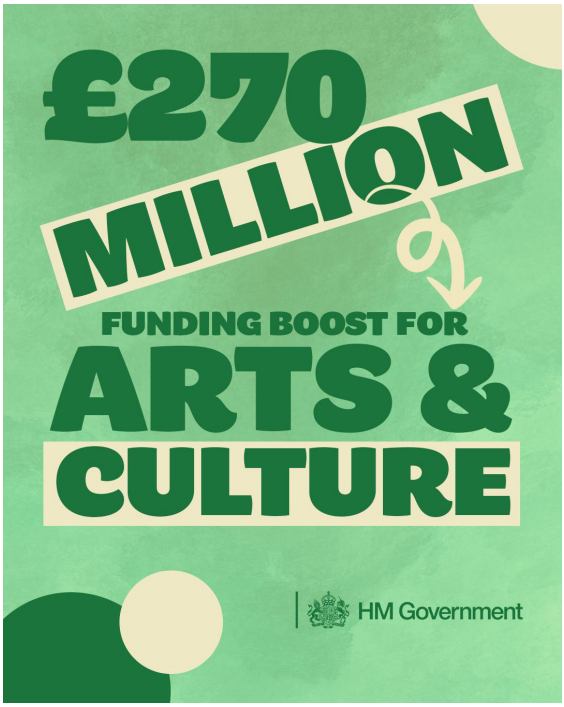
A Culture of Silence

Sophie Layton

Last month, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport announced a £270 million funding boost for museums, arts venues and other cultural provisions, known as the 'Arts Everywhere Fund'. Coinciding with the 60th anniversary of the first Parliamentary white paper for the arts, this funding boost was well-received by many in the industry, with practitioners praising the increased provision for a struggling sector.

And yet, no one knows it happened. A significant boost to the culture and arts industries, industries that contribute so significantly to the British economy and are enjoyed by millions every year, passed almost unheard. And why? Because the news cycle had been taken over. The war in Ukraine and, crucially, Donald Trump's role in it had commandeered the news of the day, leaving Culture Secretary Lisa Nandy discussing ceasefires and armaments instead of culture and arts.

On the surface, this may seem obvious; why wouldn't the news cycle switch from discussing one of the government's smaller departments to the latest in international affairs? I would be inclined to agree. But with an increasing numbers of people 'switching off' from the news cycle, or even experiencing 'news anxiety' with the everchanging and fluid nature of international developments, why does the media obsess with hiding positive stories in exchange for ones which have such a negative impact on their audiences, particularly when no tangible progress is expected within the show's runtime?



As with several other forms of anxiety, one of the key reasons for this stems from a fear of an unknown threat. Consider a fear of the dark; is someone really scared of the darkness, or are they more scared about what could be hiding within it? In a world which is shifting at a rapid pace, and one with such significant perceived threats, many feel drawn to the news cycle as a form of reassurance, with the unconscious goal of knowing more about a situation to avoid this fear.

This is all well and good but consider when the last time was that you heard, read or saw in-depth media coverage of anything to

do with the cultural industries, that truly focused on the cultural aspect. Your mind may turn to artefacts being stolen from the British Museum in 2024, but this isn't coverage about culture. Whenever anyone discusses the theatrical industry post-Covid, it's always about what they contribute to the economy, rather than their intrinsic soft-power and cultural benefits. But why? We all know how much culture plays an important role in our day-to-day lives, and how much we enjoy a good news story on the odd occasion that we see them!



I believe, however, that this is exactly the problem, and exactly the reason why culture is so underreported in almost any media discourse. Whilst many cultural industries are significantly under threat, they are surviving. London's West End, for one, bounced back largely well after the pandemic, yet still not fully. But in such an unstable world, media priorities always reach to the largest and most significant crisis; the NHS struggling with its latest winter crisis; the international community forced to rally to stave off a Russian victory; millions being deprived of benefit payments. These are all immediate crises, ones that are manifesting live and directly affect the wellbeing of millions.

Whilst this is also true for our museums, theatres and art galleries, the stakes, on the surface, are significantly lower. There will always be people venturing to see the latest musical, head to the library to pick up a book, or watch the blockbuster film of the year. On paper, this makes our cultural sector a low priority, and as such, less worthy of precious column inches or screentime.

Media communications are fantastic at informing the populace of some of the latest developments in extreme depth, often far beyond what we would ever hope for. And yet other subjects, from culture to the sciences, arts and transport are forgotten. This balance is unlikely to ever be shifted. Humans have a tendency to fixate on the negative and disregard the positive, meaning more negative and concerning stories can always be relied on to gain more notoriety than their moderate or positive counterparts. So what can be done?

Simply, it's down to you. The onus is on each of us to seek out and consume the content we want to see about our cultural industries; we can only shift the priorities of the producers if we as consumers alter our own behaviours first. Culture is ignored because it is perceived to have less of a demanding audience than subjects of defence, health or home affairs. To reverse this trend, we must learn to switch away from the mainstream, and embrace seeking the stories we want, rather than relying on their deliverance directly.