

Chapter 31

Digital Resources and Approaches Adopted by User-Centred Museums: The Growing Impact of the Internet and Social Media

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ABSTRACT

Society is experiencing unprecedented changes, largely attributable to the evolution of communication technologies, which are steadily reframing our way of life, and the methods we use to establish and maintain social relations. Museums are therefore facing numerous challenges, in general as a result of these developments: apps, open content, and the Internet-of-things. A complex relationship can be created between visitors and the museum, and this also opens new unexplored opportunities for user involvement in the museum's activities, even during the course of the visit itself. It is worth taking care to identify all the variables involved in the museum-visitor-relationship, which also encompasses the social dimension. Both the museum and the individual are active participants in a gradually expanding relationship, namely the growth of the so-called Web 2.0 and social media. Therefore, we can assume the need for museums to develop a conscious strategy for their social media presence, a real social media strategy, which forms part of the museum's wider digital strategy. The increasingly pervasive spread of e-mobile technology is a foretaste of the moment when museumgoers will radically change both the way of establishing relations with these organisations and the actual ways of using museum services. This chapter focuses on digital resources and approaches adopted by user-centred museums, where there is an increasing impact from the internet and social media.

1. INTRODUCTION

The model of the museum curator or educator who stands in front of an object and interprets meaning for a passive audience is simply no longer realistic in this world of instant access (New Media Consortium, 2012, p. 7).

Society today is undergoing unprecedented changes, largely attributable to the recent evolution of communication technologies, which are steadily reframing our way of life, the methods we use to establish and maintain social relations, as well as the way and manner in which we access the information we need everyday.

It is paradoxical in some ways that a careful observation of reality shows us that the only aspect which has remained unchanged is an endless sequence of breaks and profound alterations in our reference context, creating a constant flow of changes in which we are immersed, whether we know it or not, and of which we inevitably form part.

In today's situation – which, based on what has just been said, could be defined in oxymoronic terms, as “stably unstable” – it is particularly difficult to make out what the immediate future holds and what role might be played in that future world by museums and cultural institutions in general. However, this should not put us off making an attempt to identify at least the broad outlines to which we can refer, guidelines which – even if blurred and tentative, because they change over time and space – may help to orient the strategic choices made by such institutions.

Not only are the challenges to be faced numerous but they are also particularly insidious because it is so difficult to identify the boundaries of the “playing field,” the rules to be used, let alone the players against whom we will play. But it is precisely this chronic nature of instability that makes it more imperative for museums to establish a plausible, if not certain framework, incorporating

growing degrees of flexibility that allow them to react appropriately to changes.

As we will try to explain in the following paragraphs, from now on change must form part of the genetic make-up of museums at every level of their decision-making process (Kelly, 2010), replacing the dangerous, obstinate immobility that is often found there, as if the unchanging nature of their strategic and operative choices can still be a plausible, practicable option, even in a context as variable as the present.

2. WHAT CHALLENGES? WHAT FUTURE?

Museums therefore face multiple challenges, for the most part linked to the development of communication technologies, or more directly to the increasing importance of the Internet. The following paragraphs will touch on a number of these challenges, prompted by the recent publication of a series of particularly interesting documents: the Report from the American Association of Museums (2012), the Horizon Report published by New Media Consortium (2012), and the latest edition of the analysis of the relationship between museums and mobile technologies (Tallon, 2013).

The first document is presented as “a summary of the most important drivers of change we have observed over the past years” (American Association of Museums, 2012, p. 3) and identifies a number of aspects that are deemed particularly important for the future of museums. To start with the report focuses on the potential contribution given by those willing to make their own time and knowledge available to museums, over and above the more general and traditional role played by volunteers. In this instance, however, Internet plays a key role because the sharing process – the so-called crowdsourcing – happens online and is therefore much more widespread, heterogeneous and far-reaching.

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