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Live Performance in the Age of Technological Mediatisation

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ABSTRACT

Based on research into the work of live performers in the UK during and after the COVID-19 pandemic and utilising Walter Benjamin's (1969) concept of authentic, or 'auratic' art, this article examines the use of livestreaming platforms by these performers during this time. In doing so, it reveals how, despite structural inequalities, this technology offered performers not only the chance to continue working but also to broaden ideas about what constitutes the auratic qualities of live performance. Specifically, as interactive livestreaming technology expanded the performative space of 'live', it also enhanced the scope for intersubjective participation amongst a wider audience. As a consequence, it provided a means for performers to sustain their livelihoods and explore new ways for their work to remain meaningful and immediate, thereby raising questions about the role of ontology as a yardstick to evaluate the nature of 'live' entertainment and the work that produces it.

1 | Introduction

Technology has long fulfilled peoples' desire to express and entertain both themselves and others through art. Even art forms that appear to rely on the temporal and spatial presence of the human body—such as verse, song, or dramatic posture—quickly became dependent on the affordances of technology (Norman 1988; Salomon 1993). Moreover, like technology, art is itself sociomaterial (Orlikowski 2010). While a product of human agency, it manifests in sounds, sights, or smells, all brought to life through techniques that both reveal and create (Heidegger 1982). As such, it is nigh on impossible to understand art without engaging those technologies integral to both its production and ontology.

In the work of Walter Benjamin (1970), both these issues gained particular prominence as he explored technology's impact on the reproducibility of art. While acknowledging that art has always been reproducible, he considered industrialisation's

capacity to mass produce identical copies of artistic artefacts as necessitating a reevaluation of not only technology's relationship to art but also what constitutes genuine or, as he termed it, 'authentic' art. While Benjamin never fully reconciled the challenges this raised for aesthetics or politics, the advent of digital communication technology, particularly the internet and associated platforms and devices, has added further complexity to this problem, something highlighted during the COVID-19 pandemic. During this period, the closure of entertainment venues and the enforcement of lockdowns and social distancing compelled freelance performance artists who make a living through their work in the live entertainment industries to forsake the immediacy and authenticity of producing live, in-person entertainment (Arditi 2021).

Instead, many such performers turned to the technologically mediated landscape of "livestreaming" to survive, challenging the conditions of authenticity and aura associated with their art (Hancock et al. 2021). This shift entailed both a change in

(Live Performance and Mediatisation)

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prevailing working practices, including the ‘time-space’ rhythms observed in other areas of work (Thulin and Vilhelmson 2022), as well as a transformation in the ontology of live entertainment. Moreover, it redefined the relationship between performance traditions and the role of the audience as a copresent element of live entertainment, marking a unique and immediate moment in time and space. This article examines the motivations for and the consequences of adopting livestreaming technology on freelance performers’ ability to attribute an auratic quality to their work during COVID-19. It also questions why some performers were able to address the challenges of recreating the authentic qualities of live performance through spatially distancing technology (Giddens 1990) more effectively than others.

In doing so, it enhances our understanding of the relationship between technology, the production of art, and the socio-material and structural factors that influence it. This includes recognising the importance of work and technology in establishing online copresence and proximity, as has been previously examined in contexts such as social networking (Lampinen et al. 2009), computer-mediated education (Bulu 2012), and, more recently, as a medium capable of re-humanising management and employee relationships (Taskin et al. 2024). It also illustrates how, despite structural inequalities, livestreaming technology affords performers not only the opportunity to perform but also to expand conceptions of what constitutes auratic live performance. For as such technology widens the performative space and its intersubjective possibilities, it offers performers a way to sustain their livelihoods and explore new avenues for their work to remain meaningful and immediate, raising questions about the role of ontology as a benchmark against which to evaluate the quality of ‘live’ entertainment and the work that produces it.

The article is structured as follows. The opening section examines live performance as a distinct art form, emphasising the notion that its authenticity, or auratic quality, stems from its spatial and temporal immediacy, as well as the intersubjectivity or copresence it entails. It then investigates the impact of COVID-19 and how the prohibitions on social gatherings resulting from it affected the delivery of live entertainment, particularly the shift to livestreaming embraced by numerous freelance performers in the UK and beyond. The subsequent section considers the socioeconomic characteristics of such work in the UK, alongside the circumstances during the pandemic that compelled performers to explore new ways of earning a living while also maintaining their artistic identity. Following this, it outlines the methodology employed for data collection and analysis.

The penultimate section presents the data, highlighting four emergent themes: the motivations behind these performers’ adoption of this technology, the technological affordances and structural challenges it presented, the manner in which it established a new regime of spatial and, at times, temporal distancing, and finally, how these performers, in light of this, attempted to preserve a sense of aura associated with their work, as well as the technology’s impact on this. The final discussion examines the extent to which the use of livestreaming technology was partially successful in retaining the aura of such performances. It emphasises the importance of a

performer’s ability to maintain and foster relationships of intersubjective experience and copresence at a unique point in space-time, even if it is distanced from the immediacy of the production or the point of reception.

1.1 | Live Performance

There is some dispute over what constitutes live performance. As Auslander (2008) observes, the established view tends towards defining it by its ‘direct and unmediated’ nature, meaning that live performance is a unique occurrence in time and space that engenders a ‘sense of personal contact’ (Auslander 2008: 107). For Bauman (2004: 9), however, live performance is defined not just by personal proximity but also by the collaborative participation of an audience. Additionally, it is also understood to be characterised by the ability, as Phelan (2003: 295) argues, for a ‘mutual transformation’ to occur during such participation. Furthermore, in a manner akin to Benjamin’s acknowledgement that throughout much of history, a work of art has always been reproducible (Benjamin 1970: 220), live performance has itself often been understood as something technological. For as Auslander (2008) continues to argue, live performance constitutes a form of *techné* or craft activity that communicates not only the ideas and feelings associated with the performance but also the appropriate ways of recognising it for what it is and how it should be responded to.

Undoubtedly, live performance has long been intertwined with technology in various forms. From the amphitheatres and stages of the ancient and medieval worlds—‘a plank and two boards’ (Phelan 2003: 295)—to limelight and then the electric lamps and microphones of modern times, technology not only facilitates the work of live performance but also co-constitutes it. More recently, electronically synthesised music has enabled musicians to perform in ways that create the illusion of multiple instruments accompanying them, while samplers, sequencers, and the advent of visual technologies such as holograms, avatars, and other VR and AR systems are once again reshaping the live performance experience.

Given that this article is primarily about the livestreaming of events and performances through what is predominantly an audio-visual medium, also of relevance here is the fact that throughout their relatively short histories, both radio and television have broadcast live performances, initially out of necessity and, more recently, as an artistic and operational choice.¹ However, while the nature of live television has generated analysis and controversy (cf. Bourdon 2000), there is an important if not always clear-cut distinction between these forms of mediation and the current context. This is due to the fact that such televised performances, while often designed to be broadcast live into the home, are, more often than not, performed in front of a spatially present crowd. From music concerts to talk shows and even sitcoms, not only do these go out ‘live on air’ to remote viewers and listeners, but they also rely on the reactions and feedback from a live audience to generate a sense of immediacy and, arguably, authenticity.

This authenticity and, as such, aura of live entertainment hinges, therefore, on the moments of intersubjectivity it generates. The physical proximity to an event and, from the performer’s

perspective, the audience, creates unique and emergent conditions of possibility. This experience of presence, of being there as an event unfolds, is characterised, as Wurtzler (1992: 89) describes, by the ‘spatial copresence and temporal simultaneity of audience and event’. It fosters a dialectical relationship between performers and the audience as well as between audience members themselves, highlighting the importance of shared presence and the significance of socially and psychologically copresent relationships for the perceived authenticity of a live performance (Licoppe 2004; Bulu 2012).

This multidimensional quality of live performance—whereby the performers and audiences mutually validate the experience of not only ‘being with’ others but equally ‘among’ and ‘of them’—is, therefore, integral to its immediacy and uniqueness. It generates an identity between the audience and the event in question while grounding the performer’s energy and regulating timing (Jackson 2020), all issues we shall return to shortly.

1.2 | Live and the Rise of COVID-19

In contrast to earlier media forms such as live TV, the freelance performers whose activities we explore here are rarely stars of stage and screen, however. Rather, they are the footsoldiers of live entertainment: freelance musicians, comedians, actors, and dancers who will usually perform in any venue that pays. From theatres to wedding receptions, pubs and the streets themselves, they transition from acting established theatrical works to performing at children’s parties, singing original material to a dedicated audience, to providing a familiar set of songs at corporate events. While, as Umney and Kretsos (2015) have noted, some gigs can be less inspiring than others, what all share, to a greater or lesser extent, is a sense of mutual presence and spatial proximity with their audiences. Additionally, what they all have in common is that COVID-19 disrupted their activities in a manner unmatched in both speed and impact. And while the pandemic’s consequences for work and employment more broadly, along with the pivotal role of technology in reshaping work during this time, has been acknowledged (Hodder 2020), the closure of venues and restrictions on public gatherings had a particularly devastating effect on this creative workforce, especially live performers.

As their livelihoods vanished almost overnight, they often found themselves with little in the way of financial resources to draw on (Equity 2021) as the chronic precarity and low pay already associated with their work left them excessively vulnerable. Moreover, the impact of the pandemic extended beyond financial hardship. Performing live offers, at its best, an atmospheric immediacy (Böhme 1993) in which an almost visceral response of recognition (Honneth 1996) can provide performers with a psychological anchor and sense of self-identity, a loss that for many was as greatly felt as the financial one (Hancock and Tyler 2024).

Nonetheless, the rapid emergence of an online ecology of live performances and audiences during the pandemic attested to the adaptability of many performers to this new environment. Initially slowly, and then increasingly swiftly, online platforms such as *Facebook*, *Mixcloud*, and *Twitch* became homes to a

diverse array of artists. Consequently, live entertainment entered a new phase of geographical and, in some instances, even temporal distanciation, challenging assumptions about the nature of presence and proximity.

1.3 | Auratic Art and the Mediatization of Performing Arts

In seeking to understand the significance of such presence and proximity, the article references Walter Benjamin (1970) concept of authentic, or auratic, art and how this technology may restrict or, indeed, enhance its realisation. Specifically, it acknowledges the relevance of Benjamin’s observation that art is largely defined by ‘its presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be’ (1970: 222), a quality that technology increasingly undermines by its ability to replace ‘a plurality of copies for a unique existence’ (Benjamin 1970, 223). As a consequence of such reproduction technology, works of art lose their unique positioning in time and place, permitting infinite accessibility and diminishing the unique character of encountering an original piece.

Benjamin’s observations encompass not only fine art but also the performing arts, particularly the rise of cinema as a significant rival to live theatre. In the case of stage actors, for instance, the essence of their art is intimately connected to their presence on stage and the distinctiveness of each performance. However, for Benjamin, the technology of the camera undermines this, as actors perform not for an audience but for the camera itself, which allows the final performance to be constructed layer upon layer and preserved as a singular, unchanging entity. This fact implies that every audience, while experiencing the same work of cinematic art, loses the proximity and spontaneity of the live performance during which the actor is able to ‘adjust to the audience during the performance’ (Benjamin 1970: 230). Furthermore, as Benjamin (1970: 231) also observes, this fundamentally alters a performer’s relationship with their work and the object of their efforts, namely the audience, such that:

The film actor feels as if he [sic] is in exile—exiled not only from stage but also from himself. With a vague sense of discomfort he feels inexplicable emptiness: his body loses its corporeality, it evaporates, and it is deprived of reality, life, voice, and the noises caused by his moving about ...

In this article, we aim to understand the elements of these live performers’ experiences in similar terms, where what one might perceive as the auratic qualities of their art are closely intertwined with the values and ideals of live entertainment. These qualities emerge from the spontaneity, particularity, and vitality of the proximity and shared presence that are considered definitive of live events, alongside the unique moments of intersubjectivity that are essential for attracting audiences. Before exploring these issues and the relevant data, however, the next section offers a deeper insight into the nature and composition of this workforce and its working environment. Specifically, it examines the aforementioned challenges posed by the precarity associated with

freelance performance work in the UK, as well as the opportunities and recognition it can provide.

1.4 | Live Performers and Live Performance Work

Being a freelance live performer is a precarious way to make a living (Umney and Kretsos 2015; Butler and Stoyanova Russell 2018; Comunian and England 2020). Characterised by insecure work, low pay, and limited access to workplace benefits and protections, live performance is often, somewhat cynically, described as a labour of love. Additionally, despite numerous policy interventions that have recognised and highlighted the economic value of this workforce, such precarity has been exacerbated in the UK by a drive to strengthen market forces in the sector, resulting in a reduction in long-term investment and a growing reliance on insecure contractual arrangements (McRobbie 2004; Chafe and Kaida 2020).

Performers have also faced the ‘double whammy’ of Brexit and the COVID-19 pandemic (Kolb and Haitzinger 2023: 41). Certainly, in the case of Brexit, the negative speculation surrounding the impact Brexit would have on the UK’s creative and cultural sector (Sirez 2017; Arts Council England 2017) has largely born fruit, particularly the detrimental impact it has had on performers’ ability to work across the EU. However, it was COVID-19 that, in the short to medium term at least, did the most damage. The most immediate impact was its direct financial consequences, with studies of freelance live performers revealing that over 90% lost all their income from performance work during lockdown and beyond (Hancock and Tyler 2021). This situation was worsened by the fact that state support aimed at assisting the UK’s self-employed workforce often excluded them, largely because the eligibility criteria for the relevant schemes were primarily based on company profit and sequential tax returns over several years (Komorowski and Lewis 2020), both of which failed to recognise that many freelancers were ‘ineligible due to issues such as zero hours contracts, minimum earning requirements, work history, multiple income sources, and being agency workers’ (Bradbury et al. 2021: 5).

Nonetheless, for some, the pandemic also presented opportunities for a new relationship between their work and an emerging technology. By harnessing online platforms (Elkins and Fry 2022; Hancock et al. 2021), mainly through laptops, tablets, and mobile phones, many performers began to experiment with and manage their performance styles, skills, and expectations, in line with the demands and affordances of livestreaming their work. As the pandemic progressed, this became a means through which many performers could engage, retain, and, in some instances, grow audiences while generating income that could replace or supplement other sources (Arditi 2021). It also offered a way for performers to maintain or even enhance their sense of identity as artists, achieving the recognition and validation that their work with live audiences normally provided.

For others who lacked the necessary technological and/or financial infrastructure, however, performing online brought new or additional challenges. Indeed, for those from less financially secure backgrounds, with caring or parenting responsibilities, or

whose life circumstances precluded livestreaming from home, these challenges often led to total exclusion from this new virtual workspace (Hancock and Tyler 2024). At the same time, even performers who were able to take advantage of livestreaming found that, amongst other challenges, it often undermined their sense of legitimacy as credible artists, leaving them feeling vulnerable to rejection or a lack of recognition due to either an inability to convey their art satisfactorily when mediated through such technology or simply because of the lack of a viable or interested online audience base.

In the remainder of this article, after outlining the methodological foundations of the research, we examine these and other issues through the data we collected and analysed. In particular, we explore the opportunities and challenges this technology afforded performers in terms of their capacity to sustain a sense of value and identity as live performers creating authentic, or auratic art, as well as the often-additional structural obstacles that frequently impeded their ability to do so.

2 | Methods

The research into the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the work of freelance live performers in the UK took place between October 2020 and February 2022. Comprising a mixed quantitative and qualitative Qualtrics-administered survey ($n = 221$) and a series of semi-structured, in-depth interviews ($n = 26$), the qualitative data generated circa 68,000 words in total. This provided a snapshot of the daily experiences and challenges faced by these performers as their livelihoods and, in many cases, their source of identity crumbled around them. It further addressed our objective of understanding how our respondents experienced the technological mediatisation of their work through online performing and why some freelance performers appeared better equipped to tackle the challenges of recreating the authentic qualities of live performance than others.

The survey was distributed by inviting specified freelance (or self-employed) live performers to take part via snowball sampling and recruitment through social media networks, including a dedicated social media account, to counter the geographical concentration that might result from snowballing. For the purpose of this study, ‘performers’ were broadly defined as individuals who act, sing, deliver, play in, or otherwise perform a literary, dramatic or musical work. Participants were recruited for interviews through similar channels, but most were typically invited via an inclusion in the survey. Interviewees were then selected based on geographical, demographic reach, and artistic discipline, as well as their (self-defined) career stage.

In selecting interviewees, the aim was to achieve the largest number of interviews and the greatest breadth of experience within the available timeframe. The objective was not to work with a traditional ‘sample’ as such but to ensure that a wide range of perspectives, shaped by various work and personal circumstances, were reflected in the interview data. All those interviewed identified themselves as freelance live performers, with the majority capable of performing across several disciplines while identifying a ‘primary’ area of expertise, such as singer, actor, magician, and storyteller (see Appendix A). As

noted previously, this resulted in a portfolio of diverse performance styles and experiences.

At the time, few, if any, of these performers were hugely prominent in the public eye. Rather, to paraphrase Perrenoud and Bataille (2017: 1), they were 'ordinary' performers being 'neither rich nor famous'. Most had performed in a range of venues and settings catering to different types of audiences. For actors, for example, this could range from Shakespeare to Santa Claus or, for musicians, from solo concerts at dedicated venues to wedding receptions and bar mitzvahs. However, none that we spoke to ever felt they provided mere background entertainment; rather, they believed themselves to be, for the most part, the focus of an audience's attention when performing. The interviews focused on the challenges and opportunities performers experienced during lockdown, as well as their future expectations for themselves and the sector.

As the interviews progressed, they began to focus on the personal, financial, artistic, and technological challenges and opportunities. All interviews were conducted remotely, recorded and professionally transcribed. Participants were invited to comment on emergent findings to ensure that the data collection and analysis were integrated and interactive. Furthermore, the research involved regularly viewing a variety of online performances across different disciplines throughout the research period. NVivo was utilised to assist in data management and support the analytical process, but all interviews were manually coded. Institutionally approved ethical protocols were applied to the research design and data management, including the right to withdraw and the anonymisation of, and the application of pseudonyms to all survey respondents and interviewees.

Upon completion of the interviews, the entire spectrum of qualitative data was analysed thematically using the three-stage process of data reduction, display, and conclusion drawing established by Miles and Huberman (1994). This began with data familiarisation, resulting in the creation of first-order codes. Subsequently, these codes were organised and represented as second-order themes, highlighting various experiences and perspectives within each theme and linking insights across themes to derive conclusions about performers' experiences. Ultimately, the analysis entailed an iterative and reflexive movement (Gioia et al. 2013: 21) between the data, emergent themes, and concepts, concentrating, in this case, on the relationship between technology, art, and live performance.

As noted above, by focusing on the lived experiences of these performers, the data presented here draws primarily on the qualitative dimension of our research utilising the transcripts of the semi-structured, in-depth interviews identified in Appendix A, alongside qualitative passages drawn from the survey, which are displayed and identified as such within the text.

3 | Findings

In this section, we explore several themes that emerged during our analysis. These themes reveal not only the impact technological mediatisation had on these freelance performers' ability

to reproduce the experience of proximity and copresence that is central to the auratic qualities of live entertainment, but also their motivations, along with the affordances and challenges they encountered, resulting both from the technology itself and the socioeconomic conditions under which their performances may or may not have materialised.

3.1 | Motivations

As already observed, the work of a freelance live performer is precarious, often depending - to find, execute, and sustain a working identity- on their ability to 'hustle' (Langevang et al. 2022) by drawing on social networks and deploying entrepreneurial practices. As such, before the pandemic, while rarely used to secure work directly (Azzellini et al. 2022), platform technology, particularly those related to social media, was familiar to many performers.

This largely involved using social media platforms such as *Facebook*, *Instagram*, *Twitter*, and *TikTok* to promote not only acts, gigs, and merchandise but also to sustain a public profile and identity as an artist or performer. In this way, their identities and practices as live performers were already intrinsically sociomaterial, intertwined with this technology.

However, the outbreak of COVID-19 and the suspension of face-to-face social interactions heightened the importance of social media. These platforms provided a means not only to maintain an artistic presence but also to broadcast actual performances while also having a potentially positive social impact. Storyteller Charlie Clipper recounted how, in the early days of the pandemic:

I started doing online storytelling for free and advertising on Twitter and Facebook and through my Mailchimp mail-outs that I was going to do free storytelling sessions in the evenings for families to watch.

The notion that integrating this technology with their skills as performers could ease some of the social pressures arising from the pandemic was prevalent among those we spoke to. This perspective even extended to mentoring and showcasing other performers who may have lacked the awareness or skills to engage in livestreaming. For instance, musician Peter Easton shared how he decided to establish a website aimed at showcasing online performances:

I ... was speaking to people on Messenger and stuff, and doing the odd Zoom call and things, and realising that there were musicians that didn't have much to do. They had nowhere to perform; they had nowhere to put their music out into the world... And I just thought, 'I'm going to try and learn how to do the live-streaming. Why don't I set up a platform where other people can share their stuff as well?'

However, alongside many other performers, Peter soon realised a sense of obligation to others needed to be complemented by the ability to generate a sustainable income, especially as many

of these performers were, as noted earlier, excluded from additional state support.

The availability of various apps or platforms to take payments for performances was important to the ability of many to continue their online work. Most performers preferred voluntary contributions made during or shortly after a performance. While these typically took place on platforms like *Facebook* or *Twitch*, links to direct payment platforms such as *Ko-fi* and *PayPal* enabled viewers to support the performers financially. However, while this approach worked for some, others found it less effective, especially as the pandemic persisted. In some reported cases, audiences would, for example, often watch a show and leave without contributing anything or would pay so little that it intensified feelings of vulnerability and artistic failure already felt by many performers.

Altruism and income generation were not the only motivations for many of these performers to livestream, however. A recurring theme throughout the interviews was how the pandemic had also deprived them of a means to express and sustain their identities as artists and performers. As storyteller Charlie Clipper put it:

It is a big part of who we are. So, on that level, you find a huge part of who you are as a person is being negated; it doesn't exist anymore.

Consequently, for many of the performers we spoke to, working online was also seen as a way to sustain this sense of identity and, as one singer/musician would conclude after his live shows, 'validating' their career choices; a topic returned to later in the article.

3.2 | Technical Affordances and Structural Challenges

Before that, however, this section examines the benefits and challenges of the technology from the perspectives of the performers and why livestreaming was a more effective avenue for a continued professional presence than other options. For many, a significant advantage was the removal of existing spatial and temporal restrictions, enabling performers to reach audiences that were effectively confined to their own homes. Despite the loss of physical proximity and a corresponding reduction in a performance's auratic qualities, livestreaming allowed performances to be viewed by anyone, anywhere, provided there was a reliable internet connection. Moreover, coupled with social media promotion, this enabled many performers to cultivate relationships with global audiences for acts that had previously only received support at a national or even local level.

While this was often financially advantageous, it also provided opportunities for artistic collaborations that might otherwise have been impractical, if not impossible. Actor Bunty Havers highlighted this fact by noting how:

... you can work with people from all over the country on productions and on things, without that being 'oh, I've got

to travel down' or the money or whatever. I've done jobs where somebody's in Scotland and somebody's somewhere else, and it's like this is great. I can work with people I wouldn't normally work with.

Certainly, during this research, we observed numerous events and activities, from theatrical productions to musical performances, across various venues. These events and activities united not only audience members but also performers and producers within a virtual landscape.

Moreover, some performers clearly found livestreaming to be a more relaxed way to work, as the technology served as a buffer that could help 'deflect' unwanted attention or comments in ways that face-to-face performance often did not allow. As actor Diana Kitchener noted, this could be especially welcome for women performers:

... perhaps being a woman, it's actually been quite nice to be in the safety of my space because occasionally – and obviously guys get it too – it's the kind of casual sexual harassment that you can get... it's been really nice not to have to deal with that crap and not to feel threatened or unsafe.

Nonetheless, despite such positive accounts, not all attempts to adopt this technology were equally successful.

For those who struggled with livestreaming, the primary challenges they faced were predominantly, albeit not exclusively, consequences of structural impediments, many of which were beyond their immediate control. For some, a lack of expertise in or unfamiliarity with ICT in general and livestreaming in particular was considered an insurmountable obstacle. However, the most common issue was, as actor Alison Lennon put it, 'no money to invest in professional equipment'. In most cases, this impediment was primarily socioeconomic, with performers unable to meet the costs of a broadband connection or what was deemed necessary lighting, sound equipment, or even just a quality phone or laptop.

Another issue raised was that, for some respondents, their efforts to perform online were hindered by the fact that they could not afford to live in properties of sufficient size to provide the amount of free space they required to work. This was highlighted, for example, by performance artist Tracie Kingman in her response to the survey question, 'please describe the main technical challenge you have experienced when performing online (e.g. from home)':

Living in a small apartment means I physically don't have space for some of my acts, and there isn't a suitable place that looks good to film against – it always looks like a show at home.

This was frequently compounded by additional factors, particularly for the women we interviewed, such as having caring responsibilities at home. This often left performers feeling inhibited and unable to deliver a good show, especially if it

involved embodying different personas that might not sit well in a domestic environment.

In other instances, the problem was less about, say, class or gender, but rather the geographically uneven provision of broadband internet across the UK, particularly disadvantaging those living in more rural areas, which had received relatively little investment in its installation. This concern was highlighted by several respondents to the survey who, when asked if they had turned to online performing, simply stated, ‘No, no decent internet connection available out here’.

Even for those able to get online and perform, challenges persisted, many of which were predominantly technical in nature. For example, unlike in a live venue, it was nearly impossible to gauge how the audience was experiencing a performance. Even if some feedback could be gathered, it wasn’t easy to manage the reception due to variations in the technology through which it was accessed. Once more, returning to the experiences of musician Peter Easton:

You literally have no idea what it’s sounding like, apart from what you can hear. Whereas when you’re in a room, you’ve got a sound person, or you’ve set the sound up... But what I didn’t take into account was that people were going to be watching it in their houses on phones, iPads, laptops, TVs. Every sound was going to be different...

Others encountered unexpected legal obstacles, particularly regarding violations of copyright laws and performance regulations. This was most notably encountered by those performers who ventured into live, online DJ sets to supplement their income and enhance their profile. For example, musician Brian Jones remarked how, in this context:

I’d just do it as a Facebook Live thing. And I did that for a couple of weeks until I got kicked off. They actually closed my account for a couple of weeks, which was a bit scary. I just got banned from Facebook for innumerable copyright violations.

It was not only DJ sets that posed problems regarding copyright issues. In the UK, live music and other performances using copyrighted materials are permitted if the relevant venue holds a PRS licence. However, the consideration of livestreaming as ‘broadcasting’ introduces several grey areas for performers, a situation complicated further if the stream is recorded and subsequently made available on a platform like *YouTube*.

Despite the seriousness of these issues, the most significant regarding the adoption of such technology that emerged, however, was how they fundamentally changed the nature of live entertainment for performers. This pertained to both a loss of its unique immediacy in space, and often time, as well as the visceral, inter-subjective quality of performing before a physically proximate audience—an experience encapsulated by musician Peter Easton and one that we explore further in the following section:

I think the other major problem I found was how do you deal with the fact that you are literally playing to a screen and you’ve got no feedback coming back from the

audience? So that was a major adjustment as well, to try and work out how to kind of navigate a gig where it’s just all about you.

3.3 | Spatial and Temporal Distanciation

For those performers able to translate their work to an online format, a significant challenge posed by livestreaming technology is the inability to ‘read’ or directly commune with an audience to judge its reaction or level of engagement. This was expressed in our interviews by actor Charlie Clipper, who lamented how online performances meant that:

It’s much harder to gauge what the audience’s reaction is. It’s harder to judge your own tempo, how you’re pitching it... That’s very difficult.

However, the issue extended beyond this. The primary concern was how the use of such technology fundamentally altered the very nature of what it means to perform live. As numerous performers indicated, a live performance is a unique event, distinguished in space and time and by the immediacy and lived proximity of the relationships forged between the performers, their audience, and other attendees. Singer and musician Bob Robbins offers insight into this when describing, in his survey response, the lack of immediacy that the absence of a shared presence creates:

The biggest thing is not being able to see, hear and engage with an online audience... you can’t judge their true reaction the way you would with a live audience where you can ‘read the room’.

For actor Kevin Burke and dancer Honey Justman, among others, this challenge was characterised by a loss of what they termed ‘connection’. Similarly, actor Buntly Havers and actor/comedian Chris Gifford highlighted this as a loss of ‘being together’, while actor Pierre Grant described the experience in his response to the survey question on the artistic challenges of performing online as ‘inorganic’ and ‘muted’.

In some instances, it was the nature of one’s discipline that served as a significant determinant of this. For example, musicians, magicians, and many actors who could adapt their performances to storytelling found the online medium relatively conducive to building rapport and connecting with their audiences. Conversely, those who rely more on physical engagement and real-world proximity did not experience the same benefits. Consider, for instance, this survey response from actor Ian Lamb:

As a promenade and interactive outdoor theatre practitioner for wide age-range of audiences, I work with a team to produce experiences which cannot really be replicated easily in a virtual environment. Lack of space, teamwork and the ability to interact with audience members in a physical environment cannot be recreated easily online without some immersive experience creation requiring a great deal of investment (both financially and in time).

For many of the performers involved in our study, it was their perception of the technology's inability to mitigate the negative effects of distanced interactions that undermined the unique and connected presence of the live performance; that is to say, reinterpreting Benjamin's concept, its distinctive 'aura'. As performance artist Tracie Kingsman candidly expressed it in response to our survey question on what positives they had taken from performing online:

Honestly—zero. I have found performing online way more artistically restrictive and disappointing.

However, there was not complete unanimity over this. While there was broad agreement that such livestreaming could lose something in translation, some contended that it also offered certain compensations that could be built upon in the course of their work, retaining what at least was a close facsimile of the proximity and presence that they deemed so vital to the auratic quality of their performances.

3.4 | Findings and Experiencing New Ways to Connect

As noted earlier, the idea that a sense of shared presence can be multifaceted and a regular experience among users of virtual technologies is well established (Sarwesti et al. 2023). For some of the performers we interviewed, overcoming the sense of distanciation associated with performing online was crucial. They believed that this ability was key to their success in utilising the technology during the pandemic while retaining many of the unique qualities of live performance.

For some, the nature of online work allowed them to develop skills that, while counterintuitive, involved the ability to cultivate what were, in fact, more intimate and personal relationships with their audiences, especially when using face-to-face platforms such as *Zoom*. This necessitated, for example, learning to utilise their voice in more intimate ways or by adopting more televisual expressions and gestures to project and convey ideas and emotions in what was often a more physically proximate, albeit mediated, encounter between performers and audience members. Musician and cabaret performer Richard Mears aptly encapsulated this in his survey response when he acknowledged that:

... there is an opportunity to create more intimate performances that can connect with the viewers in a different way to how they might receive it when they are in the same room. We can appear to be actually closer to them.

Multiple research participants, including comedian Gregg Mason, emphasised that interactive platforms can enhance the closeness and engagement between performers and their audiences:

So you're talking on the Zoom show, and then you can spotlight someone else and come and talk to them next to you on the screen, so then suddenly that gives you loads of extra interactive ability that you can't have in a normal

show. Because in a normal show, if you talk to someone on the front row, always the big flaw in that is that no one else can see you.

Not that such interactive platforms such as *Zoom* were appropriate for all performers in all circumstances. For many others, the easiest and most practical live platforms were often geared towards the one-way broadcasting of visuals and sound, such as *Facebook*, *YouTube* and *Mixcloud*. Nevertheless, even in those cases, numerous performers were still excited by the opportunities provided by text-based chat and comment functions, a sentiment echoed in musician Brian Jones's observation that:

There's a little joy in making a comment on something and having the person on the screen reply to that.

However, as Brian continues to explain, the beauty of the technology lies in its ability not only to connect performers directly with their audiences and vice versa but also, to revisit the concept of copresence, to create a sense of 'being together' among audience members. This could even, in some cases, transcend the event as mere entertainment. As he explains:

The great thing about the isolation [lockdown livestream] parties is there's been a real... A community has formed around it. It's so heartening to hear people saying, 'Look, I've been having a really hard time, but Tuesday nights I'm happy. I'm happy and I'm with people.' They seem to care.

In a similar vein, musician Mark Godiva mentions in his survey response how the text chat function on such platforms, often combined with a supportive social media presence, enabled him to create, as he puts it, 'a community of fans around the world'. This community not only engaged with him but its members also interacted with each other, providing those who attended his performances a temporally and spatially unique, and quite intimate, shared experience. Furthermore, as the viral risk of COVID-19 dissipated and national restrictions eased, this led to families and extended social groups getting together to watch and partake in his online performances, treating them as simultaneous opportunities for both physical and virtual copresence. By doing so, they enhanced their ability to create an auratic experience closely aligned with a live performance or gig in the same space.

4 | Discussion

Livestreaming technology and platforms significantly impacted the working lives of freelance live performers in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic. While some struggled with a lack of personal resources and technical know-how, along with insufficient national infrastructure that compounded their sense of exclusion, many performers managed to utilise this technology to bring live entertainment into the homes of isolated and often frightened people during the pandemic's darkest days.

For some, contributing to society's welfare was sufficient motivation. For others, however, technology allowed them to

remain financially afloat while maintaining their sense of identity and viability as performance artists. By integrating social media applications as platforms for publicity and live performance with online payment systems, performers across various industries established a virtual entertainment ecosystem that endured through the pandemic and beyond. This period also resulted in technical and artistic innovations, as well as unexpected opportunities for collaboration.

However, whatever the affordances of this technology, and indeed the challenges it posed at a largely operational level, it also represented profound implications for the nature of their work and its status as an authentic artistic or aesthetic activity. As our findings suggest, many performers were concerned about the loss of shared presence and connectivity between the performer and audience, as well as among audience members. In this article, we have sought to understand this in terms of what Benjamin (1970) might have described as a loss of the aura surrounding live performance and the values and ideals of live entertainment that emerge from the spontaneity and immediacy of the encounter.

Certainly, a word frequently used by some of our research participants who expressed an aversion to livestreaming was that it was a 'dead' medium, one profoundly incapable of capturing or conveying the visceral nature and sense of community that live performance can and should generate. However, if it is fair to suggest that central to the auratic qualities of live performance is the unique experience of the event in front of and among a socially present and proximate audience, to fully assess the impact that technological mediation has on such performances, it is essential that we also consider the experiences of those who appreciated performing in that way.

First and foremost, the proposition that, as Phelan (2003) notes, a live show is characterised by its occurrence in a single location at a distinct and specific moment in time—an experience that happens only once—indicates that such mediation does not necessarily violate this condition. While the temporality of live performance is indeed often extended due to both the spatial reach of this technology and the relatively minor delays that may be experienced differently among viewers, in all cases discussed here, and for all practical purposes, they remain live, albeit in broadcast form.

Consequently, they can be subject to the same level of spontaneity as any other live performance, particularly regarding technical glitches, one-off dialogue changes, or even performer ad-libs. However, the likelihood of the latter is significantly reduced when the performer is spatially isolated from their audience or, indeed, other performers. Like Benjamin's (1970) previously mentioned stage actor, the opportunity to adjust or modify in response to a specific audience's feedback is, for the most part, muted if not eliminated. Rather than a matter of temporality, this is, therefore, an issue of spatiality and the proximity and shared presence of the event.

Nonetheless, as noted in both the relevant literature and the data discussed above, we found that proximity and presence are far from mutually dependent. Indeed, one could argue that in this context, they are relatively independent, not only at an

empirical level but also at an intersubjective one. Returning to the exploration of presence in virtual world settings, it is evident that social presence—a participant's sense of 'being in' the performance (Sheridan 1992)—while albeit partly dependent on a perceived experience of spatial proximity, is equally influenced by factors such as levels of interaction, involvement, and, in the case of a sense of copresence, an awareness of 'being with' others as part of an identifiable group (Bulu 2012).

In this light, a significant finding from our research was that, contrary to Benjamin, this platform technology, due to its capacity for interactivity, often fostered a sense of closeness and shared experience in a specific and united community that not only mimicked the immediacy and intimacy of a live performance but could also enhance it through sustained and lasting relationships that develop distantly, not despite, but owing to the technological mediation involved. Even simple text-based chat functions offered performers the chance to respond to and adapt their performances based on audience engagement, while audience members could convey, in real-time, their enjoyment of and opinions on performances, simultaneously interacting with each other as copresent in the moment (Bulu 2012). These interactions preserved the aura of these performances as distinctly live events, maintaining a sense of closeness and immediacy as they unfolded.

This was not, of course, the case for all our respondents. Even for some who were able to access livestreaming opportunities, other significant obstacles to nurturing the kind of copresence alluded to above often emerged. These obstacles could be temperamental, geographic, or embedded in the nature of the discipline or the style in which it was delivered. For others, while often possessing the technical or artistic capability to perform online, what was frequently lacking were the requisite socioeconomic resources necessary to replicate the experience of live performance sufficiently. Such resources could include, for example, the support of a partner or spouse, either financially or by facilitating the essential interaction with audience members during a performance.

Perhaps ironically, many respondents actually found the spatial presence of partners and family in what had become their work environment to be deeply problematic. This situation restricted their ability to adopt various personas, engage meaningfully with their audiences, or left them feeling guilty about the potential inconvenience they were causing to others working or studying from home. This issue was particularly pronounced for those living and working in smaller properties due to possible disturbances, their inability to create a credible backdrop for their work, or simply insufficient space to perform and engage with their audiences effectively. As performance artist Kate Trickett succinctly remarked: 'Living in a small apartment with little open space and poor lighting does not lend itself to online performance.'

It is also important to emphasise that although Benjamin's (1970) conception of the artistic aura is metaphysically laden, this should not obscure both the labour, and access to material resources that sustain the social relations of presence and perceived proximity central to the success of such technologically mediated performances. While the technology may indeed offer the opportunity to retain, if not deepen, an auratic experience

through the reproduction of a proximate and intersubjective relationship between audience members and performers, it remains profoundly dependent on the agency of, and resources available to, those involved.

Indeed, the use of platform functions that replicate the interactivity and shared proximate experiences of live performances frequently intensified the labour process for such performers, potentially exceeding the effort required when performing in a physically proximate setting. As previously mentioned, this often entailed employing social media technology not merely as platforms for performance but also to foster and solidify social relationships that, while providing a foundation for elevated levels of sociality and interaction during livestreamed performances, inevitably resulted in a need for increased work and effort on their part.

Nonetheless, it is, in large part, the ability of such livestreaming platforms, as a particular form of technological mediatization, to sustain experiences of immediacy and copresence that retains the auratic nature of these live performances. To reference Auslander (2008: 108), it is 'phenomenological, not ontological' in that its aura is not a characteristic of the performance itself, but rather of what was experienced and felt by performers and spectators.

5 | Conclusion

In this article, we argue that studying the incorporation of livestreaming technology into the working lives of self-employed and freelance live performers during the COVID-19 pandemic is instructive on multiple levels. Firstly, it highlights various structural inequalities among this already precarious UK workforce. Those who were denied access to this medium due to unevenly distributed infrastructure, a lack of personal resources, or a deficit in skills were often also excluded both from additional state support due to their working patterns or artistic disciplines and, additionally, from the ability to earn a living from their art in a disrupted employment landscape.

Secondly, it also identifies the possibilities that this technology opened up for a range of performers not only to continue working meaningfully but also to extend their activities, cultivate collaborative relationships, and sustain and grow their audience bases. In many instances, this facilitated the generation of a sustainable income—often in combination with other activities, such as online merchandising—through successive periods of lockdown. However, this did not come without its own technical and artistic challenges. Nevertheless, despite these, the opportunities afforded by the technology for enhanced levels of accessibility, experimentation, and the capacity to sustain an identity as a viable performer during a time when this seemed increasingly improbable were generally welcomed.

Moreover, the utilisation of such technology indicates ways in which established notions of what defines the auratic qualities of a live performance may be reconsidered. Unlike for Benjamin, who maintained a belief in the radical potential of mass reproduction but viewed it as heralding the demise of auratic art, this study suggests that, in this particular case, rather than merely being mimetic, interactive livestreaming technology is often capable of surpassing the auratic qualities of physically proximate performances. This

expansion opens the performative space and its intersubjective possibilities to a broader audience, both geographically and demographically, and as authenticity becomes more distributed, it alters the relationship between performers and audience members, potentially enriching the auratic qualities of performance. Furthermore, due to the technology and its affordances, the experience of live performances can also be enhanced through a loss of anonymity and a heightened sense of copresence.

In this regard, the technological mediatization of live performance not only provides a means for performers to sustain their livelihoods; it also opens new avenues for their work to remain meaningful. This stems from its ability to offer a deeper epistemological understanding of live entertainment, as opposed to one restricted by an inflexible and outdated ontology, where the unique and authentic status of live performance is defined by its reception rather than by the imposition of abstract conceptualisations or definitions.

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Endnotes

¹In the UK, shows that are recorded for later broadcasts often employ live audiences for the same reason.

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Appendix A

Table A1.

TABLE A1 | Interview participants.

Pseudonym	Main work identity	GI ^a	Age	Region	EI ^b
Alan Rupert	Magician	M	40–49	North East	W
Basil Jackson	Puppeteer	M	30–39	South East	W
Belle King	Actor	F	30–39	London	W
Bev Vale	Singer/Musician	F	18–29	South East	Mixed
Brandon Knights	Actor	M	60–69	South West	W
Brian Jones	Musician	M	50–59	South East	W
Bunty Havers	Actor	F	40–49	East	W
Charles Rogers	Actor	M	40–49	Scotland	W
Charlie Clipper	Actor/Storyteller	M	50–59	South West	W
Chris Gifford	Actor/Singer/Musician	M	30–39	London	W
Dave Amstrad	Actor	M	60–69	London	Mixed
Debbie Richards	Burlesque performer	F	30–39	London	W
Diana Kitchener	Actor	F	30–39	South West	W
Edith Kaufman	Storyteller	F	60–69	North East	Other
Glenda Kelp	Dancer	F	30–39	London	W
Gregg Mason	Actor/Comedian	M	40–49	London	W
Jane Seymour	Singer	F	40–49	Central	Black
Katherine Edwards	Actor	F	18–29	London	W
Mary Locket	Singer/Comedian	F	70–79	London	W
Mary Rustic	Magician	F	50–59	North West	W
Peter Easton	Singer	M	30–39	East	W
Petra Simmonds	Singer	F	40–49	North East	W
Terry Swift	Actor/Performance Artist	NB	30–39	South East	W
Tracy Ainsworth	Singer	F	50–59	South East	Other
Will Taylor	Singer	M	40–49	East	W
Yvonne Smith	Actor/Singer/Comedian	F	40–49	London	W

^aSurvey participants and interviewees were asked to self-identify their gender, using their own terminology.

^bSurvey and interview participants were invited to self-identify their ethnic background/group using their own terminology.