S3:E8: NAVIGATING THE DIGITAL FRONTIER...
Hilary Knight in conversation with Adrian Ellis

[00:00:00]
[THEME MUSIC]

[00:00:06]
Adrian Ellis: Hello and welcome to The Three Bells. This podcast is one of the series brought to you by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network, in which we explore what's happening around the world on the intersections of cultural and urban life. The series and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net.

And if you like our content, please subscribe and give us a positive review on your podcast listening platform of choice. I'm Adrian Ellis, the Chair of GCDN, and the Director of AEA Consulting, and our guest today on The Three Bells is Hilary Knight. And Hilary is a colleague of mine at AEA. But prior to washing up in consulting, she's had some very real jobs. Hilary was Head of Digital Content and later became Director of Digital at Tate. And before that held uh, similar, important positions of Film4, Channel 4 and BBC.

And so Hilary, the last decade at least of your career has really been on the application of digital technologies to entertainment, to news, to culture. And welcome. And if you could, just tell us how you, how you ended up in this fascinating and very sort of timely space.

[00:01:18]
Hilary Knight: Oh, thank you. It's really lovely to be here, and that's a great question. I kind of ended up here by accident. I started out uh, way, way, way back when in theatre. I have a drama degree and I wanted to work in theatre and put on shows and plays and things. And that didn't work out. We'll gloss over that.

But I ended up working in the beeb (BBC) in an admin role, working with the CTO in an area. One of the areas he looked after was a very nascent BBC online division. And it struck me as I was there that this was all very new. If you wanted to go and work in TV or radio, you had to go do your time and work your way up through the ranks.

But online was sort of, I hesitate to say it, but it kind of making it up as they went along. Everything was being invented as it was being used. And that to me was very exciting. And I, very quickly did a couple of very basic courses in building websites and things like that, and got my first gig internally at the BBC. And I really credit my time at the beeb as being my real sort of training ground. And what I discovered really quickly that I hadn't appreciated from the outside looking in, was how much of digital is about storytelling.

The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

About | **Episodes** | **Resources** | **Contact**

[00:02:28]
Hilary Knight: And actually how much there was that related back to the work I'd been doing in theatre before. It's about presenting things to audiences. It's about taking people on a journey. It's about conveying information, but also being entertaining and compelling with it. And this was all, you know, this is all when people were using dial-up modems. This is pre-broadband days. But that hasn't really changed.

And so, I moved around in the beeb a little bit and I spent a long time in Radio 1. So I'm working in music radio where you're working in a very live environment and spending days having ideas in the morning that would then be on air by lunchtime, and having to respond very quickly. And while I was there, the whole kind of shift to when two came about where the internet became less about just presenting pages that you could look at and read, and much more about who people were online and building communities online and social media and interactivity. The likes and pokes – if anyone can remember Facebook poke back in the day, but the, you know, the likes, the tagging, the poking, the direct messaging, all of the kind of behaviours that we now take as standard for lots of the digital platforms we use were all very new.

And that was a real shift from broadcasting out or presenting or performing out for audiences to um, inviting them in and talking to them and working with them. And from the beeb, I went to Channel 4 and I did some time with Channel 4 in their factual department, but actually my most interesting work there was with the drama team working as a multi-platform commissioning editor, which was sort of trying to answer the question: so if this drama were real, what would the characters be doing?

How can we build the world of this drama in a way, away from the TV screen, but in a way that feels real for our viewers and invites them in and either invites them into the world of the drama or helps them to build their fandom around the drama? And those dramas were sort of youth entertainment brands like Skins and Misfits, and we had the youth soap opera - Hollyoaks, but also working with some more serious hard-hitting pieces where we were trying to kind of explain the stories and the thinking behind the work.

And so again, it's sort of, there's a, there's a thread all the way back to storytelling. And for me, so much of what we do in digital is about how you use the tools to connect the content that you have with the people that you want to reach. And so moving, taking that into Tate was, was a really interesting challenge because until that point, I'd been working in broadcasting where you are literally in people's living rooms every night, which is an enormous privilege. But also, you are not really having to invite people into your building, which is what we were doing with Tate.

So how you then use digital to invite people to come, to get to leave their homes and come to yours was a new and interesting challenge. And working with artworks and curators and really digging deep into the knowledge and the stories that Tate has, to present those for, to audiences who run the gamut of being very deep art experts, artists themselves and part of the art sector, to kids doing their art homework. And to people who may just have stumbled across the website because they happen to be searching for Picasso or somebody they'd heard of.

[00:05:48]
Hilary Knight: So how you can use the, the deep knowledge and the stories of an august institution, as you called it, like Tate, to break it open really, take it away from being just about the building and make it, centring the art and the artworks and the artists. But using different techniques around that are hinged really on storytelling, underpinned by technology.

And what I've really enjoyed throughout is that the technology keeps changing. So your tools, the tools you have at your disposal keep evolving and audiences behaviours shift as they find new ways of connecting with each other or using digital in, in their daily lives. Um, so it always feels like a very lively space to be.

[00:06:30]
Adrian Ellis: So, there is so much in there. I don't know how we're going to sort of unpack it all, but I want to start with digital strategies, if you like, that are not related to what's going on in the building. But about expanding the reach of an institution beyond its physical building. If it has, yeah, assuming it has one.

And, as we know in the chapter of Peak Covid, for very obvious reasons, a lot of organisations were thinking very hard about a number of things, including how to expand their digital footprint, how to expand their reach digitally, and many of them did so, and some did it on a permanent basis, some on a temporary basis.

We are now post peak covid, I'll put it that way. We're now in July 2023 recording this. Tell me what's happened in broad terms to digital strategies post covid, and what's happened to audiences? What's the post covid outside of the building digital strategy world look like?

[00:07:40]
Hilary Knight: We're in a funny place right now for digital strategies after Covid. So you're absolutely right. There was, you know, the huge global pivot to digital in 2020, and that saw us through 21 and 22. When buildings reopened in 2022, and then we've seen it continue a bit this year. Lots of organisations who had done very strong pivots to digital kind of sprung back a little bit.

I think there was, the pendulum swung hard in the favour of digital while the buildings were closed. I think the reopening of lots of buildings and the sort of relief that having audiences come back into them, meant that the focus, the attention suddenly went back to the buildings, very quickly snapped back.

And some of those digital strategies were kind of left to languish, which is an enormous shame. Because actually, you asked about audiences and what we're seeing in terms of audience behaviours, is that covid lockdowns really accelerated a lot of pre-existing trends. And so audiences who weren't previously consuming culture or not consuming culture in a very big way online, suddenly were, and what a lot of them discovered was how accessible it is. And certainly for people who are not near those buildings that they love, who aren't generally able to get to a theatre or a cinema to view that live stream of that theatre in a cinema, who aren't able to get to the opera easily, who you know, are less mobile than others or just sort of inhibited by geography, were suddenly able to consume a lot more culture than they were previously.

[00:09:20]

Hilary Knight: And so there is a big access and accessibility point about having, making culture available online. And that swung back. Audiences behaviours did not swing back. And there is a risk that therefore those audiences are going to find other places to spend their time and money with. I think we are seeing a bit of consolidation of some things that worked.

People, you know, institutions are recognising the value in serving their remote audience, which is, is how I think about them. I think there's still a bit of a shift to be made for lots of organisations who haven't traditionally thought of themselves as storytelling organisations and have thought of themselves perhaps as more of as buildings. And to, for them to really go back to the absolute kind of, stone cold heart of what it is they're there to do in terms of conveying information, knowledge, sharing stories, and finding ways to do that, that online.

There's, there's some thinking, there's evidence of people starting to think about it now, but still very much, um, we're still back in that mode of trying to get people back into the buildings. I think there are some things that we've seen remain.

So The National Theatre moved a lot of their productions online available for free at the start, and that's since consolidated into an NT at Home platform. So whereas you used to be able to go see The National Theatre and the theatre and in the cinemas, you can now live stream it in your home. Um, The Met Opera available at home now as well and Opera North. So other theatre and opera companies are sort of staying with that programme of streaming productions into people's homes, and I think there is something really interesting happening with some of the touring companies.

So Ballet Rambert and the Scottish Ballet went online with classes and movement classes and things during lockdown. Sometimes for the dancers to be able to kind of work together and keep practicing and keep moving together, even though they were all separated. Those have now since consolidated into classes that are available online through an online membership scene. And these are both ballet companies that do not have buildings, they're touring. So their challenge in the past has always been about how they can get the audience data from ticket sales, which generally just sits with the buildings that they're touring to.

So actually what they're finding is by having this content that sort of came out via covid or kind of rehearsal footage, dance classes, et cetera, available through a digital membership, they're able to build a direct relationship with audiences of Ballet Rambert or Scottish Ballet that they didn't normally have, they didn't used to have. Which then has a knock on effect in terms of donations, in terms of advanced ticket sales, in terms of then being able to, you know, upsell access to on demand content as well.

So there are examples of where digital strategies that came out through covid of consolidating, but there are also plenty of examples out there of institutions going, oh thank goodness that's over, let's reopen our buildings and, and go back to the way things were. And I'm afraid things aren't going to go back to the way things were.

Um, so there's a bit of a risk there for them.

[00:12:28]
Adrian Ellis: So just on that one, is it therefore your view that irrespective of size or scope or niche, any cultural organisation today needs to have an explicit and presumably appropriately resourced digital strategy?

Hilary Knight: Yes.

Adrian Ellis: Okay, I'd just, just so I'd clear that one up.

Hilary Knight: Absolutely.

Adrian Ellis: Let me break that down a bit. So, in some of your examples, really, those organisations going it alone, I think, that is to say they were trying to work out a relationship between their potentially enormous digital audience or community and themselves. What are your rules of thumb on that?

Do you go it alone? Do you aggregate, what are the range of distribution strategies and which ones seem to be in descendent?

[00:13:22]
Hilary Knight: I think it starts with getting to know your audience intimately. The institutions that have succeeded, small or large – and there are small organisations who are doing this well, as well on really small budgets, um, are institutions or organisations that are taking the time to pay close attention to their online audiences as closely as they are to the people who are visiting and them, or attending their performances or what, whatever the organisation does.

So I can give you an example of a small institute, a small organisation, a tank museum, is quite, you know, famously knocking it out of the park on YouTube. Now, the content that they're creating on YouTube is for a very specific, very niche audience, as you might expect from an organisation called The Tank Museum.

But those audiences that the museum knows and understands exactly what they're looking for. And delivers video content about tanks that absolutely serves that niche interest so well and so reliably. So they're posting videos regularly, the content is of regularly the same quality, they have a format and formats are really useful. So thinking about formats that works really well for that audience. And they've iterated, they're looking at the data, they're reading the comments that people are leaving and they're iterating on it and constantly improving. And it's a very specific and intentional focus.

And as an adjunct to that, they now also are building um, following on Patreon, where those, I'm quite sure same audiences are donating or essentially subscribing to a membership, if you like, of The Tank Museum. This is a small museum. Small budgets doing that very well, but it comes down to taking the view that this is important. And taking the view that the audiences that they're going to serve online know what they want. And following that data, listening to the qualitative comments that are left on social media platforms, left in comment box et cetera, but also looking at the digital data of what, where audiences are coming from, what they're looking at and what they're doing, and responding to that. Being responsive to it.

The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

About | **Episodes** | **Resources** | **Contact**

[00:15:36]
Hilary Knight: And that sort of relates very much to software development. So software development is a user-centred design processes which place audience needs or user needs at the heart of whatever it is you're trying to develop. It's a very similar process. You put your audience needs at the very heart of what it is you want to, to build. Look at what they want. And from that you will in time be able to glean what it is they might indeed be willing to pay for as well.

[00:16:00]
Adrian Ellis: And I, I think I'm right in saying that your perspective is, that is not the norm. In other words, there is a tendency for people to look at things through the other end of the telescope and sort of work back from the technology. Is that right?

[00:16:14]
Hilary Knight: Yeah, I think that's right. And I think, um, there are lots of different things at play and for lots of different reasons. So some of that is looking at, well, well, what does the business want to do? Well, we want to tell more people about our exhibition, or we want to tell more people about our performance.

Rather than thinking, why do people need to know, who are the people who need to know about this exhibition or performance and what is it they need to understand from that? That's a you know, it's a very basic example. I think also what comes into that are sometimes funder requirements? So lots of institutions are funded sort of philanthropically or through commercial partners to deliver digital.

Quite often digital has some kind of commercial brand associated with it, particularly if it has to do with uh, with other programming outputs. So an exhibition is sponsored by, that sponsor may also be funding a digital output, and they may also have um, there may be criteria that comes with that funding that actually isn't really aligned with what audiences want to do and what audiences want to see.

So it's not necessarily just the institutions fault. And it's not, it's not kind of a, this is not a finger wagging exercise at all. It's also comes from a history of organisations. The organisations haven't had to do this before. This is new territory. And so don't necessarily have this skills at a senior, sufficiently senior level to be able to kind of lead on this and champion that kind of audience-centred thinking and champion remote audiences at very senior levels. Um, and I think, you know, again, just going back to the Tank Museum, if you look at actually the Tank Museum – the museum and their online content, they're quite different. And those audiences don't necessarily line up.

So it's about being able to have that conversation internally and understanding the risks and opportunities of segmenting your audience in a particular way, taking a particular content strategy with online audiences versus a content strategy for, you know, in-person audiences. And that's not to say that the tank model is one that has to be applied everywhere at all. It's just one example, but I think it's a useful one because it's not a behemoth, it's not one of the really big national institutions. It's not a big, globally recognised brand in a kind of cultural sector. And that's quite often where people first go when they're thinking, well, we couldn't possibly do what the Met are doing because we don't have that kind of scale.

[00:18:38]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:18:47]
Adrian Ellis: So you pointed out quite rightly that it's not every organisation that has senior staff with the relevant skills, but it's not just the skills, although I'm not um, I'm not underplaying the skills.

It's also the structure. Because one of the challenging things, presumably, is that to do this effectively, you need to have a lateral relationship with curatorial or side of things. Also with marketing, also with every point where you are touching the visitor or the audience.

What advice do you have for a CEO who's contemplating the insertion at senior level of a position that prioritises digital?

[00:19:26]
Hilary Knight: First of all, it's about as you pointed out, recognising that digital touches on pretty much every department in that organisation. So thinking of that senior digital person as absolutely being central to defining a digital strategy for the organisation for example, but the implementation of that strategy isn't necessarily going to be solely the preserve of their department or whoever it is they um, you know, they're line managing.

Digital sits in finance, it sits in marketing very much, it sits in audience development, it sits in development and there are other components of digital that we haven't really touched on that are also about the business tools, about how you're using digital internally in your organisation. That will touch on departments like technology, HR, finance. And so decision making responsibility for the processes, the policies, the implementation of any digital strategy has to work across, has to sit across an organisation that CDO or Director of Digital or whatever that role is, will have a lot of decision making power – for want of a much better word, but authority. Um, but they will have colleagues also in that senior team who will be needing to make decisions about cybersecurity, GDPR, you know, what a policy around AI in curatorial research might be, for example. So that role as well as being a definer, an implementer of a digital strategy also needs to have allies within that.

It's not enough to just put one person into a senior team and expect that to transform your organisation digitally. It is the responsibility of that senior team to, you know, task themselves with understanding digital. With that single person's leading that, you can have somebody absolutely leading and helping inform people and helping them to, helping the organisation to understand what it's ahead of them. But it doesn't just sit with them.

[00:21:22]
Adrian Ellis: So then let's move on to some of the other contexts where digital is highly relevant. One is programmatically, in the building. In other words, whether we're talking about the visual arts or the performing arts – clearly, digital considerations are informing programming in fairly profound ways, whether it's AR, VR, immersive experiences, et cetera. Fad or forever?

[00:21:48]

Hilary Knight: I think it's forever, and I think it's going to continue evolving in the same way that TV and radio became materials for artists to work with. And we see digital artworks, we see screen-based art, time-based media. I don't think we'd consider them to be fads anymore either. So there's that programmatic thing, the programmatic side where it's, where technology is a tool, it's part of the material the artist's working with. And that's going to continue and grow and shift and change as artists continue to interrogate and twill apart digital technologies.

And then there's another layer around that, which is around the visitor experience of either an exhibition or a show, a play, an opera or the building that takes place in. And those are really where we are seeing things like augmented reality in exhibitions. And like the you know, there's one at the National Gallery in London at the moment.

The Art Gallery in Ontario have sort of, adding layers onto artworks using augmented reality. There are lots doing that, and that's about offering visitors a layer of interpretation that isn't just about reading text on a wall. And it also puts that layer of interpretation usually into their hands, into the devices they already own.

Um, so the people are using their own phones to look at an artwork. Which frankly is a way lots of people are looking at artworks now for whether you agree with it or not. But using that that lens to offer another interpretation of that art in a way that puts it in the palm of somebody's hand is quite a powerful way, and is something that lots of visitors enjoy, are curious about. It brings a level of kind of interactivity into a gallery experience, for example, you know, otherwise you are sort of walking and looking, and stopping and walking and looking, that people enjoy and it does, there is some data to indicate that it attracts audiences into that exhibition that wouldn't necessarily otherwise do it.

And then there's a whole other layer, which is using things like virtual reality, augmented reality, and these sort of technology experiences to create new cultural experiences of their own. So I'm thinking about here the immersive market. And immersive isn't a new thing at all in the cultural sector, but it is now being driven very much by technology, whether that's projection mapping or virtual reality to create new experiences that are definitely attracting new audiences, younger audiences, people who are looking for a communal, cultural experience that feels new and feels a bit different.

And those are things that are quite often taking over spaces that aren't currently occupied by museums or theatres. They're sometimes in parts of towns where there isn't – I don't know what would we call that, heritage cultural experience? There isn't a big museum in a part of town where they're taking over big warehouse spaces.

And I think there's something really interesting there around where, when that starts to come into our high streets and into the centre of town like 59 Productions and Kings Cross in London, for example, an immersive experience that's right in the heart of London that offers something that feels spectacular for you know, a visual centric audience – we are very much a visual-based culture, a screen-based culture now. It feels very big. It's something that kind of inspires the sense of awe and at the same time offers a really authentic and interesting art experience for people who may or may not usually go to museums.

[00:25:13]
Hilary Knight: So I think there's something about those immersive technologies that are in museums and they're certainly part of the visual experience. They're in theatres as well. We have theatre's that are experimenting using virtual reality and augmented reality as part of their productions and projection mapping's been in theatres for a long time, but there are also cases of newcomers to the cultural sector who are using those technologies to present something that feels like a cultural experience, and we can debate where that sits in the, is it real art or not question. But to my mind, it, if it's attracting audiences at the scale that it is and it is, then we should take it very seriously.

[00:25:53]
Adrian Ellis: So it's a fascinating potential transformation presumably, because the physical infrastructure, the underlying business model, the nature of the organisation can be fundamentally – and often is fundamentally different from the organisations that are currently tasked with the not-for-profit world of delivering culture. The technology is quite expensive.

Hilary Knight: Yep.

Adrian Ellis: But equally, the throughput of people, and as I see the pricing means that these are high capital investment, but potentially either quite high positive return, i.e. profit, or at least, you know, financially capable of significantly higher revenue as a percentage of total, than many exhibitions. So presumably it's quite likely that the players in this market will be new players. Are existing museums, performing arts centres, et cetera, making that transition? Or do they not have the CapEx or the spaces to, to compete?

[00:26:50]
Hilary Knight: I think some of them have the spaces, certainly, and there are examples of some of the big museums playing in this space. I think there are lots of different things at play here. The National Gallery did an exhibition that felt very immersive and there are lots of exhibitions, the V&A Alice in Wonderland exhibition had some rooms that were designed that felt, well, had been sort of almost set designed. So very immersive designed rooms. So a few things happen, that these are of course expensive things to produce.

The new players in the market will create one experience that runs and runs for months, and that you can run that experience over and over and over again. It's different for museums. They have different fixed costs, they have different staffing costs. They have artifacts that they need care for in different ways. It's not a level playing field, I suppose I'm saying. But there are museums that have experimented with this, with varying degrees of success.

And actually what's interesting is that they will be cut, they are coming up against a couple of big points of friction. One is the rest of the sect- criticism from the rest of the sector. Um, criticisms and concerns about "dumbing down", playing to the gallery. They're coming up against concerns and therefore concerns from funders, pushback from elsewhere. It feels very risky. So they might take a risk and if there's a lot of criticism when they take that risk, there's little incentive to take it again.

[00:28:15]
Hilary Knight: And also they're putting on exhibitions that are far more expensive to put on in the first place because they're containing actual authentic artworks or historical objects. They're not only in "projecting works and videos", et cetera, up onto a big warehouse space. So it's um, it's a difficult territory for established institutions to move into.

But I think there are things that we can learn and they are learning from that kind of immersive space. And I think artists as well are looking at these kind of, there is a trend for people wanting things that feel big and that inspire or from, in terms of scale and size, and we see that in terms of exhibiting buildings needing to shift and adjust to accommodate artworks that now do that.

There are artists who work in using immersive kind of technologies that museums, et cetera, and art galleries are going to have to find ways to present. So I think it's possible. I think institutions can learn, can watch and learn. I think also there are great opportunities potentially for exploring partnerships with these spaces because one of the things that the new immersive spaces don't have, is necessarily the in-house deep knowledge, the artifacts, the art that the institutions have.

[00:29:32]
Adrian Ellis: Before we wrap up, I just want to make sure that we have covered what are in view, your view, the principle areas where digital technology has the greatest impact or potential impact within the cultural sector.

Have we covered those or are there other areas? And let's just go a little beyond digital into some of the other technologies that are developing quickly in adjacent sectors that may affect the way in which our organisations operate.

[00:30:02]
Hilary Knight: So I think, you know, the main areas – and they're all biggies, are around audiences and audience behaviours and audience needs. There's tools within an organisation. So for example, using digital tools to better serve membership. This is one that particularly comes up around AI I think.

There's some interesting thoughts around AI and marketing as well. Programming of course, in terms of incorporating digital experience for visitors to your building, but also using digital to leverage audiences who aren't coming in your buildings. Um, so those are the kind of the key areas. And I think it's really useful to look at adjacent sectors for what might be coming down the line. Gaming is always interesting because there's so much creativity and it's quite often the place where the technology sort of appears and is used most actively first.

But also I, I look at music industry partly cause my background in music radio. So I just, I'm generally interested, but I think also again the music industry was, is one that has to be quick to adapt to new audience behaviours. And it's very adjacent to culture sector. You know, in that Venn diagram of music sector and cultural sector, there's a great big overlap.

[00:31:17]
Hilary Knight: And I'm looking at things like ticket buying and you know, this drive to the big kind of stadium, kind of concert versus a lack of people attending sort of smaller gigs, but also looking at how artists are building communities around their work using Web3 technologies and Patreon type platforms and Kickstarter-like platforms to build their own sort of fan base and to build communities of interest around a particular kind of art form.

So that's something I'm also looking at. And then generative AI, of course, is the massive technology that's impacting absolutely everything across the board. And that's also just going to my point about earlier, might just rather, one word answer that, you know, every institution needs to have a digital strategy. Even if you decide your organisation is going to present itself to the world in its most analogue form possible, you will still need to have digital tools. So, even the most analogue businesses in the world will need to have some digital capability and generative AI is going to bring a huge sea change in how organisations are able to communicate, reach out and market themselves to audiences and how audiences are going to start searching for and looking for content and information about their cultural lives, about their social lives, about their shopping – I mean about everything.

So being alert to that and being able to think about that intelligently within your organisation as part of your digital strategising process is really vital.

[00:32:46]
Adrian Ellis: So a period of rapid and fairly fundamental and ongoing change-

Hilary Knight: Absolutely.

Adrian Ellis: Is what you are suggesting.

Hilary Knight: I am, and I'm saying that the biggest risk in a time like that is to not do anything.

Adrian Ellis: Hilary, thank you. That was absolutely fascinating.

Hilary Knight: You're welcome.

Adrian Ellis: And I'm really grateful for you from taking five minutes away or an hour away from the wonderful world of AEA Consulting to do this. So, thank you.

Hilary Knight: (laughs) You're very welcome. I've enjoyed it. Thank you for having me.

[00:33:16]
MUSIC TRANSITION

[00:33:19]
Adrian Ellis: Listeners, if you want more, check out www.thethreebells.net to find all the external references, other resources linked to this episode and links to Hilary's fantastic work.

Thank you again, Hilary.

And now a few thoughts on an overlapping topic. Overlapping in that it affects the pace of diffusion of digital in the cultural sector as well as much else. Governance. I've been thinking about governance for a couple of reasons lately. First, I was invited to a meeting last week at the Vatican on the space economy.

The space economy is, in case you were wondering, and according to the European Space Agency: the activities and the use of resources that create value and benefits for human beings in the course of exploring, researching, understanding, managing, and utilising space. I know what you are thinking. Why on earth was he invited? His knowledge of deep space? His piety? I've asked myself the same question and I concluded. There is somewhere out there an infinitely more qualified Adrian Ellis pacing anxiously wondering what the hell happened to his invitation. Anyway, the point is I got it and I went. It was an eclectic group with some real experts and a few quasi fraudulent hangers on like me, enough of them to make me more comfortable about having snuck in.

It rapidly became obvious. Two speakers in, the big challenge of the space economy is governance.

Space is pretty empty, as you probably know, and that's probably how it got its name. But the Earth's atmosphere, the thermosphere and the exosphere are crowded. They're full of junk, orbiting this planet, a thousands of pieces of debris. Not asteroids, but our detritus, also known as crap. It's shaming. 36,500 objects larger than 10 centimetres. A million objects between one and 10 centimetres, and brace yourself – about 130 million objects between one millimetre and one centimetre. And then there's 11,300 satellites for communications, for national security, and increasingly, for monitoring climate.

That is, I learned, a 40% increase over the past 18 months because in recent years, private sector investment has outstripped public in a new race for space. Space is the place where the Musks flex their muscles, but it's not only crowding we need to think about. Some satellites have been there since the 1970s. That's half a century, so they're quite vulnerable to advances in cryptology and therefore hacking, ransom, et cetera. The new frontier for organised crime and terrorism.

So who's responsible for the governance of space? In 1958, the United Nations General Assembly established the Committee on the Peaceful Uses of Outer Space (COPUOS) to govern the exploration on the use of space for the benefit of all humanity, and to pursue international cooperation in the peaceful uses of outer space. But as space has become more crowded, the governance of space has become more fractious and contested, and the institutions of governance risk failure, colonisation by private interests, polarisation, weaponisation, et cetera.

The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

About | **Episodes** | **Resources** | **Contact**

[00:36:30]
Adrian Ellis: What do I mean by governance? I mean the same as everybody else. The rules that give decisions, some sort of binding status.

It can obviously be the force of law, but it can be less than legal, accepted practice, convention, et cetera. Governance means due process because processes give those decisions legitimacy. Good governance is where the processes are predictable, transparent, non-arbitrary, non-contested based on some articulated theory of justice, viewed as binding, and optimised for mission fulfilment. Bad governance is where they're arbitrary, opaque, contested, or ignored.

One only really understands how good or bad government systems are, when the system is under pressure. Governance is under pressure everywhere right now, as well we know, and where governance collapses, there's a negative form of anarchy. There are warlords, order replaced by survival of the fittest, exploitation, treachery, bad faith.

Which brings me to the second reason I've been thinking about governance. That description, warlords, survival of the fittest, deep politicisation, et cetera, describes an organisation we've been working with on a strategic plan. One that totally fell apart. A massive investment of time, not only by my long suffering colleagues, but by the organisation's staff in sorting out priorities, building business models, facing uncomfortable realities, matched at board level by a lack of clarity, courage, transparency and commitment to process or mission. All leading to the most disconcerting sort of failure. The failure that comes at the end of a process, recriminatory and polarising after everyone's exhausted themselves, their emotional reserves and their budgets.

The governance model of non-profits is pretty precarious in best of times. You're looking for an unusual bunch of the willing and able, to do and be a lot of things. People who understand and believe in the mission of an organisation, people who understand the difference between governance and management, people who can represent stakeholders interests.

And today we have a significantly broader sense of who stakeholders are in reality, than we have previously. People who can provide that is give or get the resources required to fuel a machine. People who have the time and people who are unremunerated. It's a lot to ask for, and it's no wonder it's tough to keep the plates spinning. The system is in place for good reason, and despite differences in legal frameworks and tax regimes, has recognisable similarities pretty well across the globe.

But like the space economy – unlike the cluster of wicked regulatory problems that are looming with respect to AI, bioethics, gene editing, or quantum computing, the governance model is ill matched to the changing and challenging nature of the task. Crises of governance are therefore increasing as the demands placed upon the systems of governments grow, and with respect to the avalanche of samey advice from BoardSource, Bridgespan, National Council of Nonprofits, CAF in the UK and others on good practicing governance, we may need to go back to first principles if things continue to stall.

The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

About | **Episodes** | **Resources** | **Contact**

[00:39:40]
Adrian Ellis: What are the key dimensions of an organisation a governance model needs to enable? I suggest there are really only four.

The first is to define and constantly refine an organisation's purpose with sufficient precision to know whether you are fulfilling it.

The second is to secure those resources.

The third is to ensure resources are optimally aligned around effective mission fulfilment.

And the fourth is to ensure probity; no more, no less. If we were to rebuild even as a thought experiment, the framework of governance around these four imperatives, would we end up where we are, now?

[00:40:20]
THEME MUSIC

The Three Bells is produced by AEA Consulting for the Global Cultural Districts Network. The podcasts and supporting materials can be found at www.thethreebells.net. And if you haven't already done so, please subscribe to our feed and rate us on your podcast listening platform of choice.

My name is Adrian Ellis. Thank you so much for being with us today. And I look forward to joining you again soon.

The Three Bells: a podcast about culture in its urban context produced by AEA Consulting and the Binnacle Foundation for the Global Cultural Districts Network.

About | **Episodes** | **Resources** | **Contact**