

# Digital technology and the democratization of culture

**Aymeric des Esseintes,**  
*white collar in culture and entertainment*

**Abstract:**

When asked why they do not have more cultural activities, the French mostly mention three obstacles: costs, the lack of time and the distance from cultural facilities. We are thus tempted to see digital technology as a powerful tool for cultural democratization. For one thing, it abolishes distances and makes instantaneously available a nearly infinite variety of works of culture. Nowadays, a huge proportion on the supply side (pieces of music, books, films or virtual visits of exhibitions) can be potentially accessed via a smartphone. For another, digital technology makes culture available at a low cost, sometimes for free — with the risk of instilling in users the illusion of “everything for free” and of blurring the bounds between legal offers and cyberpiracy. What to conclude about the past fifteen years, a period when digital technology came into massive use in our everyday lives and for access to culture? The answer is equivocal and less simple than it seems.

When asked why they do not have more cultural activities, the French mainly mention three hurdles: the cost, lack of time and distance from facilities.<sup>1</sup> This tempts us to see digital technology as a powerful means for democratizing culture. First of all, it abolishes distance and makes instantaneously available a nearly infinite variety of works of culture. Nowadays, a smartphone suffices for access to an overwhelming supply of culture, whether music, books, films or even virtual visits of exhibitions. Secondly, digital technology makes culture available at a low cost and sometimes for free — with the risk of deluding users into thinking that everything is for free and blurring the boundary between legal offers and piracy.<sup>2</sup>

What is the current situation? During the past fifteen years, digital technology has come to be massively used in our everyday lives and as a means of access to culture and entertainment. The situation is less simple than it seems. The answer is not unequivocal.

---

<sup>1</sup> IPSOS study of February 2016 for the Ministry of Culture.

<sup>2</sup> This article has been translated from French by Noal Mellott (Omaha Beach, France). The translation into English has, with the editor's approval, completed a few bibliographical references. All websites have been consulted in July 2019.

## **Digital technology has increased the time spent consuming music or videos, but has not expanded people’s cultural practices beyond their “zone of comfort”.**

During the past fifteen years, the use of digital devices for listening to music and viewing films or series has grown and become widespread. As a consequence, more time is devoted to these two cultural practices.

Nowadays, people are massively listening to music in an electronic format. In 2018, 81% of the French streamed to access audio and video products,<sup>3</sup> mainly via smartphones: 24% of the time spent listening to music was done using smartphones, and 97% of 16-24 year-olds listened to music on their smartphones.

By becoming digital, music has unquestionably gained in accessibility; and the time spent listening to it has increased as the revolution of streaming music and videos has spread. Streaming now accounts for fifteen hours of consumption per week, compared with eight hours in 2011. Furthermore, it increasingly takes place via for-pay streaming platforms (Deezer and Spotify together now have more than five million subscribers in France) and via for-free video platforms (YouTube). Meanwhile, people spend less time listening to the radio, in particular to music radio stations.

We observe the same trend toward streaming in the viewing of films and series. However the time spent watching television and the attendance of movie theaters have withstood this trend rather well. Netflix has more than five million subscribers in France, even though, when it was launched in 2014, pundits were betting that it would fail because of regulations about the media and the requisite proportion of French films.

Even though the time spent watching films or series or listening to music is increasing with the spread of digital devices, this trend does not lead people to explore new cultural frontiers. The musical genres being streamed are those that have been dominant for nearly thirty years now (pop, rock, electro, rap) and now dominate the music scene worldwide. The digital revolution has not affected long-term trends in this industry. It is noteworthy that the dominant genres on streaming platforms are urban and pop music to the detriment of the others. As much can be said about the consumption of films or series, with a growing share of American products (in particular for the series).

Overall, more time spent on smartphones or in front of screens means more time spent listening to music or watching videos but without any change in cultural practices or tastes. On the contrary, the algorithms that make recommendations or playlists have probably led people to consume types of cultural products close to what they habitually consume. This phenomenon, though hard to measure, is real, as each of us has experienced.

Nevertheless, some subscribers are, thanks to the platforms, exploring works of culture in the “long tail”. They would not have necessarily had the idea of consuming these works had access been limited. Unfortunately, this remark cannot be corroborated since no statistics exist about the “long tail” in the total listening time of subscribers to streaming platforms.

---

<sup>3</sup> According to IFPI [Fédération Internationale de l'Industrie Phonographique] (2018) “Panorama de la consommation de musique 2018” (Paris: IFPI), 20p. available via <http://www.snepmusique.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/10/10-2018-IFPI-VF-Consumer-Insight-Report.pdf>.

## **Digital technology has neither altered reading habits nor enlarged the circle of readers.**

Let us start by noting that the time spent reading books has not increased since the digital revolution. The contrary might have happened, since this time tends to contract to the benefit of the time spent on the social networks, video gaming and the viewing of online videos. The proportion of the French who declare that they are readers has grown: up from 85% in 2015 to 88% in 2019.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, the slow erosion of the book market since 2015 lends credit to the idea that the time devoted to reading is contracting, along with the number of books that respondents say they have read.

Of course, the recommendations posted on websites or the social media influence readers as much as, if not more than, the reviews published in magazines and newspapers or the comments made on TV broadcasts devoted to books.

Meanwhile, the circle of regular readers has not grown owing to the various formats of e-books. The percentage of the French who state that they read e-books has held steady at about a quarter of respondents: 24% in 2019 and 2017 compared with 19% in 2015.<sup>4</sup> The proportion of e-books in book sales ranges from 3% to 4% depending on the year. Readers of e-books are younger (40 years old on the average) than readers of paper books (52 years old). They are also more urban and better educated. According to qualitative studies, the persons who read e-books are big readers of paper books too.

Differences are more marked in lower-income households. According to the last survey on this, which dates back to 2008, the number of books read by persons when the head of household is a worker dropped between 1997 and 2008 whereas, in these same households, the percentage of persons who read no books rose from 34% to 42% — as compared with a steady 8% in white-collar families. The statistics released by INSEE in 2012 and 2015 tend in the same direction: differences in reading practices by social origin have not diminished in the past decade.

A combination of factors might explain these results:

- The invention of e-readers has not altered the relation to reading as much as the invention of the streaming has upset the relation to listening to music or viewing films. French households have not widely adopted e-readers. Reading on a tablet or smartphone has made up for this slack.
- The business model in the book market is still based on purchases, whereas business models in the music and video industries have massively shifted toward unlimited subscription services.

---

<sup>4</sup> Centre National du Livre (2019) *Les Français et la lecture*, survey conducted by IPSOS, summary available at [https://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/fichier/p\\_ressource/17602/ressource\\_fichier\\_fr\\_les.frana.ais.et.la.lecture.2019.03.11.ok.pdf](https://www.centrenationaldulivre.fr/fichier/p_ressource/17602/ressource_fichier_fr_les.frana.ais.et.la.lecture.2019.03.11.ok.pdf).

## **Digital technology has not reduced the percentage of people who have not visited a cultural facility during the previous year. This percentage has remained unchanged since the early 1980s.**

As recent surveys by the Ministry of Culture have shown, digital technology has enhanced the visiting of museums in many ways. According to a 2016 survey by CREDOC, 44% of respondents used the Internet in relation to a visit at a museum, monument or historical site — 7 points more than in 2014. They wanted to reserve tickets, obtain information or share their visit on social networks. The profile of those who use the Internet to prepare for, or accompany, a visit closely matches that of persons who already go to museums. According to the head of research at the Direction Générale des Patrimoines, “Current statistics cannot confirm the hypothesis of a broader public thanks to digital technology, even if online uses, without a physical visit, are visible in certain populations.”<sup>5</sup> Besides, only a minority of the French make virtual visits of exhibitions or artworks: 15% according to the CREDOC survey. Visits via the Internet have not, till now, held up to their technical potential for debunkerizing culture in terms of social classes.

The many public and private initiatives should be mentioned that use digital technology to broaden the access to artworks. The most visible is Google Arts and Culture, based in Paris, which allows for virtual visits of hundreds of museums and art galleries worldwide. Two other initiatives, also worthy of mention, have shown that, for the experience of a “virtual visit” to be successful, the visit must not be of lesser quality than an actual visit to a museum. It must offer something else to attract a public that thinks that museums “are not for them”.

- The first initiative (undertaken by Didier Fusillier, president of La Villette in Paris, and backed by the Ministry of Culture) consists of a network of miniature museums (*micro-folies*) for targeting people who have a distant relation to culture. These *micro-folies* present artworks from the big national museums in a digital version along with activities; they are “living spaces” for conviviality and exchanges.<sup>6</sup> The eight that have been set seem to have found their public, but no statistics are yet available about this.
- The second (a private initiative) has introduced digital images and music into a new type of “immersive” exhibitions at two locations in France and several outside the country.<sup>7</sup> Out of the four million visitors per year to the sites managed by Culturespaces, 38% come to see multimedia exhibitions.

Once again, digital technology itself does not democratize culture, but it can be used to invent new forms of cultural brokerage and access to artworks.

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoted in MISSION SOCIÉTÉ NUMÉRIQUE (2017) “Le numérique dynamise la fréquentation des musées, expositions et monuments... sans élargir pour autant leur(s) public(s)”, 13 July available at <https://labo.societenumerique.gouv.fr/2017/07/13/numerique-dynamise-frequentation-musees-expositions-monuments-elargir-autant-leurs-publics/>.

<sup>6</sup> [https://lavillette.com/page/micro-folies-de-la-villette\\_a139/1](https://lavillette.com/page/micro-folies-de-la-villette_a139/1)

<sup>7</sup> Carrière de Lumières (Baux-de-Provence) and Atelier des Lumières (Paris). See <https://www.culturespaces.com/fr/home>.

## **Digital technology reduces the cost of access to culture at the risk of fostering the illusion of “everything for free”.**

The clearest contribution of digital technology to the democratization of culture probably has to do with costs, which is often the first hurdle mentioned in surveys (before sociocultural inhibitions). Digital technology has reduced the costs of producing and distributing many cultural goods, whether books, recorded music or films. Manufacturing and distribution costs are marginal in the digital realm. This has led to a lower unit sales price while preserving royalty payments to authors and publishers. An e-book is, in general, 30% less expensive than a paper book. The same holds for downloading an audiobook; the sales price is about €10/month,<sup>8</sup> whereas a paper book usually costs more than €20. Likewise, an album just released and downloaded from iTunes costs about €10 compared with approximately €15 for a CD.

Above all, digital technology has overturned business models in several fields of culture and spread the standard of unlimited consumption. This holds in particular for music, where the dominant model is the unlimited subscription (for €10/month), and even for films and series via a subscription for video on demand (VOD). Parallel to these for-pay offers, for-free services financed by advertising have forced their way into the market, whether by legal means or piracy. YouTube, the main channel for listening to music among 15-25 year-olds, accounts for more than half the time spent listening to streamed music! And piracy still involves more than ten million people<sup>9</sup> who use “streamripping” (freeware to change a music video into MP3 segments) or stream illegally (or live) films and sports. These new business models have implanted in consumers the idea that an unlimited offer, or even unlimited and for free, is the new standard — with no questions asked about how to pay the authors and businesses.

## **Conclusion**

Digital technology is, for two obvious reasons, an incredible tool for democratizing culture. First of all, it makes immediately available an infinite number of works of culture. Secondly, it reduces the costs but with the risk of creating the dangerous illusion of “everything for free”.

But does this profusion of cultural goods at a low cost suffice to democratize culture? Nothing is less certain, since cultural practices have not changed much. The French who often go to museums or shows still do so, while using the Internet and digital technology to “optimize” or enhance their outings. In contrast, the persons distant from culture still are distant. Tastes in terms of music and films are still limited and have not changed much since the digital revolution. For example, classical music is still reserved for an ageing cultural elite, and the generalization of streamed music for free or for pay has not changed this. On the contrary, the use of algorithms for making recommendations has tended to entrench consumers in their preferences and practices instead of helping them to imagine turning toward different, more demanding genres of music or films. Given the situation of persons who have not received culture as a heritage from their parents, the question of education in the arts and culture is still a full-fledged political issue. This education could take place through digital channels. Using these channels to target this public will probably become a necessity since smartphones have become the major (if not only) means of access to cultural goods and services for young people.<sup>10</sup> But the question remains standing: how to awaken curiosity and accompany young people toward new areas of culture? This question is not to be reduced to the technical issue of the channels used to diffuse culture.

---

<sup>8</sup> The price of Audible, which is dominant in the French market at present.

<sup>9</sup> According to the EY ALPA study of September 2018, 10.6 million in 2017.

<sup>10</sup> The Ministry of Culture is testing Pass Culture, a program for 18 year-olds. It offers digital access to culture and tools for making recommendations that, instead of entrenching users in their current tastes and preferences, lead them to experiment.