Theaters are meeting the digital Rendezvous: Professional practices of French performing arts sector in numerical and web practices

Abstract

The paper presents the context, methodology and conclusions regarding a first diagnostic done in France about the digital revolution, and its appropriation by theaters. This diagnostic is the initial step for future analysis and continuous panel of how theaters, as a performing arts sub-sector, is committed to digital practices, either from the inside part – the establishment with details about equipment, staff training and strategy, and from the outside part – the services offered to attendance. In addition, we tested the relationship with artistic partners as potential relevant indicators of digital commitment. Conclusions are most counterintuitive what represent eager avenues for research on the increase of digitalization in the French theater context.

Keywords
Theater, digitalization, digital commitment, staff training, artistic offers, digital services

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Introduction and objectives

If we direct our attention on the organizational practices of performing arts institutions, often the consensual discourse describes a universe still crossed by digital uses where only exist outdoor advertising and are primarily dedicated toward audiences. However, they are representations of professional practices and not proven facts. To objectify professional transformations in theaters, a diagnostic of the digital scene would be useful.

What about the new ways of working internally? What about new approaches towards the audiences? Can we speak of a proactive marketing adapted to aficionados of digital or is it a technological bandwagon approach imposed by the new uses of spectators? What is the involvement of employees and leaders? What about their personal tastes and skills in terms of using new digital tools?

To offer first elements to answer these questions, this paper presents the content and the implementation methodology for this diagnostic about digital practices and uses in the performing arts sector in France. After a first theoretical part focusing on how digital revolution alters cultural sectors and especially performing arts sub-sector, the problematic focuses on theatre situation with the question of "Do theaters are delayed regarding digital activities and How do they experiment appropriation of digital revolution?". The second part deals with the methodology of the diagnostic done in France among all types of theaters. And, the third part present some results in order to deliver and discuss main messages about the current situation of theaters for this first diagnostic. The conclusion insists on the potential of this diagnostic to be the point of departure for the creation of an observatory of digital appropriation of theaters in France.

1. Theoretical framework: The digital revolution alters cultural sectors and performing arts

1.1. Culture and digitalization: new cultural consumption practices and more artistic opportunities and creations

Like all sectors of activity, culture is facing technical and anthropological revolution generated by the development of digital. If digital revolution trouble traditional procedures and models, it is also a dynamic factor in the development and ownership of culture.

Indeed, cultural practices have undergone profound changes since the generalization of digital tools in households, which is accompanied by a questioning of the hierarchic and horizontal logic of cultural legitimacy.

The proliferation of channels of access to cultural goods and the difficulties to trace their consumption raise economic challenges about the remuneration of authors, but also ethical issues regarding the integrity of the work and the related rights of creators. But the digital enriches henceforth number of art forms, until constitutes a genre in its own right (the digital arts), promoting interdisciplinary and hybridization. Vector new ways of creating and production that emphasize collaborative processes and exchanges devices, digital promotes accessibility to information and knowledge, but also innovative devices of mediation of artworks (virtual tours of objects and digitization of works ...). The arrival of Web 2.0 and the generalization of Social Networking Sites (SNS) promote the interactivity of the public, allowing better appropriation of aesthetic experiences, and sharing.

Finally, simplification and lower costs of techniques have generated new forms of amateurism, opening up new opportunities for cultural practices and answering the renewal expectations about the role of culture in society. If certain cultural sectors were immediately affected by the digital revolution - including music, the creation modes of production but also of distribution were radically exchange, others consider the digital from the issues of mediation and communication with the audience.

Thus, museums were pioneers to make available digital tools to visitors: upstream, to prepare the visit (thanks to the website, for example), on site, to interact with the works and customize the visit (augmented reality, virtual tours, virtual exhibition, social networks, mobile applications ...), and downstream, to complement, refine, relive the visit or share thoughts with other visitors. Numerical

mediations henceforth form an extremely rich field experiment, underpinned by a socio-technical imagination that sees in digital technologies the promise of accelerated democratization and greater scale for the access to cultural goods, encouraging personal expression and challenging the legitimate devices of expertise.

1.2. Theater and digitalization: Contradictions between images of a refractory sub-sector and practices attesting precursory postures

Among the cultural sectors, the theater has regularly been described as being late in terms of ownership of digital, especially in comparison with museums or contemporary music. It is true that performing arts maintain an ontological mistrust towards the digital, from these opposition couples. On one side, the physical presence of actors and the reality of actions *versus* the virtual projected images and the disappearance of human bodies. On the other side, the ephemeral character of theatrical experiences *versus* the memory of digital data that feed the big data.

This distrust based on the very essence of theater is accompanied by an historic rejection of commercialism and consumerism, founded at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from the constitution of the "Theatre of art" and the advent of setting modern stage, which is the origin of aesthetic paradigms of public theater sector in France. This criticism of the commercial theater continues in the rejection of cultural industries, assimilated to leisure and entertainment, whose economic development is henceforth bound to the digital inputs. Thus, the theater boasts a logical artist, historically formed around the autonomy of art - which is based on public policy support to performing arts - and strongly rejects any commercial logic since the latter is associated with the risk of loss of the singularity and of artistic freedom. The ideals of emancipation policy has linked the *spectatorial* practice, inherited from ancient and revolutionary models, still largely share within theater professional community. And they could seem inconsistent with commercial and marketing logics developed by the cultural industries entertainment.

Yet despite these reticence and suspicions, in recent years, theaters operate the contributions of digital tools, as well artistic dimensions that managerial and organizational dimensions. If the experiences of "digital theater" are still rare, many shows give space to digital techniques and / or virtual, opening new reflection trails on the issues of theatricality. As for museums, beyond the making available to henceforth the use of digital tools such as websites or online ticketing, theaters have seized the digital opportunities to enrich audience experience. Besides, some devices are now usual: show teasers posted on Facebook and Twitter to allow theaters to communicate and the audience to react, digitized archives of past seasons agenda, installation of magnetic loops for deaf viewers, surtitles, etc.

Other devices are still experimental: virtual tours of theater, augmented reality devices, overflights by drones during outdoor shows, etc. Artists and spectators seem henceforth attentive to developments of these tools, however the acceptable limit of these experimentations is to keep "intact" the time of the representation. For instance, in some American and Chinese theaters, "tweet seats" are proposed. This allows spectators to tweet during the representation, even if it might disturb the public. Conversely, this kind of digital offer remains strongly rejected by the French cultural community.

1.3. The problematic: Do theaters are delayed regarding digital activities and How do they experiment appropriation of digital revolution?

In view of these contextual elements, it seems important to question the reality of this putative sectoral digital divide. Should we not rather speak of an appropriation of the digital revolution, at least regarding the relationships with audiences?

This ambition appears as a necessary objective for all the sector as expressed by theater professionals and experts of performing art sub-sectors which were interviewed during the restitution of the results.

Therefore, the diagnostic aims to objectively answer this problematic looking both at theater external aspects (i.e. the practices devoted to audiences), and theater internal aspects (i.e. the managerial and organizational practices of institutions toward employees, artists and partners).

1.4. The problematic: Do theaters are delayed regarding digital activities and How do they experiment appropriation of digital revolution?

To reply to this problematic, as figure 1 shows, the conceptual framework integrates the 6 following themes described below:

1) The relationship to audiences

This component aims to assess the type and targets of digital communication. It refers to website, to comprehensive newsletters, to targeted information, but also to all cultural mediation solutions using advanced technological approaches.

2) The relationship to staff

This component aims to assess the changes in job descriptions, types of skills sough, presence of internal managerial practices based on collaborative tools for permanent and intermittent employees, scanning of information available to professionals (turners, agents, journalists and mass media, stage managers, etc.).

3) The relationship to art

Questions relating to this point allow testing the correlation assumption between the choice of digital in artistic proposals programmed and / or supported, and the commitment in the digital as the overall strategy of the institution.

4) The digital commitment as a strategy

This point is to identify if the digital appropriation responds to a logic supported by the collective, or is the result of a sum of desires, attractions and implications in digital that are made by individuals.

6) Induced effects of digital ownership

This latter point intends to address the effects professionals note today as effects of their commitment to digital. It is about both organizational effects through professional practices, the effects in connection with their mission of spreading the culture, through changes in the composition and quantitative changes in their audiences.
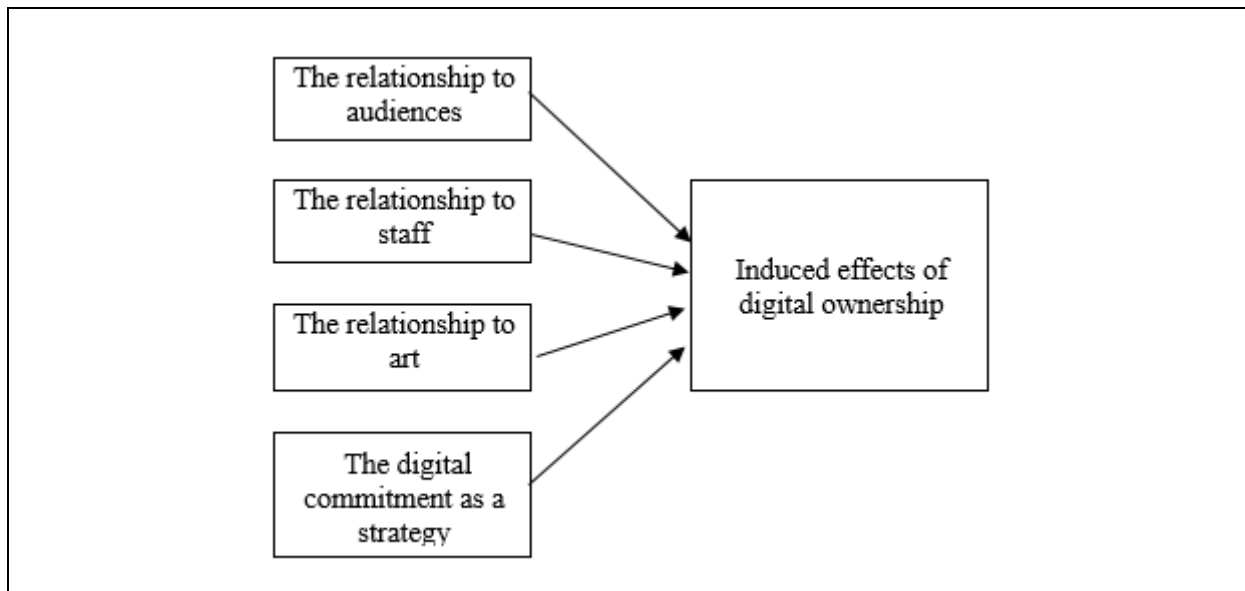

Figure 1. – Conceptual framework

2. Method: A first diagnostic about digitalization of theatres in France

The diagnostic on digital practices in theaters was piloted by TMNlab Association, in a contractualized collaboration with university research labs, and was funded by targeted subsidies from the French Ministry of Culture and Communication.

We design the sample with the National Theater Center (ARTCENA), the Association for the Support of Theaters Privates (ASTP) and the Syndicat National des Scènes Publiques (NPS) with the ambition to be representative of French theater sector. All collaborators provided lists of establishments that was subsequently retreated and updated. The final sample size is 252 institutions that reply to the on line questionnaire. The sample (see table 1) is a mix of the different types of organizations that compound the performing art sector in France.

We created and tested the questionnaire after many iterations between researchers and professionals associated in the project. The questionnaire was composed of closed questions and open-ended questions, and organized according to the five themes identified in the conceptual framework (in section 1.4).

	Return rate	% within the the sample
National Theater	*83%*	2%
Dramatic Center	*66%*	9%
National stage	*77%*	19%
Conventional stage	*60%*	26%
City stage and theater	*45%*	21%
Private theater	*31%*	6%
Other theater	*79%*	5%

Table 1. – The final sample

3. Main results and discussion

31. A cultural sector more in advance than in delay

The results of this first diagnostic of French theaters are affirmative. **The theater sector is already very engaged in the digital revolution**. This fact is noticeable in all its fields of activity, although some activities are less advanced (in particular the artistic sector). So, the premise of a "delay" of theaters digitalization appears unfounded.

On the other hand, results show that some establishments have potentials to improve their practices and uses of numerical tools. Most of these practices to foster and mature refer to marketing and public relational strategy. They include:
- Queries utilizing the potential of ticketing software;
- Use and/or learning of CRM functions;
- More regular updates of the website;
- Development of website versions for smartphones and tablets;
- Tools for systematic and personalized emails and mails;

- Improvement in newsletters contents and targets;
- Proposals of interaction devices with the public;
- Formalization of the cross-communication strategy (on-line posts and contents on all points of contact, off-line with printed information);
- Use of statistical indicators.

32. The need for a subsidized human resource training strategy in digital

It is essential to notice that these observations fluctuate with the deficit in digital training of staff in theater. Training issues, both linked to initial diploma and lifelong training, appear crucial for the future. The development of digital technology and practices within cultural institutions cannot depend only on voluntary commitment of professionals who agree to train themselves during their leisure time and/or because they are passionate to new technologies. Some accompanying arrangements from human resources division should be implemented and supported what suggest public policies to set off such internal strategies within performing art sector, either nonprofit or private.

33. The mediator role of theater status: not a direct explication but a correlate

The assumption of most professionals in France were that the category of theatre would explain directly the way establishments would appropriate or not the digital practices. Our results were not so determinist.
In fact, this hypothesis that a category of theater would be distinguished from others, what would suggest that the commitment in digital would depend on the status of the theater (i.e.: National theater, national scene, granted stage, drama center, City theater), is not verified in a global way.

Finally, at the question: *Does theater status explain digital commitment?*, the reply needs more developments.

Since the results do not allow us to consider a category of establishment as prime innovators for all items measured, we need to detail as follow:
   a) *The status/category of theater is less explicative than size and equipment*
In fact, if the rate of equipment in digital material and the number of positions specifically in connection with computers and digital, what depends on the size of the structure, appear to be quite a good indicator of digital commitment, results are not so clear. The status of the establishment is only relevant considering the size of equipment (number of appliances, computers, hardware and software). Similarly, results show a better formalization of digital practices within important structures (especially for National Theaters).

   b) *The status/category dedicated to creation leads to more digital artistic offers*
When theater have a clear mission to promote creation, more digital artistic offers are proposed. As results shows, regarding artistic offers, National Theaters and dramatic centers have a clear advantage, which corresponds to the fact that these establishments are dedicated to creation.

   c) *The status/category of 'Scène Nationale' (multidisciplinary) demonstrates earlier commitment and offers more digital services*
The 'Scène Nationale' category is the group of theater that were engaged in digital revolution for more than 10 years although the mean for all categories is about 8 years old. In addition, this group are the theaters that propose the most number of digital services offered to their attendance.
These two intertwined observations let us suggest that the values supported when this group of cultural organizations were created are still very alive within these establishment (a heritage of missions to be the new places opened (symbolic accessibility for everybody and democratization purposes). In fact, most of the time, quite each local 'Scène Nationale' is a conversion of what was previously, during the

1960's, the 'Maison des Jeunes et de la Culture" ((Youth and Community centres) institutionalized by André Malraux during his mandate of Ministry of Culture.

This category seems keeping in his and the Multi-purpose ambitions, the commission for dissemination different genres and artwork styles, and consequently, the desire to offer to its diverse audience, pioneering artistic appropriation of the digital issues.

d) *Digital commitment of theater should be investigated through other perspectives*

For numerous questions, the differences between the categories are tenuous or insignificant.
Moreover, some differences show that the category of theater is not a systematic explicative variable.
As an example, the replies about the evaluation of how the theater is active on Digital Social Networks suggest to check for other factors.
In order to explain this or other differences, we suggest mobilizing variables like:
- Management influence and collective norms infra-organizational
- Individual voluntarism (Several employees would be catalyst actors within their departement, teams)
To confirm the relevance of such variables, it would be fruitful to complete this quantitative diagnostic by qualitative research, which would include in situ observations and interviews.

Conclusions: contributions, limitations and future research agenda

General contribution
This diagnostic represents a zero diagnostic of digital penetration in the sub-sector of performing arts in France. Thanks to this survey of a representative sample of public and granted theaters in France, a better understanding of the situation of how digital revolution alters theaters.

Managerial takeaways
The results that will be presented, meet three challenges:
    1) to provide factual elements but also qualitative, allowing professionals to identify interesting experiences to further exchanges about adapting theater to digital issues;
    2) to give the government a better readability of the appropriation of digital by the theater sector, and to guide public policies;
    3) to build the foundations of an observatory about changes in digital practices in the future.

Future and on-progress analyses
The current supplementary analyses focus on:
1. Build scores to characterize institutions: staff training score, internal coordination score, distribution and retailing score, external communication and advertising strategy score, and personalization and targeting marketing score;
2. Construct scores adapted to the performing arts sub-sector: cultural mediation, public interactivity, digital artistic offers, accessibility to disables;
3. Establish a typology of institutions according to their level of commitment in digitalization through using the theoretical framework of the sociology of innovation, the study of early adopters, etc.;
4. Identify the organizational criteria for digital engagement for performing arts institutions in order to assess the impact of the organizational structure (institutional status of theater) and other variables (size, geographic location)

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