

festforward

Festival *Futures* Now

July 2030



Issue #52

A fictional look
at future festivals

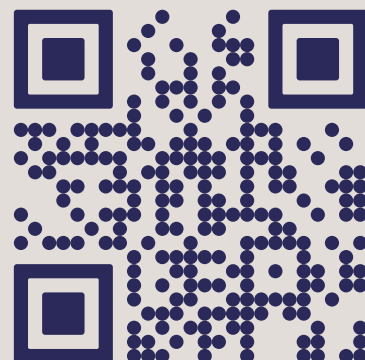
Word of mouth makes a comeback

Is the festivals' recommendation agent, August.io, missing the mark?

Death of the Author?

Inside AI scriptwriting

Meet the Scottish Festivals' Data Custodian



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(Fe\$toons F\$8.50)



Established in 2022, *FestForward* is the leading futures-focused publication for Scotland's festivals sector.

Our mission is to explore trends and innovations at the cutting edge of Scotland's festivals scene through critical independent journalism, showcasing what's happening now and charting new ideas for the sector's possible futures.

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Note from the Editor

Welcome to this year's third edition of *FestForward*, as we look forward to Scotland's summer festivals' first offerings of a new decade.

When we started *FestForward* in 2022, we set out to find stories of innovative work with data and digital technologies that help the festivals and cultural sector chart their futures. In 2030, keeping values of equity and sustainability at the centre of what festivals do is more resonant than ever.

Digital technologies and data-driven approaches have gradually become embedded in the sector. *FestForward* has shone a light on these developments and discussed their roles in supporting creative industries which are equitable, accessible, diverse and sustainable.

Promoting and supporting critical engagement with the tensions of producing and accessing live, online and hybrid festivals for organisations, artists, freelancers and audiences is at the heart of our magazine.

With that in mind, in this issue we explore dynamic pricing models – their challenges and opportunities; perspectives on the new summer festivals recommendation agent August.io; and the creative and cultural tensions of AI scriptwriting.

Plus, we meet Xim Tyrell, the Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative's data custodian, to discuss their role in both preserving existing data about festivals and ensuring ethical approaches to data practice in 2030 and beyond.

Wherever you are joining Scotland's festivals from this summer, the team at *FestForward* wishes you a wonderful festival season!

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Shuttering of 'Facebook Groups' leaves creative communities in the lurch

Once a hive of activity for grassroots creative communities, the imminent closure of Facebook Groups has left many organisations seeking new online spaces which rely less on commercial platforms.

Facebook usage in the UK has declined sharply since 2022, but for some, the site remains a place to connect. The work of helping members migrate to new spaces, in addition to finding a home for an archive of more than a decade of social media activity, could be a huge challenge for organisations with small teams and budgets.

Dr Cath Moore, a community media specialist from the University of the Scottish Borders said:

"While many services now exist to support data migration, internet activists have been encouraging online communities to turn to more decentralised services that allow for greater control and portability of member records and addresses from platform to platform."

New interactive South East Scotland cultural map shows positive impact of long-term cultural funding initiatives

The South East Scotland Cultural Map, founded in 2023, has added a new layer to its interactive map of cultural assets in the region, tracking the impact of the government's '5+ Fund' for culture.

The fund, launched in 2025 as a model for longer-term and non-output driven cultural funding to support dispersal of cultural activity across the region, is shown by the map to be linked to both an increase in the number of cultural spaces, and in year-round activities in and around those spaces.

A government official also credited this wide-reaching cultural activity to long-term investment in the work of local grassroots cultural organisations, who have been "key to ensuring the region's cultural sector reflects the stories of its residents and communities."

To find out more, visit: sescot.culturalmap.org

Community owned venues lead the way in survey of best hybrid venues

A survey of performers' preferred venues for multi-format work, published in May by the Scottish Festivals Research Network, suggests that the wave of recently established, community-owned venues are more likely to offer artists choice and support for hybrid work than traditional venues.

Granton Gasworks Arena, which opened in 2024, came out on top, with artists citing the flexibility and diversity of the space as a key factor for supporting their practice. Even with less high-tech kit, performers said community-owned venues were more flexible and ambitious in how their spaces can be used, resulting in more freedom to produce unique experiences.

Researcher Bene Peachio explained:

"When working on multi-format work, which often combines live and recorded content, performers and audiences are looking for much more than a traditional stage with fixed seating. Our findings show that freedom and support to do whatever works best for that performance is the most important factor for artists in choosing a venue."

Visit sfrn.org/results for full results and findings.

Accessibility Accreditation Framework (AAF) uptake increased in 2029-30

Recent figures show the AAF is gaining more widespread support from event producers and venues. Launched in 2027, the AAF aims to promote consistent approaches to access requirements in all performance venues across the UK. Figures for 2029-30 show a 23% increase in accredited venues across Scotland.

On announcing the results, a spokesperson for the framework – which has actively campaigned for clear approaches to access to be prominent in digital performance spaces as well as physical venues – told us:

"Our ambition is for 95% of Scottish festival venues, whatever their format, to be accredited by 2035."

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Winner of the Scottish Sustainable Innovation Award 2030

The Price Ain't Right!

Time to reflect on dynamic pricing

Photo credit: Ehimetolor Akhere Unuabona, Unsplash



Pictured above: Hamish Shambles, Celtic Clown

A new ticketing platform – *tixie* – has been blamed by several performance venues for poor sales in 2030 so far. Once the darling of startup and innovation awards, the company promised ‘dynamic pricing’ to algorithmically produce ‘fairer’ pricing and new ways to reward customers. Venues including Banter Comedy Club, Filmhoose, and Granton Gasworks Arena hoped that by linking ticket prices to wide-ranging audience data, they could reward customers who supported the cultural sector already, and attract new audiences.

However, it appears many customers are unimpressed by the new scheme, and fear being taken for a fool by the pricing algorithm. Joke-hunter Liz Nethy was frustrated when buying stand-up tickets for a group of friends: *“Me and a couple of mates try and see some comedy once a month or so, but now every time we book, we all need to check the ticket price individually to see who scores the cheapest. I’m all for customer rewards, but it just seems so random.”*

Horror fan Danny Torrance put it like this: *“Whenever I buy a ticket with them, I have to decide which profiles to connect to my account – those linked to my work or private accounts – to find the best deal. I’m sure some people know how to game*

it, but I just want to know the price and book my seat.”

One anonymous venue told our reporter that while they had been able to promote some fantastic one-off prices made available to some customers, the variable pricing could also seem unfair, and make it harder to predict their takings at the box office.

Celtic clown act Hamish Shambles had initially been excited by *tixie* as a way to offer cheap tickets to fans who had supported his crowdfunding, but was left dismayed when he saw that one family who he had flyered on the street that morning were charged more than five times the base price after using the platform.



Connect your data to August.io to create your perfect festival schedule with our clever – and occasionally eccentric – AI

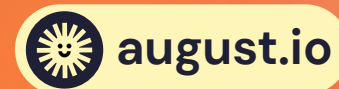
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Advertisement: paid for by August.io



There are now fears that such erratic pricing could undermine the wider sector, even those who don’t use *tixie*, as customers sharing their experiences online have highlighted wild price swings. A spokesperson for *tixie* defended the platform, suggesting it was up to venues, artists and audiences to work together to configure the platform appropriately for their audiences:

“Where we’ve seen isolated incidents of extreme price disparities for a show, this is usually the result of a lack of good data, or unclear strategy about the audiences a venue or artist hopes to attract. We believe tixie offers unique value for venues, artists and audiences and helps them align on core social, cultural and environmental values.”

Industry insider Juliet Mulberry suggested that while dynamic and flexible pricing could work

in theory to help venues address specific issues – such as reducing emissions, or developing key brand partnerships – in practice, simplicity was key.

“Buying a ticket is as much about communication as it is about price. tixie appears to be sending mixed messages to customers, who ultimately may look elsewhere if they feel they’re not receiving a fair, clear and consistent service.”

One venue we spoke to anonymously told us they are moving away from *tixie* to offer other rewards to ticket buyers, such as drink tokens for green transport and discounts for subscribers. With trust in the platform seeming low, other venues and festivals may soon do the same.

By Denis Cherls

Word of mouth makes a comeback as declining demand suggests festivals' algorithm has missed the mark

August.io, the festivals-owned and operated recommendation agent, is struggling to attract audiences, festival insiders say.

The recommendation agent creates a personalised festival itinerary by integrating data from other online sources, including social accounts, online news consumption, attendance at cultural events and even data from supermarket loyalty cards.

Audiences are familiar with this kind of data aggregation from older media platforms such as Netflix and Spotify. But this type of more passive curation for festivals and live events doesn't seem to be taking off.

The platform, and several festivals promoters have pitched the system as a relevant, exciting, and "occasionally eccentric" way of preserving the experience of live discovery at the festivals. It also promises convenience through instant booking, an in-app ticket wallet and calendar notifications, as well as the opportunity to rate favourite events to recommend them to other users.

For the first time – as joint owners and operators of an algorithmic system – the festivals can provide transparency about what data is used for programme recommendations. This way,

festivals say, audiences have more control over data sharing than on other commercial events platforms. The app even includes a link to a comprehensive diagram of the data sources plugged into the system and how these data points are linked together to form each user's itinerary. The hope, as one source close to the programming of August.io told us, is that this will encourage trust in the system, and show that the festivals are serious about making sure recommendations are diverse and representative.

But just because the app is owned and run by the festivals, this doesn't mean that there are no commercial opportunities within the system. Advertising on the platform is allowed within a set of guidelines that festivals say are designed to tackle attempts to game the algorithm to make some events more discoverable than others. Unfortunately, this part of the app seems to be less transparent. There is currently little information available about how those events that pay to advertise on the platform receive more exposure.

Rather than addressing biases, critics have questioned whether the August.io algorithm will instead reinforce and replicate ongoing inequities in festival programmes. While festivals' attempts to tackle issues around equity, diversity, inclusion and access in recent years have been widely acknowledged in the sector, August.io has yet to outline what they will do to address these concerns. Sian Tini, Equitable

Participation Lead at the Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative, said this was a real concern for festival participants and audiences:

"For those participants from backgrounds and populations who were marginalised in the cultural and festivals sector for so long and with more still to do to achieve a more equitable landscape, this system feels like a backdoor for old biases and inequalities that we have worked hard in recent years to address."

"This system feels like a backdoor for old biases and inequalities that we have worked hard in recent years to address."

A spokesperson for consumer watchdog Automated Consumer Watch, also noted broader perceptions of audience profiling and automation that go beyond the cultural sector:

"The general lack of trust in recommendation systems since the Abydos Health Analytics scandal has probably had an impact on uptake. People are more protective of their personal data than ever before and less likely to give it away for an experience they can manage effectively themselves, particularly if they take pleasure in discovering our festival programmes in a more analogue way, such as word of mouth."

Festival audiences online have discussed missing out on making their own choices of what to see. Picking up recommendations through speaking to audiences and performers face-to-face or taking a chance on a wild card event appear to remain popular ways of curating a festival itinerary. As one theatregoer put it, *"Festivals are meant to be places of discovery – you can't just automate eccentricity!"*

Another said: *"How could August.io possibly find my favourite festival events – the ones I love to hate? Seeing something that I don't like is as important as seeing something I do..."*

However, concerns about the app go beyond audience experience. Producers, performers and critics have also questioned the role of reviews in the system, and the impact of in-app ratings on the algorithm. Freelance journalist Helga Sonnet told us:

"the work of a freelance art and culture critic is a creative act. We can't be replaced by a percentage score on an app, and anyway, our jobs are already precarious enough!"

"Festivals are meant to be a place of discovery – You can't just automate eccentricity!"

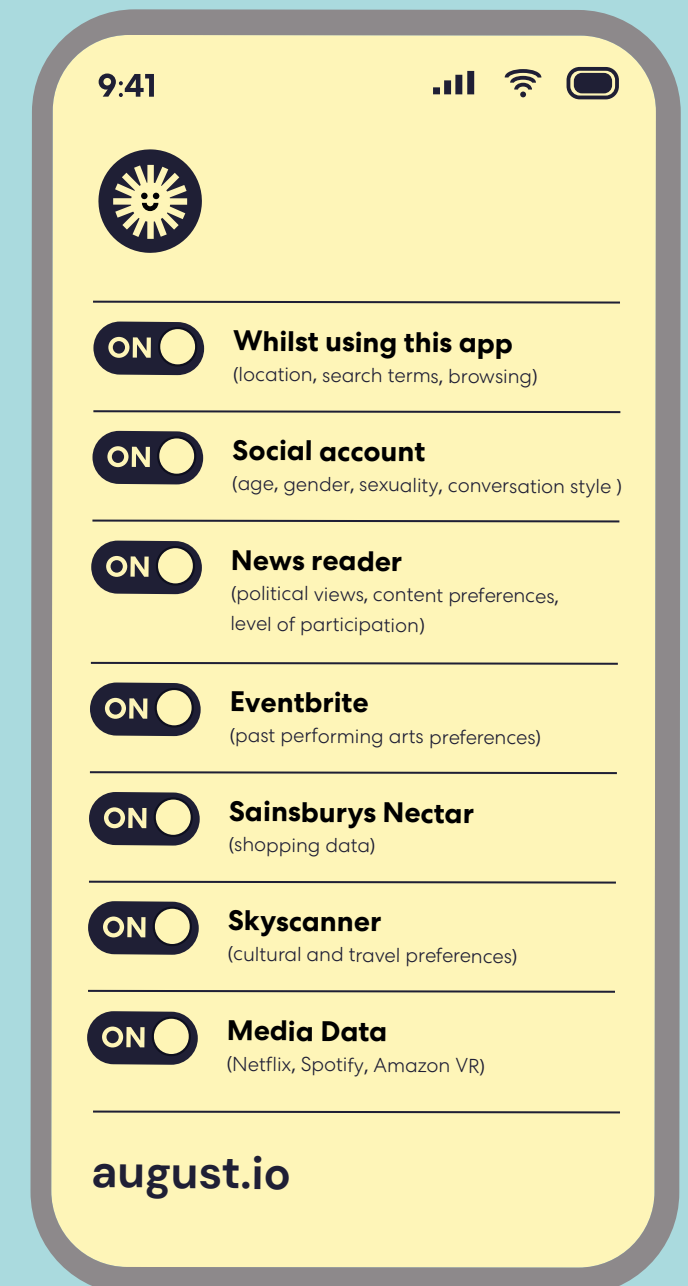
Sian Tini from the Data Cooperative agreed, and added that the cost of a bad recommendation could also be a factor in August.io's low uptake:

"On streaming platforms, a bad recommendation can quickly be switched off, but a £20-30 festival ticket is a much bigger investment of your time and attention. I'm not sure we will ever find an algorithm that can inspire that degree of comfort and trust to decide for us which live shows we see."

August.io is still at the beginning of its journey, and whether uptake increases over this year's summer season remains to be seen. The festivals have been commended in their commitment to moving away from global commercial platforms towards a more bespoke and transparent system.

However, so far, it seems like many of the familiar issues with algorithmic recommendation systems are yet to be resolved.

By Christine Vitesse



Top 10 character names 2030: *compiled by Culture.ai*

1	Morag
2	Dereich
3	Thistle
4	Paolo
5	Dillon
6	Beinn
7	Fatima
8	Gucci-Fendi
9	Greta
10	Peppa



The nominees:

FestForward Reader Award 2030 Nominees

Every summer the *FestForward* Reader Award recognises outstanding contributions to Scottish festivals' equitable and sustainable infrastructure over the past 12 months.

We asked you to nominate someone you felt had made a big contribution to equity and sustainability in the sector. These names – a record number this year – were narrowed down by the *FestForward* team and an external panel to three nominees, who have been put forward to the reader vote.

Voting is open until 5pm on Monday 26 August. You can read more about the nominees and vote now at scotffests2030.org/festforward-awards.

The award will be presented at the 2030 edition of our hybrid *Festival Futures Now* Symposium at Granton Arts Hub, Edinburgh and online on Tuesday 3 September. Grab a free ticket now at scotffests2030.org/festforward-symposium.

Shani Mills

Data Programme Support Officer,
Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative



Shani is nominated for their curation of the Augmenting the Arts digital exhibition (artsaugmented.ar) which used AR engagement to bring festivals' data archives to life. This rich

exhibition showed the amazing diversity of these archives and how preserving and remixing these materials can create brand new ways of thinking about festivals' pasts and futures.

Sullivan Mitchell

Freelance creative practitioner and audience insights specialist

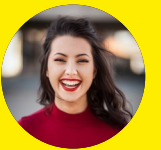


Sullivan has been working across the cultural sector and academia for almost a decade, tirelessly championing research projects – such as with Scotland's

Rural Festival of Place – which encourage open, balanced, supportive and thoughtful collaborations between academia and arts organisations.

Kayan Rodriguez

Accessible AI Officer, City of Edinburgh Cultural Planning



Since 2027, Kayan has led the development of the cre.ai.te creative data skills training programme for young people aged 14–18. First piloted at South Edinburgh Arts Initiative and now delivered in schools,

colleges and arts hubs across South East Scotland, the 8-week course explores skills for working with AI in the creative arts and considers how these can be used to bring about collaboration and connection.



Photo credit: LinkedIn Sales Solutions, Unsplash

Festivals' Data Custodian reveals all

By Becci Pione

Balancing the old and the new – histories and futures of data – is the day job of Xim Tyrell, Data Custodian at the Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative (SFDC). So it feels apt that we are discussing the health of festivals' data archives and practice in what was once a Nightingale Ward at Edinburgh's Old Royal Infirmary. Our interview begins with talking about how their role has changed since the SFDC began in 2024.

“When we first started talking about data it meant balancing two things: trying to capture as much data about audiences as we can to make marketing more efficient, while staying on the right side of data protection laws like the BDP. We met so many arts organisations who were unaware of the valuable data they already had, or were afraid of the obligations of managing it properly. So we needed to start

by building confidence, skills and demonstrating the value of collaboration.”

Before the SFDC existed, there had been limited agreement or consensus on how cultural data across multiple festivals and venues could and should be shared. While organisations sometimes shared box office systems or marketing data, this was often ad-hoc and lacking context. At Culture Summit 2024, key, binding commitments were made by major venues about how data such as cast diversity and algorithmic authorship should be recorded, shared, and publicly archived.

Simply having the role of a Data Custodian – someone independent, sitting outside of any single organisation – has given the sector a trusted forum and centre of expertise to address the challenges of good

data management. And over time, Xim has become more proactive in demonstrating the potential value in cultural data sets, not just for the sector, but for civic life.

“It’s been vital to find ways to show not just those who work in the industry, but the public at large, how data generated and curated from the cultural sector can tell us so much about who we are, and help us become who we want to be.”

However, beyond being a guardian for cultural data, Xim also relishes some of the more adversarial aspects of the role, including most recently in giving evidence to a public inquiry into Accessibility and Exclusion in the Performing Arts.

“For a long time, evidence about many of the key factors that left people excluded from

participating in arts and culture was often ignored. But by engaging SFDC members to more rigorously collect and analyse data about audience participation, and the diversity of the cultural workforce, we could show directly where more needed to be done. I feel a real responsibility to use the data we have to widen the opportunities our sector can provide.”

As more and more cultural services have come to depend on cultural data sets, the need for a highly data literate advocate for equity is even more pressing. In partnership with Scottish academics, apps like *August.io* and *tixie* which depend on cultural data, are being audited to ensure they properly seek consent, and display warnings where there are risks of bias in their outcomes.

“We have to be careful we don’t stifle innovation, or scare people off from using this data

“For a long time, evidence about many of the key factors that left people excluded from participating in arts and culture was often ignored.”

in novel ways, but it’s equally essential that those companies that use this data commercially commit to a set of enforceable standards.”

As data is now more accessible and embedded in public life, it has also been a rich resource for artists and performers seeking to explore cultural histories, and find inspiration for new work.

“We run open clinics once a week specifically to help artists run queries on the festival archives. It’s amazing what people want to know: ‘Who did the first queer Shakespeare? How many shows were there about Brexit? What’s the best time of day for a clown show?’. These might seem trivial, but answering these questions can really inspire people or give them confidence in a creative idea.”

As our time was coming to a close, I asked Xim what kept them up at night. Their response revealed the many

hats and skills required for their role:

“It is, honestly, thrilling to see festivals and venues investing in more roles to generate and manage data better. We’ve really turned a corner in acknowledging the value of data beyond driving a marketing campaign. But when I sit on interview panels for these roles, I’m often concerned that we’re seeing arts graduates, and those with expertise in the sector, lose out to candidates with a pure data science background. We absolutely need both – data science in the arts is its own discipline – not just an application area or domain for computer science. What gives me hope, is that some universities are creating space in their curriculums to let arts students take data science modules, and vice-versa. But we need to keep that balance, and ensure that we’re not just doing festivals by numbers.”

“We’ve really turned a corner in acknowledging the value of data beyond driving a marketing campaign.”

Cultural influencer profile

Meet top cultural influencer, Brodrick Mentz



By Christine Vitesse

Tell us about your first ever cultural experience...

I think it was a Shakespeare thing for kids in Edinburgh, I must have been around 8 years old, so probably 2010. I remember that it was funny, even though I wasn't 100% sure what the actors were saying. But other people's laughter made me laugh and I was swept along by it all.

What's the best thing about your job?

Getting the chance to travel, in real life but also online, and experience things I might not otherwise have found. I really do love sharing great cultural things!

And the worst?

Finding it hard to switch off. Even with all the awareness of burnout we have now, and support from peers and organisations like the Cultural Platform Labourers' Union, it still requires discipline to tune out.

How does a cultural influencer make a living?

Partnerships mainly, with cultural organisations and businesses who want to be associated with them. But there's a balance in choosing who to work with; if, like me, you are lucky enough to have the chance to choose. Some clients will offer high rates, but the partnership might not look great as part of your brand further down the line.

How would your friends describe you in three words?

Tall. Enthusiastic. Easily amused. (Four words, sorry.)



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— Alex Gower
The Penicuik Dance Troupe

THEATRICA win Sustainable Innovation Award for Fe\$toons currency platform

By Gini Songelah



THEATRICA, the team behind the Fe\$toons currency, collected a Scottish Sustainable Innovation award this month in recognition of their steady ascent from a quirky rewards system to a unique part of the festivals landscape.

The team credited a pairing with the Scottish Festivals Data Cooperative and a commitment to grassroots representation on their board as keys to their remarkable success, along with attracting seed funding.

Speaking after the ceremony, transaction designer Tommy Kettles told *FestForward*:

"We always had a vision for what Fe\$toons could do if enough people believed in it. It's a privilege to have won this award, and to be a part of so many amazing creative businesses in the region. The creative sector has always been sustained by various informal economies – we're delighted to be able to recognise and add to that."

Fe\$toons were launched in Edinburgh in 2024 as an alternative, local currency that venues could use to promote and support Edinburgh-based artists and creators. Now, pegged in value to the pound and backed by local authorities and Scotland's major banks, transactions made in the platform currency offer audiences discounted prices, venue perks and digital merchandise, and can be used across multiple venues and festivals. Though there are fees to cash out of the currency, audiences can also earn Fe\$toons by arriving for shows early, sharing and remixing content from the show, and making green travel choices.

For venues and artists, Fe\$toons offers new, more playful ways to engage audiences, but also to follow and understand their cultural preferences. As Fe\$toons are exchanged, the holder can see where they've been spent before, creating unique cultural economic maps – Fe\$toons spent at Ziggy Starman's first solo show have even become collectible!

When initially launched at cult venues in Edinburgh, Fe\$toons were known for their jazzy marketing and neon top-up payment rings. But, as more venues began trading and accepting Fe\$toons, the value of an explicit local, cultural currency came to the fore. The currency gained popularity in particular through funds to support emerging artists from South East Scotland – paid for through round-up fees on each transaction – and interest earned on balances in Pound Sterling. Having grown locally, Fe\$toons soon became part of festival tourists' experience, who saw it as a way to identify and take part in authentic experiences, while investing in the local economy.

The award comes in particular after the successful launch of a loan scheme to cover festival participants' accommodation and marketing costs. Speaking on behalf of the nominating committee, entrepreneur Jamelia Saka-Docherty described the award as *"recognition for years of collaborative innovation, focused on applying new technologies, towards the needs and interests of local audiences, rather than big business."*



The FestForward Panel

Compiled by Denis Cherls

Death of the author?

Useful, or unsettling? Culture and creativity have an uneasy relationship with algorithms, with artificial intelligence often seen as at odds with human creative expression.

But Culture.ai – launched in 2026 and steadily growing in popularity among playwrights, scriptwriters and producers – is out to change that view. The platform aims to offer writers recommendations on how to make their work authentic, relevant, diverse and representative.

Working with data from cultural and lifestyle journalism, trends data, social media platforms and script repositories, the Culture.ai algorithm recommends character names, scene settings and plot twists designed to make scripts more engaging, inclusive and accessible.

This issue's panel debate brings together four people working in the cultural and festivals sector to share their views on the tension between art and creativity, and data-driven systems like Culture.ai, to reflect our world and engage diverse audiences through art.



TERRENCE JENNINGS, 27

Playwright and performer, winner of the 2028 Young Playwright of the Year Award

TJ: Systems like this make me question "who is art for?", and this is tricky. I write from my own ideas, imagination and experiences, so of course these are not going to immediately appeal to all audiences. Maybe that's fine or maybe it's self-indulgent, but I feel like my creativity is mine and I work really hard on it. I do reluctantly see that running my work through something like Culture.ai might give good suggestions to make it more accessible to more audiences, but I still can't help but feel that it dilutes the impact of the work.



ALIZA RASMUSSEN, 43

Freelance theatre and festival producer

AR: I tried Culture.ai with some writers recently and I was sceptical but pleasantly surprised. As someone who produces programmes of work that take place all at the same time, I was intrigued to see whether it would be useful in helping me understand the breadth of the offer and how we could be more inclusive and reach as many people as possible. As much as commercial success is seen as a cop out in terms of creative success, I do think systems like this might be useful in helping us understand how we can be both creative and commercially viable at the same time.



LANI MCINTOSH, 24

Writer, activist and producer of the YouTube channel 'Art not Algorithms'

LM: I can't stress enough how damaging I think these kinds of systems are to human creativity. All these algorithms do is encourage gamification of art and force creativity into systems that are designed to serve the platforms and turn art into 'content' for them. Any other benefits are purely incidental and, as we saw with so many of the older social media platforms that are on the wane now, many of those benefits are outweighed by harms and bias. We're fine with content for content's sake, so let's leave art for art's sake alone!



ARISHA WANG, 56

Freelance cultural data insights analysis


AW: I think a lot of the backlash against systems like this is around the difference we still perceive between art and content, despite all the changes that have come about to platforms and the way we consume culture online in recent years. If we frame a system like Culture.ai as being for marketing and audience development – checking scripts for alignment with audiences and inclusivity, for example – it's easier to see the benefits. I think, in general, we are still way more comfortable with platforms and algorithms in the context of marketing and distribution than we are with ways they might be used to make art.

Classifieds



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Moderator becomes crowd pulling act at DigiLaffs 2030

By Gini Songelah



The role of digital moderators at festivals has grown in recent years, as these events have developed their online and hybrid programmes. Ross Zavala, winner of DigiLaffs 2030's best online comedy newcomer, has turned moderation into a brand-new career.

He started out his performance career as an online volunteer and moderator in 2025, when the Fife Media Festival offered walking tours of the festival site for small groups of online audiences to help them choose their festival programme. As the four-week stint as a volunteer went on, Ross admits he started to get a bit creative with the content, adding some extra jokes and anecdotes, as well as a few extra stops on the way:

"It was just so much fun meeting all these folk from all over the place, making them laugh, and bringing a digital space based on Fife, my favourite place in the world, to life for them."

By the following year, when he returned to the festival for the same volunteer role, word got round among regular audiences that Ross' tours were ones to sign up for. This led to his moderation skills receiving a very unexpected 5-star review in *The Scot*. And in 2027, alongside his now regular gig as a moderator, Ross tried out some small in-person gigs as a stand-up, for a limited Edinburgh run. Ross says:

"I couldn't believe it when a producer approached me to be part of their line-up. At first, I said, 'No way'. I wasn't sure my banter with the online audiences would go down so well in a room full of people. But then I thought, 'Why not? What have I got to lose?'"

This year saw Ross take his comedy back online in his first outing at DigiLaffs – a year-round showcase of the best in online comedy with a growing popular following. Ross performed his new show, *Moderately Successful*, on the online mainchannel for three nights in May. Some of his act has

been inspired by the volunteer role that helped him explore his creative side in the first place, and some of the funniest parts of the show relate stories of stewarding audiences through online and digital experiences, particularly the ones that went wrong.

Speaking at the DigiLaffs newcomer awards, streamed in June, Ross told fans that while he was delighted with his award and was planning to keep going in comedy, he wasn't ready to hang up his virtual FMF lanyard just yet and would be returning to Fife, via the metaverse this autumn, for more stewarding duties.

Ross Zavala's stand-up performance of *Moderately Successful*, recorded on Saturday 18 May is available as a pay-per-view event for £5/Fe\$toons F\$3.50 per device at digilaffs2030.uk/on-demand until Sunday 28 July.

A day in the life of a festival platform worker...



Roosevelt Paige is 27 and has been a freelance platform worker in the arts and festivals for the past five years.



Wake-up...

I usually check my emails and notifications on my work phone as soon as I wake up, just to make sure there's nothing I need to sort first thing. When I first started out, I used my personal smartphone for work to save money, but I was never off it and always worried I'd be working from the wrong account. Now I have a separate phone for work, and it's set to have notifications off between 11pm and 7am, but work social media can be just as addictive as my personal profiles, so I don't always stick to that!



Morning...

I schedule most of my content posts a few days, or at least the night before, so morning is my time to update content and campaign planners; share and link to any relevant content from other accounts; and, if I'm working in a team, maybe meet with other platformers to catch up and brainstorm ideas.

If there's something going wrong in online comms, I'll be responding to that and trying to take the conversation off public channels, to be dealt with privately by permanent employees of whoever I'm working for. Sometimes this can take a lot of time and cause a lot of stress when you're trying to stick to a tone of voice or brand while helping people resolve problems.



Lunchtime...

Lunch doesn't always feel like a break. I often drop into a stream about current algorithmic trends or viral content types while I go for a quick walk. If I'm physically close to where I'm working, I might grab a few photos, videos and soundscapes to use later on. I also use this time to update my personal social accounts – this is important for increasing rates of pay from the union and building a brand towards the next job. Sometimes I only work on a job for a few weeks so I'm always thinking about what's next.



Afternoon...

Every couple of days I set aside time in the afternoon to look at all the platform insights and work out how we're doing with engagement and sales. I've noticed over the past few years that data wrangling and analysis skills are becoming much more sought after in freelancers, although the arts organisations I work with are starting to have their own in-house analysts to look after their data too. Otherwise, I spend the afternoon creating and scheduling content and tailoring it for each platform, although I sometimes use tools that automate this process – the _crop_circle has a good one – to speed this up if I'm short of time.



Evening...

I often end up working into the evening... I'll fill in my union timesheet most days. At least the union has given us the chance to be transparent about how platforming can take over your life and try to improve rates of pay, although it can make you more competitive with others. Finally, if I've got the energy, I might update my profiles on freelancer platforms to make sure I'm as ready as I can be to attract new clients or respond to offers of future work.

The FestForward view...

...on the Cultural Platform Labourers Union strike



Support for workers' rights is needed, but the systems being used expose the continued inequities of platform work in the cultural sector.

The Cultural Platform Labourers Union (CPLU) has announced two periods of strike action – 30–31 July and 5–7 August 2030. The strike has the potential to have a big impact on the operations of Scotland's summer festivals, from marketing and box offices to digital platform moderation. The action was announced in June in reaction to the news that several cultural organisations and festivals were moving away from regulated platform labour towards less experienced, and cheaper, in-house assistants and short-term roles. This has been widely perceived as an explicit cost-cutting move and one which undervalues both union members and other cultural workers, and increases the precarity of these roles.

But there is protest within the union too. The CPLU timesheet algorithm – which now uses personal platform profiles to inform rates of pay – has complicated its relationship with fair work and prompted internal divisions and complaints. If platform labourers' personal work in building their own influencer-type brand online is explicitly linked to their professional lives and value by their union, can they ever really be promoting fairness and equity?

The CPLU was formed in 2025, and in the early days the key benefit of membership was access to a timesheet plug-in, which encouraged gig and platform freelance workers to log their additional working hours beyond the expectations of a standard 7–8 hour working day. The aim was to show cultural organisations employing freelance or short-term platform labour at busy times of year the true cost of that work, and to highlight its value to the organisation in order to improve working conditions and secure better rates of pay.

Like other areas of gig work, the early 2020s saw an

increased awareness of the precarity of platform-mediated labour. Collective action by unions across several services – food delivery, transport, and the cultural sector – was instrumental in securing access to living wage minimum rates of pay and other benefits.

Part of this success for cultural sector workers was linked to the CPLU timesheet as a tool for transparency, showing the huge workloads and scale of unpaid labour happening across multiple platforms. As the timesheet, and CPLU membership, grew, more features were incorporated. The algorithm that allowed workers to plug in their personal platform metrics – followers, reach and conversions for any brand partnerships – to help determine their rate of pay was added in 2028.

“Even with the best of intentions, this personalised aspect of the timesheet is encouraging competition between workers.”

As those protesting within the union say, even with the best of intentions, this personalised aspect of the timesheet is encouraging competition between workers. As a result, it is marginalising and penalising platform labourers who don't have the time or resource to increase their rates through personal branding, and feeding the 24/7 culture of platform labour that it is part of the union's role to tackle.

So, here at *FestForward*, we support the strike and encourage serious negotiations to take place; but also, and just as importantly, we support those within the union calling for reform to the systems and tools that help it work with its members best interests at its heart.

By Jonas Victor

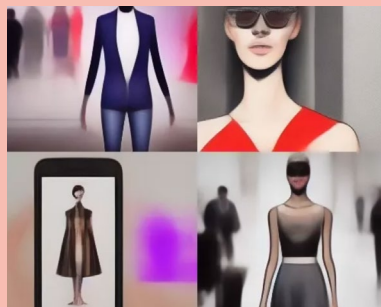
Our top hybrid experiences for summer 2030

By Denis Chertis

Hybrid events continue to evolve and grow in popularity. Festivals in Scotland and around the world have been experimenting and pushing the boundaries of what's possible in merging digital and online experiences with physical spaces to create shared connections and community.

Festivals have become simultaneously local and global – connected to a place and space but also available year-round to a developing audience based anywhere in the world.

This year, the range of hybrid events in Scotland's festival programmes is bigger than ever. Here are our top picks from across the summer's festivals.



Costume Dr-AR-ma

Exquisite Corpse meets London Fashion Week meets Cluedo! In this interactive AR fashion mystery, it's time to find out who is dressed to kill!

Thursdays, Fridays and Saturdays 6pm and 8pm, 8-10, 15-17, 22-24 August (1.5 hours)

In place

What is a place in a world of hybridity and the metaverse? Five artists in towns and cities from Scotland, Paraguay, Japan, New Zealand and Morocco create a synchronous performance with perceptions of place at its heart.

Sunday 25 August, 10pm (BST) (1 hour)

Heartbeats

A miraculous display of mind-body synchronisation. Dancers share heart monitors, and create beautiful patterns from their collective bio-signals.

Friday 9–Wednesday 14 August, 8pm (1.5 hours)

Back to the Future in concert

Join Orchestra of Scotland from Edinburgh's Holyrood Park, performing the score from the 1985 film alongside international musicians beamed into the venue in real time using the latest in synchronous sound technology.

Saturday 3 August, 7pm (2.5 hours)

Mary King's Ghosts

Live, every night at the witching hour. Turns out they were right – 6G can summon a VR ghost. Will you leave your phone on all night?

Friday 2 August–Sunday 1 September, 11pm, every day except Mondays (1 hour+)

Hybrid hat tricks

A magic workshop for kids aged 8-12 that you can take part in at home or in Edinburgh's Centre for Circus Skills. Tickets include props which can be posted to you or collected at the venue.

Monday 12–Friday 16 August, 11am and 2pm (1 hour)

Sitting Room Slam Grand Final

Performance poets from around the world who have made it through their national heats will compete – in any language thanks to auto-translate technologies – for the much coveted Living Room Lyricist award. Votes from audiences and a panel of poets in Edinburgh's Centre for Literature will be combined to pick a winner.

Friday 30 August, 6.30pm (BST) (2 hours)

Contemporary Art in the Metaverse

Join Edinburgh Festival of Contemporary Art's Metaverse Architect, Sage Allan, for a tour of EFCA's first permanent metaverse collection, curated in partnership with Scotland's National Gallery of Contemporary Art.

Sunday 11 August and Sunday 18 August, 2pm (1 hour)

For live dynamic ticket prices, see tixie.com

Teenage Alien Dance Diaries? Which mad random generator came up with this?

Call me old-fashioned, but when I received an automated e-flyer for the 'Teenage Alien Dance Diaries' I really had to question where our once-great festivals are headed. I'm all for seeing something quirky now and again, but since all these new apps and streaming services came along, it just feels like all we have is remake after remake, garnished with whatever the bots think is in fashion at the time. Last year it was non-stop werewolves, now it's all aliens. What on earth next? Russian dolls? Shakespearean Elves? Bowie save us.

Libby Henderson, Bonnyrigg



Letters

Purple Pineapple seeks an Edgy Buzzcut

Dear 'edgybuzzcut(?)' I had such a wonderful time chatting to you in the online (chat)bar before the *ImprovDatingBot* show, but never caught your private handles before the show started. I was the cute guy with the purple pineapple avatar and a passion for Kate Bush. Will you run up a hill with me soon?

purple_pineapple, Dunfermline, 3D artist

A Day in the Life of... an Online Community Gardener (April 2030 Issue)

Thank you for your wonderful piece on Millie the Online Community Gardener. It's high time people recognised the countless volunteers like this who make online spaces pleasant places to connect over cultural experiences.

Nico Sorbonne, Newington, Content Manager

Wishing on a Ticket Collection

Am I the only one who misses picking up and collecting physical tickets for a show? Although not everyone keeps scrapbooks of their tickets, they can be such rich mementos of past festival experiences. I've got tickets that transport me right back to my early 20s, jumping from show to show, chasing the next Kevin Bridges. I know you can collect NFT tickets now, and it's nice to connect with other collectors, but somehow it's just not quite the same. Bring back the physical box office!

Humza Capaldi, Livingston, Paramedic

Let's talk about the real digital futures you want to see!

FestForward is a fictional, local, cultural magazine, written in 2022, to stimulate conversation about equitable and sustainable digital futures in the festival and cultural sectors in Edinburgh and South East Scotland. The stories you've just read were all developed through interviews, conversations and workshops with individuals and organisations working in the the region's cultural sector in 2022.

We believe telling stories about possible futures – the good, the bad and the ugly – can help us work together in the present to discover and develop more equitable approaches to the application of digital and data-driven technologies.

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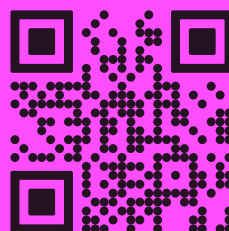
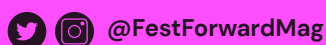


Get in touch

Have you enjoyed reading this edition of *FestForward*? Let us know what you think, and tell us about the digital cultural futures YOU want to see.

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