



Culture in the digital realm: an explorative survey in the Caribbean

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1. Introduction

1.1 Why this survey?

As the world is going increasingly digital, the cultural sector is changing along with the times. Technology is vital to the cultural sector, from digital archiving to online exhibitions, and from virtual tours to social media marketing. However, not all cultural organisations possess the required means and expertise to find their way around this new digital landscape. That's where Cultuurloket DigitALL and DEN step in. Their goal is to help cultural organisations build their capacity and expertise with respect to digital transformation. This enables them to better serve their audiences, to target new audiences, and to preserve and promote their cultural heritage.

DEN and Cultuurloket DigitALL are dedicated to supporting digital transformation in the Dutch cultural sector. In recent years, a new dynamic aimed at transnational exchange and collaboration has emerged in the cultural sector across the Kingdom of the Netherlands. There is a growing awareness, particularly in the Netherlands, that the history and culture of all parts of the Kingdom are interconnected and interwoven. This dynamic is stimulated and supported by making the public cultural funds accessible to all parts of the Kingdom.

DEN and Cultuurloket DigitALL welcome this development, and have begun to explore the current state of affairs in terms of digitalisation in the cultural sector of Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, Sint Maarten, Sint Eustatius (Statia) and Saba. This has resulted in this overview of wishes and needs.

1.2 Context: policy and practice on the islands

This survey is based on a 'bottom-up' approach, focusing on the needs felt in practice by the cultural sector on the six islands¹. To arrive at useful recommendations, a brief preliminary study was performed into the state of policy and policy making on the islands. The policy environment on the Antillean islands differs strongly from the Netherlands, but also differs per island.

Due to the limited government involvement and organisation with respect to culture, policy making in this field developed relatively recently on all the islands.² In the first decades of the Netherlands Antilles -- consisting of all six islands from 1954 to 1986 -- the financial support for culture as well as the organisation of activities derived to an important extent from the Netherlands. The government first began to engage with culture with the establishment, around 1960, with a 'Bureau Opvoeding en Cultuur' (Agency for Childrearing and Culture), with a main office on Curaçao and a subsidiary office on Aruba. From the late 1960s and 70s on, other

¹ Specifically, these are the Leeward islands of Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao, where Papiamentu or Papiamentu is the main spoken language, and the Windward islands of Saba, St. Eustatius and St. Maarten, where English is the main spoken language. For more information about these islands go to: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/caribische-deel-van-het-koninkrijk/vraag-en-antwoord/waaruit-bestaat-het-koninkrijk-der-nederlanden>

² For an overview: Groenewoud (2021)

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institutions were established such as an archive, a university, an archaeological office, with activities on or for all islands but with its main office on Curaçao. After the political restructuring of the Antillean islands in 1986 and 2010, issues relating to centralisation and decentralisation continued to affect the organisation of culture on the islands.

It would take another few decades for the first policy frameworks to be written, first on the larger islands and after that, in the run-up to the governance changes of 2010, also on the smaller islands. These various policy frameworks each struck their own tone and marked out their own direction. In their actual implementation, the government-funded activities remain limited and largely focused on preserving traditional cultural phenomena such as carnival and harvest festivals. Aruba was the only island after 1986 to make more substantial resources available for a wider-ranging cultural agenda, through the Union di Organisacionnan Cultural Arubano (Unoca).

The 2021 edition of *Boekman 128*, devoted entirely to culture in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, paints an accurate picture of the present-day cultural sector. It is an informative overview that confirms how the cultural sector operates fairly autonomously. The collaboration between cultural institutions and government policy makers and financing bodies remains limited. The most consistent players in the cultural field are privately funded organisations. The success and sustainability of cultural activities often depend on the extent to which culture makers and artists manage to obtain funding. As a result, the work performed by all organisations has more of a project character than that it is focused on continued development.

The Dutch Ministry of the Interior and Kingdom Relations has drawn up a Work Agenda titled 'Strengthening the Digital Society in the Dutch Caribbean', which focuses on digital service provision by the government and, by extension, on the infrastructure and the knowledge and skills of citizens and businesses. It is a collaborative effort with the countries of Aruba, Curaçao and St. Maarten, aimed at achieving progress collectively. Although the cultural sector is not a primary target group for this Work Agenda, the identified improvement points are obviously highly relevant for this sector. The sector can also play a role in increasing knowledge and expertise among the population, particularly through the public libraries.

1.3 Survey principles

To ensure a systematic approach for this survey and that all relevant aspects are included requires a clear framework based on principles. This paragraph describes the main principles. The main questions are formulated first, followed by a description of the research field.

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Main questions

This survey of the digital wishes and needs in the Caribbean focuses on three main questions:

- 1. What are organisations doing with respect to digital technology?**
DEN and Cultuurloket DigitALL wish to understand whether and how the organisation is using its digital presence. Aspects to consider here are the use of social media accounts, a website, and other online manifestations. The answer to this question paints a picture of how institutions are present in the digital world.
- 2. What do organisations wish to improve with a view to (growing) their audience?**
The organisation's online presence can be used for all sorts of purposes, ranging from interaction with the audience to making collections accessible, and everything in-between. What an 'improvement for the audience' means will therefore also vary per organisation. This question aims to determine what the organisation's own wishes are in the digital domain with respect to their audience.
- 3. What would most help the organisation to take the steps needed to realise its ambitions?**
This question seeks to identify the obstacles that the cultural organisation might encounter in realising its ambitions, and aims to help DEN and Cultuurloket DigitALL to better tailor their services to the actual needs.

Cultural organisations and the cultural landscape

In this survey, 'cultural organisations' refers to: theatres, music venues, film theatres, museums, festivals, as well as producers of professional performing arts, cultural promoters, initiators, collectives or makers that are engaged in art, intangible heritage and/or culture. This includes libraries that organise and offer cultural activities. Having a clear overview of the cultural landscape on the islands was essential to performing this survey. In 2021, and at the request of the *Landelijk Kennisinstituut Cultuureducatie en Amateurkunst* (LKCA; national knowledge centre for cultural education and amateur art), lecturer and researcher Gregory Richardson of the [Instituto Pedagógico Arubano](#) compiled the core data regarding the cultural infrastructure in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, particularly with respect to art and heritage, cultural participation and cultural education. Some of this information was used for this survey, specifically the available basic information of the organisations and reports on their most recent activities.³

1.4 Method and accountability

To arrive at a comprehensive overview of the needs and questions with regard to digitalisation in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom, the survey conducted interviews with parties active in the cultural field on Curaçao, Aruba, Bonaire, Sint Eustatius, Sint Maarten and Saba. All respondents were suitably rewarded for their time and effort, and their contributions were processed anonymously.

³ <https://www.lkca.nl/artikel/culturele-infrastructuur-caribisch-deel/> consulted in November 2023.

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The used indication of 'cultural organisation' has a somewhat broader meaning than the definition used in the Netherlands by DEN and Cultuurloket DigitALL. The cultural field on the island is not only shaped by organisations but also by individual makers and people in other roles, who sometimes hold multiple positions as well. For the 'bottom-up' approach used by this survey, an explicitly institutional focus would not have been appropriate. An additional factor is that each island has its own unique cultural identity, cultural customs and traditions. The interviews expressly aimed to take account of this. It also meant that a number of local authorities were asked to contribute their views to this survey, drawing on their helicopter view.

All Dutch Caribbean islands were included in the survey. At least two informers were interviewed on each island. The interviews yielded a coherent picture per island, and all information was subsequently processed in this report as a practically useful text that can serve as a basis for follow-up action. This survey should not be read as a scientifically solid research, but as an exploration. The goal is to form a picture of the issues to be discussed further, and how to go about it.

The survey focuses on the cultural domain, as described above. We are aware that digitalisation projects are also ongoing in related sectors such as archives⁴, libraries⁵ and the archaeology sector⁶. These organisations and projects were not included in this survey. However, the various interfaces between these domains, such as information supply for the cultural sector and the sustainable storage and offering of products and productions by the cultural sector, were discussed. Certainly in small communities, the distinction between these organisations cannot necessarily be drawn very sharply, as this explorative survey also shows.

4 <https://curacao.nu/nationale-archieven-curacao-en-nederland-gaan-samenwerken/> consulted on 1 December 2023.

5 The libraries in the Caribbean area with which the Koninklijke Bibliotheek in The Hague collaborates are: Biblioteca Pública Boneiru, Bonaire; Gertrude Judson Bicentennial Public Library, Sint-Eustatius; De Queen Wilhelmina Library, Saba; Biblioteca Nacional Aruba, Aruba; Biblioteca Nashonal Kòrsou, Curaçao; Philipsburg Jubilee Library, Sint Maarten.

6 <https://curacao.nu/archeologie-van-curacao-centraal-op-internationaal-niveau/>

2. Outline of results

Cultural organisations and creative makers wish to serve their audiences in the best possible way, to reach new audiences, and ultimately to preserve and promote their cultural heritage or creative products. All cultural institutions and creative makers that participated in this survey are involved in the digital domain and apply various strategies to increase their presence, activities, public engagement and access to cultural heritage in digital space.

The discussion of the results in outline follows the three main questions of the survey. Accordingly, we start with an overview of what the cultural organisations and creative makers are currently doing in the digital domain. Next, we discuss what the organisations and makers would like to do. The discussion concludes with the third main question, which is how the organisations and makers can best be helped to take the steps required to achieve their ambitions.

2.1 What are the cultural organisations and creative makers currently doing in the digital domain?

The first main question inventories the presence of cultural organisations and creative makers in the digital domain, as well as their digital activities. The resulting picture is as follows.

Social media, online presence and involvement: many cultural organisations and creative makers make use of social media, particularly Facebook, to create a digital community and to interact with the public. This was also noted by Richardson in his 2021 report for LKCA.⁷ They use these platforms to share information, to make announcements, to promote exhibitions, and to provide (visual) reports. With respect to public involvement, the digital site or platform is viewed as a "digital space of belonging" where interaction takes place, also with the diaspora.

Website and online catalogue: some organisations have a website. Efforts are being made toward digital expansion, but many would like to see this even larger still.

Collaboration and support: cultural organisations in Sint Maarten are supported by initiatives such as NPOwer/Foresee Foundation. This initiative brings together non-profit organisations to share expertise, build capacity, and offer support in areas including financing, fundraising, marketing and governance.

Digitalisation of collections: some organisations on Aruba, Bonaire and Curaçao have digitalised a considerable part of their archive and offer this information online, free of charge. On all islands, the wishes are greater than what is being realised.

⁷ <https://www.lkca.nl/artikel/culturele-infrastructuur-caribisch-deel/> consulted in November 2023. See also paragraph 1.3.

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Creative processes and education: digitalisation is used by makers and cultural organisations to facilitate steps in the creative process, to gather knowledge, and to improve access to the professional art world. Cultural agendas and digital open days for art education programmes are promoted online. The cited examples of online knowledge gathering reveal the lack of an adequate overview of the digital platforms already available. Digital information skills is an attention point for educational programmes.

Diversity in digital strategies: there are considerable differences in the degree of digital advancement between the various cultural organisations. Some have progressed further in digital transformation, while others are just starting out. Social media, contacts with regional networks, and the use of informative apps and QR scans are some of the digital strategies being used.

Finally: cultural organisations are using a variety of digital means and strategies to increase their presence, stimulate involvement, and improve access to cultural heritage. There is also an increasing awareness of the challenges and opportunities offered by digital transformation, and that collaboration and support play a vital role.

2.2 What do cultural organisations and creative makers want to do digitally?

Cultural institutions and creative makers in the Caribbean region are ambitious with respect to digital transformation and cultural development. The survey resulted in the following picture.

Digital presence: an interactive, properly maintained website with diverse and high-quality content and social media channels are essential to a strong digital presence and to making various forms of culture accessible. This also applies to the use of advanced equipment, for instance scanners for unusual materials, and equipment to produce an oral history podcast and to share videos.

Knowledge sharing and training: the wish to expand public reach through digital channels not only requires technological resources but also the training of staff and increasing awareness in organisations. Knowledge can also be shared by means of online courses.

Education and debate: there are wishes to integrate cultural activities within broader societal debates. For instance, there are plans to digitalise basic knowledge for local communities, for students, for a better categorisation of in-house archives, to make educational sources digitally accessible, and to develop a digital debate platform.

Finally: Progressive digitalisation is viewed across the board as an opportunity to improve services, increase awareness, and to get more young people involved. The cultural organisations and creative makers are mainly focused on the various aspects that can improve accessibility, involvement and education.

2.3 What would most help the cultural organisations and makers?

The third main question examines the obstacles that a cultural organisation or creative maker may encounter in the pursuit of their ambitions, and how these can be overcome.

Website: the organisations that have a website generally wish to further expand the possibilities that a website can offer.

Digital skills among an important group: some of the volunteers that are indispensable to the continued existence of the organisation are not so interested in digital initiatives. This enthusiastic and important group of people doesn't see much potential in the digital domain and is less involved in creating appealing content and understanding digital platforms. There is a need for education and workshops to bridge this gap.

Financial obstacles: financial constraints for the non-subsidised organisations are a bottleneck for e.g. the digitalisation of archives and acquisition of professional equipment, including podcast equipment. The same financial constraints impact the quality of education and visual materials and the organisations' daily operational activities.

Cultural organisations and makers could be supported in obtaining the financial means vital to acquiring the necessary equipment and training the staff. Some respondents specifically emphasise the wish to acquire resources for (podcast-related) activities such as research, production and editing.

Digital infrastructure and training: there is a growing need for digital infrastructure and training in cultural organisations and among creative makers, in order to make optimum use of the digital domain. The goal is to digitalise all files, archives and collections, thereby making them more accessible.

Overcoming digital obstacles: Bonaire and other small islands are not always acknowledged by large digital platforms such as Facebook and website providers, which is an obstacle to digital transformation. Furthermore, there are specific problems with playing music on social media, leading to creative but less audience-friendly solutions such as using YouTube just for musical productions, instead of placing everything integrally on Facebook or Instagram. Finally, using online payment systems on the islands is a source of many problems, which strongly hinders the development of e-commerce.

Qualitative needs: cultural organisations and makers need financial support to improve the quality of digitalisation. They require support in implementing digital initiatives and maintaining a consistent online presence.

Cultural organisations wish to make their offer digitally accessible, but are hindered by financial constraints as well as a quest for licences. The lack of financial resources for professionals and for equipment affects the quality of digitalisation. There is also a need for advice on the implementation of digital initiatives and consistent online presence, and for the manpower to achieve these goals. Support in doing research, digitalisation, and collaborating with local experts is essential.

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Specific support needs: additionally, there is a need for advice and training in specific areas such as social media, digitalisation and collaborating with local experts. Establishing an expertise centre for cultural research ('Kennisinstituut voor Cultuuronderzoek') and a digital platform offering sector-specific support could prove very valuable.

Another expressed need is for specific support such as proofreaders, interns to assist fundraising, and professionals to help with website management, as well as a call for a training course offering digital know-how for non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and training in areas including social media and digitalisation, and how this can benefit organisations.

One further specific need is for a digital platform offering cultural sector-specific support, including experts such as curators, restorers, copyright experts, standard contracts, invoicing, VAT rules, DIY lists, and so on, in English and Dutch as well as in Papiamentu.

Finally: The general aim of cultural organisations is to make the rich cultural heritage and culture accessible for diverse target groups through the use of digital means.

3. Analysis of the results

The interviews yielded a lot of information that can help identify the strengths and bottlenecks. To work towards practicable recommendations, this chapter collates the findings from three distinctive perspectives. First, paragraph 3.1 describes the common trends, clustered per geographical area. This overview helps to determine the available support and the experienced urgency in the different geographical areas. Next, paragraph 3.2 explicates a number of very practical and concrete needs and wishes. This overview contributes to identifying where 'quick wins' are to be found. Finally, all that has been identified and described is re-embedded in the concrete context of policy and practice on the islands in paragraph 3.3. This overview helps to determine what can realistically be expected and to connect the insights and experiences to the practical realities on the islands.

3.1 Common trends

Windward and Leeward islands: The interviews with respondents living on the different islands nevertheless reveal a number of common trends. There are, broadly speaking, some clear similarities between the Windward islands of Saba and Sint Eustatius and to a lesser degree Sint Maarten, on the one hand, and between the Leeward islands of Aruba and Curaçao and to a lesser degree Bonaire, on the other. On the Windward islands there are clear wishes relating to digitalisation, such as improving online registration and payment systems, and clear needs with respect to technical support for website maintenance, and making older generations in the organisations aware of the digital opportunities, and an exploration of digital regional collaboration.

On the Leeward islands, a number of steps seem to have been taken in terms of digital transformation, with more digital knowledge, experience and know-how available. This is reflected in their more specific digital wishes which are of another nature, and in the concrete proposals being made.

There is, incidentally, a striking qualitative difference in the digital profile between the tourism sector and the cultural sector. In practice, hotel facilities are often used to stage cultural events, and hotels and some holiday apartments are easy to find online, with well-designed and interactive websites, and bookable with just a few clicks.

Common trends: We can identify five trends that are common to the islands.

First, *regional collaboration* is considered important on both Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, and on Saba, Sint Maarten and Sint Eustatius (Statia), particularly with regard to mutual knowledge sharing between cultural organisations and makers.

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Second, both on Aruba, Curaçao and Bonaire, and on Saba, Sint Maarten and Statia, there is a clear recognition of the *generational gap that more or less mirrors the digital gap*, and an awareness of the need to bridge this gap. Involving younger generations is seen as vital to successfully realising the digital ambitions.

The third common trend concerns *education and awareness*; the need for education and increasing awareness with respect to digital opportunities is felt on all the islands. Cultural organisations and individual makers feel the need to create clarity about the benefits of digitalisation and its actual impact on their activities.

The *need for technical support and financing* is the fourth common trend. Cultural organisations and makers experience limitations in terms of equipment, infrastructure and financial resources in the pursuit of their digital ambitions. For instance, they lack the financial resources to hire professionals, so much is done autonomously or not at all. In all regions, respondents emphasise the lack of public subsidies, so that financial support is crucial to making the desired digital quality push. On nearly all islands, respondents also pleaded for lower thresholds in funding application procedures.

The last notable observation is that *setting up an online shop on the islands is challenging*. Various obstacles ranging from local banks being blacklisted to non-acknowledgement by digital platforms make it a complicated process. These obstacles adversely affect the attempts to build a regional audience.

3.2 Categorisation of the wishes

When we sum up and categorise all the found wishes and needs, then the following practical list emerges, in random order:

Equipment	such as a digital announcement board, high quality scanners, equipment to create oral history podcasts and to make videos accessible, but also technical support and replacement options in case of defective digital equipment.
Manpower	digitally trained professionals for research, production, recording, podcasts, photo and video shoots, but sometimes also manpower for basic tasks.
Support	in testing, maintaining, and keeping interactive, multifaceted websites functioning and up to date, for instance for registrations, and snippets from previous and upcoming performances, also for art education. in building an online audience or database and in reaching specific target groups. in completing fund applications, in the shape of a coordination office where cultural organisations can go to for advice on all sorts of matters.

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Training	<p>in digital skills and cost-free tools and in creating solid, interesting content for digital platforms.</p> <p>in understanding the available platforms to obtain knowledge with respect to history and culture, such as Europeana, Delpher, DBNL, Digital Library of the Caribbean, and Open Archives.</p>
Solutions	<p>for the bottleneck with respect to acknowledging/recognising the islands by major digital platforms such as Facebook, Shopify et cetera, and for bottlenecks in music production</p> <p>improving the accessibility of international payment traffic for small players in the cultural domain, to better support e-commerce on the islands.</p>

3.3 Results in their context

Ad-hoc versus development

Due to the absence of structural government support on all the islands, virtually all organisations and makers are dependent on self-recruited financial support. This recruitment is largely performed on a project basis, and is hence ad-hoc. As a result, staff work from project to project, without the opportunity to pursue a more development-oriented approach. Simply providing funding or temporary support won't solve all the problems.

Impact of the lack of a policy framework

On all the islands, respondents express the wish that fund application procedures could be simplified. This is partly attributable to the lack of a policy framework spanning all the islands. Funds in the Netherlands set high demands in terms of demonstrating aspects such as local support and relevance. On many islands, organisations cannot draw on a more widely supported and/or applicable policy framework. This makes it a lot more challenging to write the application texts and to describe such aspects.

Making information available

The greater digital presence of cultural organisations on social media stimulates a considerable amount of interaction, also with the diaspora. As an inadvertent 'side catch', the cultural organisations in this way also obtain information that it was not aware of before. There is an interest in uploading existing videos, in producing podcasts and digitalising valuable materials. A strong podcast requires research, footage editing and production, and so on. The digitalisation of existing information requires high-quality scanners, sometimes with special features, for instance for unusual dimensions. The entire process of making information available also requires training employees and volunteers, and in some cases hiring specialised professionals.

Making information digitally accessible

The above also applies for making information digitally accessible. In an ideal scenario, all of the files, archives and collections kept by all cultural organisations would be made digitally accessible. Given the real risks posed by storms and hurricanes in the region, this is particularly important for the management and preservation of paper heritage. This also implies a need for sufficient technical capacity, to avoid needing to be overly selective in choosing what to preserve.

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Refreshing websites and expanding public reach

For cultural organisations that run a website, its maintenance, management and adjustment to recent digital developments is a bottleneck. This requires specific know-how and/or (self) training, which people don't get around to. The same applies for ways to expand the website's public reach, for instance through Google Analytics or the most efficient use of free (Facebook) marketing tools, and for questions such as 'how do I create strong and interesting content, at no cost?'

Using digital tools

Cultural organisations and creative makers often have a very clear idea of the purpose for which they wish to use digital tools. Besides for an interactive website: for storing or increasing their own database and (research) material; for reaching a larger audience through targeted advertisements and announcements; for online ticket sales and/or payment for lessons; for a high-quality recording of performances and activities and making these digitally available; for giving oneself a platform as a maker.

Specific disciplines

For the digitalisation of visual arts exhibitions, makers are searching for an optimal approach: platform, manner, how and what, comparing, doing it yourself or instead hiring a specialist. This labour-intensive search pushes the actual digital exhibitions to the background. There is a plan to develop a digital debate platform, as part of digitalising performing arts. In this way, socially engaged performances can be discussed before and after the show, with the goal of stimulating a broader community dialogue. It will also help take the themes beyond the actual performance. The development of a digital debate platform is however hindered by a lack of knowledge, technology and resources.

Funding applications

With regard to submitting funding applications, respondents say that this requires (too) much written input by the applicant. Writing skills have a different role in the multilingual education generally offered on the islands, however. The emphasis on written input creates an unequal playing field. In practice, it creates a threshold for applicants. Furthermore, rejections lack specific and constructive explanations and feedback: what was wrong with the application, what should be done differently, how can the applicant improve the application for the next time, and so on. These questions now remain unanswered.

Other options mentioned to help make funds more accessible: funds could offer a smaller and therefore more readily accessible sum, or a phased form of financing so that the entire project creates less of a threshold, and with each further step the applicant gains more experience in terms of completing the application, calculating a budget, accounting for expenditure, and so on. Another option could be to lower the age limit for applicants so that pupils in school can already start practicing with fund applications. A further option is that funds themselves offer more support in completing funding applications.

4. What next?

In the European part of the Kingdom of the Netherlands, we are fortunately seeing a growing awareness that the history and culture of all parts of the Kingdom have been closely entwined ever since the 17th century. This awareness is for instance reflected in making the public cultural funds available to all parts of the Kingdom. However, the cultural sector in the Caribbean part of the Kingdom operates in a very different policy environment than the European part, which also differs per island. This explorative survey has sought to inventory the wishes and needs of cultural organisations and creative makers on the Caribbean islands. That is why this last chapter first looks at the basis, namely transnational consolidation. After that we consider targeted investments on the islands, to conclude with sustainable work methods for a future-oriented consolidation.

4.1 Transnational consolidation: the basis

Different realities: the islands not only differ in terms of size and population compared to the Netherlands, but also differ amongst themselves. As a result, there are different realities that need to be taken into account. The local government plays a vital role due to its helicopter view and the resultant wisdom regarding cultural organisations, but it is essential to also be aware of the various voices of stakeholders. It is important to rely on local key figures, as they possess valuable insights, networks, knowledge and experience. But also make sure that these key figures are supported materially and financially, given the pressure they are under. Intermediaries, both in the Netherlands with a network in the Caribbean region and on the islands with connections in the cultural field and/or education, can fulfil a crucial role.

Good start: establishing personal contact is a good start to further collaboration. The point is to get to know each other, and to exchange information about your organisation or activity. This can be done online; the aim is to have a direct conversation and to have a face to go with the name. Relevant parties include local public authorities, local key figures and intermediaries. Start by discussing the most effective means and methods of communication. For the current survey, Zoom worked well. Continually facilitate the conversation about digital transformation in order to strengthen the connection and to identify and overcome any thresholds at an early stage. It is important to build a network on the islands, but it is also crucial to offer people on the islands the opportunity to travel to the Netherlands. Reciprocity is very important in the collaboration; the benefits for the local community must be clear.

4.2 Local investment: targeted investments on the islands

Financing: seek funding opportunities that can help obtain the required digital equipment and to train volunteers and staff. This can improve the practical use of digital technologies in cultural organisations. A coordinating office could help boost the efficiency and effectiveness.

Programmatic and realistic: help out the organisations on the islands with aspects concerning for instance funding applications that pose a challenge in the context of the islands, such as the absence of a policy framework and the emphasis on writing skills, and offer substantiated feed-up, feed-back and feed-forward in case of a rejection. Create enough room for the organisations to overcome the ad-hoc character of their work method, for instance by working with a multi-year programme rather than projects.

Build further: digital initiatives have already emerged on the islands and in the region. When taking further steps, it is essential to connect with the existing digital initiatives and wishes. This will help cultural organisations in terms of sharing expertise, capacity building, and overcoming digital challenges.

Many cultural organisations and a number of creative makers already have a solid digital network on platforms such as Facebook. It would certainly be worthwhile informing them about methods to strengthen and expand their digital presence at no cost. Building further also means making (the conversation about) digitalisation an integral part of application procedures, along with the understanding that not everyone in the organisation will see this as a priority.

Collaboration: encourage collaboration between the islands and promote digital inclusion by sharing knowledge and experience. Concentrate on strengthening digital possibilities and overcoming any constraints. Nearly all respondents in this survey expressed a clear message: for any and all follow-up steps, make sure that the steps are taken in collaboration with local people on the islands, including the government and local partners. There is a clear difference in the digital dynamics between Curaçao, Aruba, and the Windward islands. For the latter, the recommendation is to first focus on further training and supervision, followed by collaborative projects between the islands. There is a clear digital vanguard on Curaçao and Aruba that could play an important role for the other islands in the form of knowledge exchange.

4.3 Future-oriented consolidation: sustainable work methods

Coordination: various digitalisation processes are ongoing in related sectors such as the library, archive and government sector. Good coordination will improve efficiency, facilitate collaboration, and ensures continuity. Lobby for the recognition of smaller islands on major digital platforms such as Facebook and website providers. This can contribute to a smoother digital transformation for cultural organisations in these regions.

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Coordinating office: consider the option of establishing a digital platform with sector-specific support in multiple languages, including experts in the field of equipment, manpower, curating, restoration, copyright, and standard procedures. This can serve as a go-to information and support source, and can facilitate demand-driven training courses for NGOs, for instance about the opportunities offered by digital platforms, if desired.

A lot of specialised digital knowledge and expertise is already available on one or more of the islands, see for instance the number of web developers and digital professionals. The latter could play a role in the desired training and support of cultural organisations and makers. Furthermore, various collections are currently being digitalised. The exchange of knowledge about this between makers and cultural organisations appears to be a matter of coordination. Collectie Aruba <https://coleccion.aw>, in which several collections are connected together, could serve as an example. By concentrating on the wishes of cultural organisations and makers, a coordinating office could help meet various and perhaps changing needs, and hence remain relevant.

5. Afterword: the sum of the parts

by Margo Groenewoud

It still feels a bit new and unfamiliar. Organisations based in 'Netherlands by the North Sea' contacting heritage organisations in the Caribbean parts of the Kingdom. And not just once in a while, but -- the way it sometimes feels at least -- all of them, and all at once. Because they want to do more, and do more together. And that is a good thing, obviously. In fact, we often grasp but a fraction of the added value to be found in approaching heritage from the perspective of our shared history. That's what emerged from the research programme *Traveling Caribbean Heritage*⁸, which raised the tips of many shared veils, and critically reviewed what it found. Getting to know and understanding each other in the Kingdom of the Netherlands is not as easy as opening doors, but requires research, openness, asking questions, listening. The initiative by DEN and DigitALL to carry out this survey follows naturally from the renewed interest in the bonds between the cultures in the Kingdom, and from curiosity and openness towards the various communities on the six islands.

While working in the cultural field, I have always looked in two directions: towards the Netherlands, and towards the Caribbean partners. At first, as head of a university library on Curaçao from 2008 to 2017, I mainly looked towards the Netherlands, to explore what we could do together. Things didn't always go smoothly, I sometimes encountered quizzical looks, and was literally asked "what can we do for you" (never the other way around). Or: "But having Royal in our name doesn't mean we deal with the whole Kingdom!" Some wonderful things got done as well, but the interest remained haphazard.

Times have changed, fortunately. Can we start working together systematically, as a cultural field that spans the Kingdom? In my view, this is not the only or even the best pathway to success. The viewpoint of the Antillean islands -- always seeking broader shoulders, given their small scale -- is also turned towards the Caribbean region. Organisations are working with suppliers focused on the Caribbean, with the Digital Library of the Caribbean (dLOC) and many other partners and colleagues, also through UNESCO. These are all partners working in the same Caribbean reality, facing the challenges of being small-scale, and of climate risks, instable governance, financial constraints, and limited internet reach and bandwidth. But also with a strong capacity for transnational thinking and working, across imperial language borders. It is not without reason that Lara Putnam writes in her articles that, for the Caribbean islands, the 'transnational bend' in

8 Oostindie, G. & Van Stipriaan, A. (2021). *Antilliaans erfgoed: 1. Toen en nu & 2. Nu en verder*, Leiden University Press. And: Stipriaan, Alex van, Luc Alofs, and Francio Guadeloupe (2023). *Caribbean Cultural Heritage and the Nation: Aruba, Bonaire, and Curaçao in a Regional Context*. Amsterdam: Leiden University Press, 2023. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/jj.4470335>.

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research perfectly corresponds with the 'digital bend'.⁹ In other words: research, knowledge and insight in the culture of the Caribbean islands has not only been enriched but truly transformed by digitalisation. That is the field that we are operating in.

That Caribbean cultural knowledge is becoming more accessible isn't even the most important thing: it is that knowledge is being democratised. By adding one's own material, voices and perspectives are added to the archive that were not heard previously. In a manner that everyone can use, also when you're teaching a class with internet on your mobile phone, or giving a guided tour. That, also, is when you need to be able to access heritage. It should be possible to build and arrange your own digital library, without complicated procedures and high-grade internet. These basic principles of social justice -- in terms of substance and technologically -- are vital to organisations such as UNESCO and dLOC. Together with these organisations, and the Internet Archives on Aruba, and with important networks such as ACURIL and Carbica, progress has been made. If Dutch organisations join in, then the sum of the parts can be very valuable for all of us. For the cultural sector, which efficiently gains a wider reach; for the audiences near and far; for educational organisations, and of course for those that come after us. With each other, for a shared goal, with each their own role and added value within the whole.

⁹ Lara Putnam, 'The Transnational and the Text-Searchable: Digitized Sources and the Shadows They Cast', *American Historical Review* 121, no. 2 (April 2016): 377-402.

6. Source

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