimes in capital letters, like “MY LIFE IS COMPLETE” or “LOVE THIS SONG” or “YESSS”) and messages directly to the artist. Comments from the audience also frequently mentioned the grave situation and the communal power of music to bring people together in challenging times. There was also an evident variation in the kind of audience who were digitally present at the concerts. For some of the more established artists, like the aforementioned Sondre Lerche, there was clearly an international audience present, with comments from countries such as Mexico, Indonesia, Spain and the US, in addition to a Norwegian audience. For other artists with a more local/national fan base, the comments to a performance could take on the character of being humorous cheers and comments to an artist they were very familiar with, and sometimes knew personally. “Play Amanda from Hauksgund, you are sooo good at that”, a member of the digital audience commented in the message feed of the Facebook event. Another interesting element that characterized the audience communication was that the comments were directed at other members of the audience, either in general or to specific people. People would discover friends in the digital audience in the feed, and consequently tag them and write e.g. “Hey, Johnny, are you here?” Others would address the rest of the audience more generally, with comments like “Would anyone like something from the bar”, or, at a rock concert, “Don’t push!”

2.2. April: exceptional becomes normal

Towards the end of March, exceptional was the new norm for the cultural sector. Thousands of digital performances had been streamed, substantial amounts had been donated to performers, and thousands of people had attended digital concerts. The first rescue packages for the sector had been launched by the Ministry of Culture on March 18, to help compensate for the disappearing revenues from ticket sales, etc. Moreover, artists’ organizations had been working extensively to both ensure the livelihood of their members, and to adjust formalities to the new situation. The Norwegian collection society TONO published a detailed guide on the administration of copyrights and registration of digital concerts at the end of March.\(^\text{13}\) In others words, what started out as individual amateur initiatives two weeks earlier, had been gradually professionalized in a fortnight. The number of platforms for digital performances and concerts increased substantially during April. At the end of the month, there were approximately 35 such platforms available, according to an overview,\(^\text{14}\) offering about 400 digital concerts during this month.\(^\text{15}\)

At the same time, there were certain signs that the newsworthiness of digitally streamed performances was decreasing. Several of my informants report a general impression of the interest of the general audience diminishing after the first few weeks. This also had evident consequences for the possibility of making money through streaming performances. One of the organizers of a concert platform made a prediction in the last week of March that the interest and willingness from the audience to donate money would decrease.

Some weeks later, an artist who had streamed a couple of concerts, told us:

There is not necessarily so many watching those [digital] concerts now, because the interest faded rather quickly… Or that the newsworthiness of watching a streamed concert has disappeared, so now you are perhaps left with either playing for your core audience, meaning those that anyhow would like to hear you, either from your living room or from a stage, or the audience that still has not heard their favourite artist.

At the end of March and the beginning of April, there was a development towards more specialized digital platforms, in addition to attempts to establish new business models for digital performances. The largest platform, DigitalScenen, with 138 000 members at the time, established a second platform, DigitalScenen Pro, dedicated to more professional artists and productions. A couple of days later, one of the first purely digital music festivals was held in Bergen, Verftet Online Music Festival. The people behind the festival described their ideas and ambitions for the festival in the following way:

Get ready for Verftet Online Music Festival, Bergen’s largest virtual concert festival, where we can enjoy great music together. We want to turn despair and frustration into innovation and positivity, and invite everyone to a digital festival experience out of the ordinary - right home in your own living room.\(^\text{16}\)

April was also the month for launching new business models for digital content. One such innovation was the production of drive-in concerts and stand up-shows in a parking lot outside Oslo. The first concert was held in front of 200 cars on April 1st. There were tickets sold to both the drive-in event and to a live-streaming of the event. This was a new way of organizing the economy of concerts at the time. Up until this point, all digitally streamed concerts and performances had been available to everyone, with encouragements to

\(^{12}\) https://www.facebook.com/groups/615519919290299/about/ [Read 16.03.20]
\(^{13}\) https://www.tono.no/tono-guiden-for-direktesending-av-musikk-pa-nett/ [Read 22.10.20]
\(^{14}\) https://www.musikkjemekontoret.no/ressurer/oversikt-norske-livestreams [Read 27.10.20]
\(^{15}\) From the number of concerts collected on the webpage karantenekonserter.no [“quarantine concerts”]. The total number is most likely considerably higher.
\(^{16}\) http://www.verftet.no/about/ [Read 22.10.20]
donate to the artists or to charity. A few days after the launching of the drive-in concerts, another new digital/online festival was presented – *Et helt annet sted* (“Somewhere Else”). This festival aimed to create high quality content, available exclusively only to the ones who had bought a ticket or a festival pass. It was also presented with an emphasis on the fact that it was a Norwegian digital platform for concerts. One of the founders of the festival stated that it was important to keep revenue within the country, and not send them to major international players like Facebook. The ambitions for the festival were high: “Our aim is to give people a new kind of festival, never experienced before, and thus take part in the creation of a new chapter in music history.” The concerts were only to be presented live, and not as a recording, in the sense that the performance should only be available while it took place. The idea was to create a kind of exclusivity, a kind of unique experience not possible to replicate and watch again. Nevertheless, several concerts ended up on YouTube. For example, this happened with the first concert of the festival on April 12, by the Norwegian artist Sigrid. The concert represented something rather new, in the sense that it was produced live with a film director and cinematographers. The concert film starts with Sigrid sitting in a dimly lit backstage room, with the first five minutes of the film showing the artist chatting on her phone with what seems to be concertgoers and fans. The concert and production received very positive reviews. One of the reviewers thought it was “unforgettable”, and that it was “the world’s best concert right now”, by “the best artist in Norway”. He ended with a slightly unlikely prediction: “If streaming concerts continue at this sky-high level, I don’t know if we really want to go out to concerts ever again.”

In the latter part of April, it became evident that neither the problems nor the potential solutions were the same for different parts of the culture sector. The use of streaming platforms for performing arts had been much more modest than for the field of music. Within performing arts, there were also differences between the subsidized and non-subsidized/commercial part of the sector. On the one hand, there were active private theatres, doing improv theatre or stand-up on digital platforms, like *Det andre teateret* (“The Other Theatre”) or *Latter* (“Laughter”). The latter theatre also offered to make tailor-made digital humour concepts for businesses and workplaces. On the other hand, the subsidized part of the performing arts sector approached the situation quite differently. The large performing arts institutions, including the National Theatre, The Norwegian National Opera & Ballet and The Norwegian Theatre, chose to temporarily lay off a large proportion of their actors and theatre workers. The national opera alone laid off approximately 600 employees. The layoffs sparked some controversy, as these institutions get between 75 and 90% of their income from state subsidies, and hence should be relatively secure financially.

Another relevant difference that came to light, was a difference in the willingness to use, or optimism regarding digital solutions. The director of The Norwegian Theatre, one of the largest theatres in Norway, wrote the following in the newspaper *Aftenposten*:

> What we [theatres and orchestras] can do without, is a political competition to push activity into a digital format that is foreign to the physical performing arts. There is actually a limit to how many Facebook-shared video clips from home offices we really need.

The viewpoint of the theatre director implied a conscious and rather critical attitude to the digital opportunities for the traditional performing arts. The statement could also be read as a signal that the honeymoon days of digital culture in the first weeks of the pandemic were drawing to a close.

### 2.3. May: loosening up

When May and its darling buds arrived, the lockdown had lasted for six weeks in Norway. It had been six weeks more or less without any purely analogue performances and without actual people sitting or standing in front of an actual stage. It had also been six weeks of digital concerts, shows, plays and festivals. This month turned out to be a month for taking stock of the situation, for some preliminary analysis and predictions and for a slight loosening of restrictions.

In the first part of May, one of the first analyses of the economic consequences for the cultural sector was published (Grünfeld et al., 2020). The report estimated that roughly one third of the revenue had disappeared in March and April. The loss of income was estimated to be most severe in the music sector, where the loss was calculated to be 50%. This number includes revenues from all sources, including streaming revenues and revenues from synchronization, both of which are only modestly affected. In total, the loss of income was estimated to be 1.5 billion NOK during the first six weeks. The numbers were presented with a caution that they indeed were uncertain estimates. The quantification of the impact and the statistical demarcation of the sectors are rather fuzzy, but the numbers given illustrate a general tendency.

There were also attempts to look more systematically at the economic consequences and strategic choices for individual artists. The management behind the pop group No. 4, who held a ticketed only digital concert in the last week of April, offered a fascinating insight in the marketing strategies behind such a concert. In an article on their webpage, ACT Entertainment described “how we sold 1000 tickets” to the concert. They described a conscious social media strategy to maximize ticket sales:

17 https://www.vg.no/rampelys/musikk/i/0nyBlJg/sigrid-og-aurora-fronter-ny-stroemmfestival [Read 27.10.20]
18 https://vier.live/ethelannetsted [Read 27.10.20]
19 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=--14HuXGP9k [Read 27.10.20]
20 https://www.vg.no/rampelys/musikk/i/6jRe5Q/konsertanmeldelse-sigrid-uforglemmelig [Read 27.10.20]
21 https://www.aftenposten.no/meringen/debatt/i/Vb8Ky1/fram-til-no-har-teatra-faktisk-ikkje-vore-dei-som-treng-hjelp-mest-hans-antonsen [Read 27.02.20]
22 https://www.act.as/news/slik-solgte-vi-tusen-billetter-paa-blaa [Read 03.11.20]
A challenge identified by the management, was the “conversion from Facebook-attendee to ticket buyer”. The conversion rate (the percentage of people “attending” a Facebook event who actually bought a ticket) was 68% at the band’s last (analogue) concert, while it was only 13% for the digital concert. Another challenge that was identified was that although the revenue was acceptable for a one night event, the relevant comparison would be to a nation-wide tour.23

On the 7th of May, the regulations for public events were changed, making it possible to produce stage performances once again. The audience limit was set to 50 persons, with a minimum distance of one metre between each individual. The obvious challenge for most performers and artists was that it was difficult to organize an economically viable event with an audience of this size. One of the first artists to make use of this new possibility, was the pop/soul singer-songwriter Jarle Bernhoft, who organized 10 consecutive concerts with 46 tickets available for each show.

In May, the performing arts sector also became more active, both in a digital and in a downscaled analogue format. There had been a number of digitally streamed living room readings, monologues, stand-up acts and improvised performances from the last part of March, but in May more organized, professional and institutional productions appeared. On May 2nd, there was e.g. organized a digital version of the annual Tromsø Performing Arts Festival.24 The revised programme consisted of documentary films, streamed performances and a digital installation, in addition to a “morning rave” with two DJs. The festival also included a panel discussion on the possibilities and challenges of the sudden digitalization of performing arts. The panelists described the situation as being “thrown into the digital ocean, swimming as best as we can”, and stated that the situation “will lead to important rethinking and innovation for the performing arts”. The panel had also made the interesting observation that the situation had created a temporary schism in the performing arts sector. Parts of the sector had almost immediately turned to digital and/or social media with their content, while others had decisively shut down their work with the firm opinion that theatre needs to be analogue and place-specific.25

There were also attempts to adjust or transform plays programmed for the stage to a new digital format. One example of this was a “corona version” of the The Wild Duck (by Henrik Ibsen), digitally re-staged by the theatre Teater Ibsen. The digital version was produced as short videos with the different protagonists of the play, and these videos were presented one by one on Teater Ibsen’s Facebook page. The play was reviewed as the “best digital adaptation of a play in the corona period”.26

In the first and second week of May, some of the established theatres started staging plays again after the temporary loosening of restrictions. And as with the music sector, there was an obvious mismatch between the cost of the performances and the ability to obtain ticket revenues. However, this mismatch also highlighted the differences in the performing arts sector between state-subsidized and private theatres. While most state-subsidized theatres in Norway only get between 10 and 30% of their income from tickets, the ticket share of the total income for private theatres is between 80 and 90% (Hylland & Mangset, 2018). This difference made it possible for the subsidized part of the sector to start staging professional productions for an audience of just 50 people.

2.4. June: lockdown fatigue

The final part of the first 100 days of the pandemic was a period that included more attempts to study the short-term and long-term consequences (e.g. Gran, Kampen Kristensen, Molde, Nylund Hagen & Booth, 2020), a falling number of infections and a much awaited further loosening of restrictions. From June 15th, with 200 people were allowed, and there was an explicit exemption from the rule of social distancing for “professional practitioners in culture and sports”. There was a certain optimism in various sectors, backed by reports that more than half of the employees being laid off in March were back at work at the end of May.27 In the last two weeks of June, there were also signs that the general motivation to take part in the collective effort, the dugnad, to combat the virus, was diminishing, in line with the number of Covid-19 patients. A profiled artist like Bjarne Brøndbo, from the widely popular band DDE, signalled that he and the band would stage concerts against the will of the authorities, as a kind of civil disobedience and “musical demonstrations”. Brøndbo stated to his 14 000 followers on Instagram that “I have used my whole life to get good at my livelihood. Now the authorities have decided that it has no value”.28 The diminishing motivation and general pandemic fatigue led to some cautionary statements from public health officials. One of the senior medical experts from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health warned the public in a Churchill-like manner: “This epidemic is not over here. We are only at the end of the beginning.”29

Digital performances had at this point also come to include the large state-subsidized institutions, such as The Norwegian National

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23 Cf. https://www.ballade.no/bransjen/hele-landet-for-en-hyre/ [Read 03.11.20]
24 https://varscenefest.org/english-program/ [Read 05.11.20]
25 The festival was critically commented upon by a reviewer with the question of whether digital theatre is more or less the same as linear television. Cf. http://www.scenekunst.no/sak/festival-i-egen-stue [Read 06.11.20]
26 Cf. http://www.scenekunst.no/sak/vildanden-pa-hjemmekontoret/ [Read 10.11.20]
27 Aftenposten, June 17, 2020. https://eavis.aftenposten.no/aftenposten/90501/?gatoken=dXNlcl9pZDoxNDYxMzJmZnVzZXJfaWRhdHlwZTJjdXN0b20%3D [Read 10.11.20].
28 Instagram post, June 14, 2020. Quoted from Aftenposten, June 16, 2020. https://www.aftenposten.no/meninger/kommentar/i/4qMXlg/rai-rai-det-gaar-ille-naa-halvor-hegtn [Read 12.11.20]
29 Commentary in Fædrelandsvennen by Preben Avitsland, June 13, 2020.
Ballet. On June 11th, the performance *Nærme* ["Close"], was streamed on the platform Vierlive.no. This was the same platform that was used for the abovementioned concert with Sigrid, and the director of the production was also the same. In other words, the streamed performance was produced as a film, rather than as a filmed performance. This was also recognized by a review of the production. It was referred to as a “high-quality dance film that is separated from other scenic film productions through the fact that the camera is present on stage as an independent actor. This is a rather new mode of work for a traditional ballet company that almost always dance for an audience on one side of the stage.”  

In June, there was also a marked increase in the general critique against the various rescue packages from the government. Different parts of the cultural sector felt that they had been forgotten: managers, stage workers, sound engineers, booking agencies etc. The alleged gap in the measures to compensate for lost income was thoroughly illustrated in an article in the newspaper *Aftenposten*: Where eight different actors/roles usually made an income from a traditional concerts – the concert promoter, artist, musician, sound engineer, light technician, manager, promo agent and booking agent – only one of these, the concert promoter, was included in the current compensations from the Ministry of Culture. This served to illustrate the evident fact that different parts of the field of culture, e.g. in this case, the music sector, includes more actors than the artists and performers (cf. Kleppe, Berge & Hjelmbrekke, 2019).

In the above-mentioned closing session of the Norwegian Parliament on June 19th, Norwegian MPs seemed to agree that the first phase of the pandemic had come to an end: “Norway has passed the test”, as the opposition leader stated. At this point, 100 days had passed since the initial lockdown. However, there were also voices of concern in this last sitting before the parliamentary holiday. Another member of the opposition stated that “it makes an impression to talk to people in the cultural sector left with nothing. I was at my first concert yesterday. That felt very good, but with an audience of a maximum of 200 people and with a distance of one metre, no one should think that the crisis in this sector has passed.”

3. Artists’ perspectives

How do the adaptations and changes from the first 100 days look from the perspective of artists and organizers? And how do they judge the potentially lasting influences of the sudden digital turn? The word *sudden* is certainly operative in this context, both because of the sudden lockdown and because new digital platforms were literally established from one day to the next. The organizers behind the two most popular platforms describe their initiatives in this way:

My idea was basically an idealistic one. This was Friday the 13th, and I thought that there must be some kind of [digital] stage where people can donate money, where different streaming concerts are presented. I didn’t find any such stage and thought, there must be something I can do. [Organizer 1]

It was a rather spontaneous reaction to the shutdown of concerts, motivated by a couple of things: a wish to contribute to the music sector by using social media, to create an outlet for a natural need to play amongst musicians and a wish to experience live performances of music in a dramatic period for the sector. [Organizer 2]

All of the informants had recently either held or organized digital concerts/performances. For most of them, this had been a completely new experience. When asked about the characteristics and experiences with digital performances, their answers varied, partly in accordance with the type of performance they had staged. The artists having held living room-based concerts had different experiences than the ones performing on a stage. This became evident in the question of the potential interaction with the (digital) audience. An artist from a rock band, said that “during the show, the band did not get any sense of an audience.” An artist from classical music answered the following to the question of whether he got a sense of an audience being present: “It was rather a focus on the other musicians and a mutual joy of playing together.” On the other hand, the artists performing solo from their own homes had a different experience with their online audience. They took the time to look at social media comments, reactions and also, occasionally, song requests. When asked about the sense of an audience during the concert, a jazz musician said: “Yes, absolutely! […] I really felt that we were a community during the concert.”

What seems to have been a genuine innovation, or at least to generate a feeling of something new, are the concerts held from the couches and living rooms of well-known and lesser-known artists. This seems to have created a sense of intimacy and collectivity that was appreciated. One of the organizers said: “The concerts I have seen … it became closer, in a sense, they talked about things that everybody could recognize, and people did it from home. It connected and made you feel closer to the artist.” In a similar vein, another organizer, also himself an artist, stressed that the digital concerts should not pretend to be what they were not: “Either you should use the potential of technology to create concert experiences that cannot be produced on a stage, or you should use the intimacy, the possibility to come home to artists, see their rehearsal spaces, join them outdoors and so on.” The points made by these informants echo

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30 *Aftenposten*, June 15, 2020. [Read 11.11.20]
31 *Aftenposten*, June 9, 2020. [Read 11.11.20]
32 Cf. [https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2019-2020/refs-201920-06-19/?all=true](https://www.stortinget.no/no/Saker-og-publikasjoner/Publikasjoner/Referater/Stortinget/2019-2020/refs-201920-06-19/?all=true) [Read 22.12.20]
33 This is in accordance with results from a study by Gran et al. from May 2020 ([Gran et al. 2020](https://www.aftenposten.no/kultur/i/b5Eqgl/anmeldelse-av-naerme-foelsom-dansefilm-fra-nasjonalballetten)). In their survey, over 60% of self-employed musicians reported that they had been working creatively in a manner that was new and unfamiliar to them.
performances were held without any audience at all. One way to measure the interest in the performances is to look at the numbers times, there seemed to have been a certain mismatch between the supply and demand for the digitally streamed performances. Some number of people who click the course of the first 100 days of lockdown. The tendency can be illustrated with some numbers from the collected through Facebook, as the vast majority of these performances were organized as Facebook events. The platform counts the these events was 1066, with a median of 565. In the two first weeks of June, however, the number of events hosted was 12, and the last two weeks of March, the platform hosted more than 90 events. The average number of people clicking Interested or Going on one of the average number of people who went or were interested was 221, the median being 161.

In the old days, there was a kind of filter for good and bad, [...] What we will end up with, is that everybody streams themselves on different platforms constantly, marginalizing the audience, giving the big artists a lot of attention, while everyone else disappears in the multitude of everything else, both bad and good and amateur and professional, in a complete jumble.

The artists interviewed were not alone in their comparison of digital and analogue, to the benefit of the latter. When there was a slight reopening of stages and clubs in May and June, critics seemed to look at analogue performances from a birds-eye perspective, reflecting on the value of place-bound art. In a review of a ballet performance, critic Margrethe Kvalbein wrote in Aftenposten: “It was good to be together again. [...] To me, the experience was first and foremost a reminder of what we have lost in the past months: The joy of experiencing the beauty of movement together.”[34] The same day, music critic Eivind W. Stuen wrote this in a review of a concert: “I am about to see my first physical concert since [March]. It feels good. [...] He [the artist] puts into words the emotions we all feel. That is the redemptive effect live music might have. It is good to have it back.”[35]

4. Lasting changes? discussion and concluding remarks

A challenging question for both cultural practitioners and researchers alike was (and still is, at the time of writing) the question of potential lasting changes in the cultural sector. The question of lasting change pertains to both the basic structure of the field of culture as such and more specifically to the impact of digital adaptation, or, possibly, digital disruption. My ambition in this paper is primarily to say something about the latter. From the perspective of the informants, many of them were rather pessimistic about the future potential of digital performances. Several of the artists, all with recent experience from digital concerts or shows, saw the sudden explosion in online culture as a fad or a mere novelty, destined to pass. This perspective was predominant as early as in late March and April, when most of the interviews were conducted. A pop/rock artist said that “the question is, however, how many watches a whole show, now that the novelty has worn off.” This was mid-April. Two weeks later, another artist said: “It seems to be a fad that has passed after the first weeks.” A classical music performer put it this way: “At first it was fascinating and nice to have concerts and contact online, but after a while I felt that I missed meeting people.” And one of the organizers referred to what he expected to be an upcoming return to the natural habitat of performed music:

It is natural that this part [digital performances] is strengthened during this period, but it is also natural if the frenetic level of activity that we see now will be reduced as live music returns to its natural forums – stages, clubs et cetera.

This prediction turned out to be correct. The level of activity on the digital platforms was significantly reduced after May 2020. At times, there seemed to have been a certain mismatch between the supply and demand for the digitally streamed performances. Some performances were held without any audience at all. One way to measure the interest in the performances is to look at the numbers collected through Facebook, as the vast majority of these performances were organized as Facebook events. The platform counts the number of people who click the Interested and Going buttons attached to the events. Generally speaking, the numbers went down in the course of the first 100 days of lockdown. The tendency can be illustrated with some numbers from the Brakkeske2020 platform. In the last two weeks of March, the platform hosted more than 90 events. The average number of people clicking Interested or Going on one of these events was 1066, with a median of 565. In the two first weeks of June, however, the number of events hosted was 12, and the average number of people who went or were interested was 221, the median being 161.

There are, of course, also other potential explanations to the decreased interest in digital concerts. The general decrease in interest overlaps with a slight loosening of restrictions and a slowly growing offer of analogue alternatives. In addition to this, as schools and universities were gradually opening up in the same period, potential arenas for socializing might also have affected the general interest in digital concerts. However, the subsequent lockdowns after this period did not result in any marked renewed interest in or supply of these concerts. Neither the audience numbers nor the number of available digital performances have increased in these periods.

To return to the topic of lasting change, the question remains whether there are genuinely disruptive qualities in the adaptations and solutions described above. In the original version of the concept, disruption (and disruptive innovation) was used as a term to

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[34] Aftenposten, June 18, 2020.
[35] Aftenposten, June 18, 2020.
describe the processes where small companies were able to challenge and eventually outcompete the existing dominant actors in a market, through the use of innovative technology and/or business models (Christensen et al., 2015). Using this business-orientated understanding of disruption, the digital adaptations during the pandemic do not seem to have developed any business model or technological solutions that might threaten or challenge incumbent players. To put it differently, there is also no sign of new services being offered that could be serious contenders to existing ones, e.g. in the sense that digital concerts could be an actual challenge to the existence of analogue concerts. There are no detectable signs in the development described, no available numbers and very few interpretations from relevant actors that would indicate this kind of disruption.

However, there are exceptions. One of informants, a jazz musician, described a more general and slightly dystopian kind of disruption:

I don’t quite see that we’ll get back to the way things were. [...] Our thing has always been to travel around in Norway and the rest of the world, to meet musicians, meet other cultures, mingle with people, get inspired. I don’t quite see how that could be possible, without the whole world being vaccinated, and with a certificate that says that you might talk to me. I am afraid we’ll never get back to that.

How does a concept like digital disruption describe the 100 days of cultural Covid-19 lockdown? Seemingly, the situation entailed all the necessary components or constitutive elements for digital disruption, as identified e.g. by Skog et al., (2018): 1) A digital innovation, 2) a digital ecosystem where the innovation is implemented, and 3) a value logic that creates and captures the value of the digital innovation. The different combinations of streamed performances, social media platforms and digital tools to donate money to the artists clearly represented a digital innovation, even though none of the various elements of this combination were completely new. This innovation was implemented by organizers – part gatekeepers, part entrepreneurs, part idealists – in the ecosystems of different digital platforms. The innovation was also marked by a value logic typical of these platforms; a click-based value logic in which the numbers of clicks, comments, likes and followers are the primary indicators of value: The basic act of the click generates revenue, indicates popularity, affects pricing strategies, creates hierarchies, etc.

Yet, to describe the digital adaptations during the initial Covid period in Norway as a digital disruption would imply that the roles of key actors, patterns of production, distribution and consumption, financial structures and business models have changed in a lasting way as a result of the digital turn. Nevertheless, this does not seem to be the case. The reasons for this are many. Firstly, the innovations and adaptations were not sparked by a business logic. More or less successful attempts to capitalize on and commercialize digital performances came later. In the first stage, the situation was characterized by ad hoc solutions and a combination of idealism, voluntarism and amateurism. Secondly, the first weeks and months of the cultural lockdown did in no way entail a competition between a New Product™ and an Old Product. The situation was a kind of false competition between digital performances, and a competing product (analogue performances) that for a period was completely removed from the market.

It is probably more correct to say that the pandemic triggered a temporary digital disruption. The digital adaptations were spurred by necessity over-night, and not by changing consumer behaviour or the development of new, more efficient tools of cultural production. One the one hand, the pandemic has highlighted the cultural sector’s potential for rapid changes. On the other hand, however, the pandemic has to an even stronger degree highlighted an inertia, and a stability and a profound desire to return to a normal, less digital situation. Even more than illuminating the innovative and transformative potential of the digital, for many the situation has accentuated the value of the analogue. It has perhaps highlighted more of the cons than the pros of digital performances. Using the quoted distinction between digitization and digitalization by Brennen and Kreiss (2016), we might say that while digitization has been a necessary solution to the pandemic situation, this has seemingly not led to digitalization. In other words: while the examples of digitization – converting analogue information into digital information – are plentiful, they do not imply a lasting restructuring of different domains of social life around digital communication, i.e. digitalization.

One of the most interesting observations made during the study is that the cultural workers have been forced to adapt to the situation, while at the same time having been forced to reflect on the very nature and potential future of their line of work. Fundamental values like collectivity, presence, ambience and the analogue qualities of performances seem to have been rediscovered partly along with and partly as a consequence of digital innovation. The digital emulations and simulations of analogue performances served to remind of the intrinsic qualities of the latter.

Lastly, the pandemic and ad hoc solutions have also highlighted the structural divide between the institutional and non-institutional part of the cultural sector. This divide relates to how risk is very unevenly distributed in this sector. Although it is far too early to say, there might be a potential lasting impact here, in the sense that public cultural policy will come to look differently on how risk is structurally managed by in the cultural sector. Furthermore, another interesting development to follow is how public cultural policy will relate to recurring initiatives to create business models for digital performances. These are topics for research in the years to come.

Declaration of Competing Interest

None.

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