

CCRN Working Paper: Public Museums and Pan-demos
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Over a decade ago, exhibition and museum designer Calum Storrie (2006) argued that “museums should be a continuation of the street” (p. 2). The crux of his point is that the museum should be integrated into the life of the city, forming a relationship of shared experience. Paradoxically, it was upon the closure of ‘the street’, a time of physical isolation and increasing connection via social and digital media, that we saw a rapid and distinct shift away from the controlled and contained space of the museum. This paper explores the emergent communication practices employed by public museums in the wake of Covid-19 restrictions. I argue these practices engender a digital sociality, and encourage more dynamic, open, and co-constructive processes between publics and institutions.

Public museums have had a hard time trying to convince audiences that they have evolved from the stuffy, somewhat alienating and authoritarian institutions they are often perceived as. This is a long-standing narrative. One such example comes from the writing of Theodor Low ([1942] 2012), then museum educator of the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Low was unshakeable in his belief that museums play a vital role in enriching the lives of people. Yet he also asserted that the exclusionary hierarchy within museum activity, along with the refusal to incorporate ‘popular education’, disconnected the museum from the needs of the public.

In the context of digital media engagement, an environment seen to complicate the more closed system of the museum, public museums have maintained control by primarily offering exhibition and collections archives, or marketing content around exhibitions and events. As a result, audiences are positioned as future visitors and consumers for the physical site, rather than visitors to the digital in and of itself. Museologist Ross Parry writes, “the web’s anomic quality... still remains problematic for the museum” (2013, p. 18). Historically, public museums have played it safe on social media, and more often than not, opportunities for engagement are heavily moderated, with communicative features like the ‘comment’ function disabled. Digital offerings were seen as an informational supplement to site visitation, not as

a space of sociality, until lockdowns positioned them as our only viable 'substitute'.

It was estimated that over 90% of museums worldwide were forced to close their doors and stop in-person operations during the coronavirus crisis (UNESCO 2020). Prior to Covid-19, many museums already had a digital presence, with digitised collections, active websites and social media accounts, podcasts, video tours, audiovisual essays, and email newsletters. In lieu of on-site visitation, museums continued to engage audiences through increasing their digital offerings. The latest International Council of Museums (ICOM) Covid-19 report shows that 74.8% of museums are considering increasing their digital offerings, and 76.6% are rethinking their digital strategy (ICOM 2020). The report makes a point of highlighting the groundswell in, and uptake of, social media in particular. 47% of museums increased their use of social media platforms after lockdown, while an additional 3.8% started using social media for the first time (ibid).

The Network of European Museum Organisations (NEMO) gives us further insight into the growing use of social media, with their latest report showing that 60% of responding museums found their social media activities to be more popular than before the onset of Covid-19 (NEMO 2021, p. 5). This isn't a surprise, given the pre-existing popularity in uptake and usage of social media within society. Further, the emphasis on social media is a pragmatic choice; they are online services that require less additional financial resources and fewer skills relative to developing a virtual tour. Though a screen experience does not do justice to the kind of embodied experience of physical visitation, it offers different points of (productive) disruption. The forms of collective action afforded by the web offer "a profound challenge to the status quo" (Shirky 2008, p. 48). In the context of museum communication in the pandemic, this action is best perceived with a focus on crowd-sourcing content and cross-institutional collaboration on social media platforms. These practices both disrupt traditional control and containment strategies, shifting museum communication to become more dynamic and open.

The NEMO (2020) survey found that it is the social media hashtag that has seen the greatest level of uptake. Some of the most utilised – #MuseumFromHome, #MuseumMomentofZen, #BetweenArtandQuarantine (#TussenKunstenQuarantaine) – collectively tag over 100,000 posts. The latter, #BetweenArtandQuarantine, called for people to recreate artworks from museum collections using materials within the home. Contributions range from playful portraits that replace frilled Victorian-era collars with toilet rolls, to recreations of works that critically reflect on the relationship between race, colonisation and museum collections. They showcase a diversity of voices and present different types of engagement as valid. Many contributions are reposted by museum social media accounts, creating a circulation of images between public and private spaces. In some cases, these practices have merged with the physical site of the museum. Just prior to entering into the ground floor gallery of the National Gallery of Victoria's (NGV) 2020 Triennial, there is a large screen with the prompt 'make a meme'. By scanning the QR code, or visiting a designated website, visitors can share their 'witty observations about artworks' which are then featured on the screen.

Museum attitudes have shifted from creating content around what they believe people need (or what will bring in more consumers), to looking at what their audience is already doing and following their lead. The Uffizi provides a wonderfully entertaining example of this with their TikTok account. With video edits of various paintings from their collection set to pop music, or audio from soap operas, the Uffizi pays homage to the traditional theatricality of museums prior to modernism, while invoking current online trends and youth culture. We tend to push a narrative of museums – particularly art museums – as a transformative experience, while social media content like the Uffizi's is relegated to 'positive distraction'. It is easy to fall into a pre-existing rhetorical debate around the museums' role as either enlightenment or entertainment. The reality is that the museum – online and offline – holds space for both experiences. It is important to recognise – in the vein of Brecht – the importance of playfulness for breaking down barriers to access critical reflection. Rather than dismissing these practices, it is more productive to view them as an entry-points for engagement. What is

changing in these online spaces is what is shared, what is included, and what is permissible in the digital space of public museums.

Another example of a more audience-led approach comes from the Kunst Museum Basel, who crowdsourced ideas on Twitter and Instagram stories for their project *The Digital Museum*. One Instagram post included the statement 'We are curious about what you want to know and see'. The crucial point here is the reformulation of the assertion 'This is what the public needs' to the question 'What do you, the public, want?' Ultimately, what we see in these practices is a sharing of authority – between museums and publics, as well as museums with other museums. After decades of claiming more democratic and inclusive practices, the pandemic accelerated a previously slow-moving process. The normative content is still there – and it should be. But alongside it is content that follows an audience-led agenda, and that recognises the profundity of play.

Amorim and Teixeira's (2020) reading of the pandemic through the lens of Žižek's (2014) 'event', is useful in pinpointing why we need to pay attention to the social media practices of museums since early 2020. The pandemic-as-event is "something that disturbs the existing epistemologies hence creating new orders of the possible" (Amorim & Teixeira 2020 p. 1). The pandemic-as-event has disturbed the spatial and temporal organisation of museum-to-public communication strategies. It has also provided new opportunities for the inverse, the ways in which the public can communicate with the museum. During a Cuseum webinar (2020), Scott Stulen (Director of the Philbrook Museum) located this new temporality as key to the shift in museum practice. He noted that timelines have been condensed, and that the things that museums thought they would experiment with in the future are being implemented now. Approval of various communication and engagement strategies has gone from months, even years, to days, if not hours.

While the financial stress for museums as a result of Covid-19 restrictions is undeniable, we can also see a moment of respite from the constant competition within tourism and leisure industries. As a result of this, museums were no longer competing with other museums for visitors, and

new forms of cross-institutional collaboration emerged. Across Instagram and Twitter, public museums championed the work of other public museums, sharing links that direct visitors to the content of other museums. Another emerging practice was the museum 'Instagram takeover', where two museums would swap control of each other's accounts for the day – both offering their existing audience new perspectives and sharing their audience with another institution. In promoting each other, these museums send a powerful message about the value of their institution beyond the metrics of economy and competition for visitor attention.

Nina Simon, in her book *The Participatory Museum* (2010), makes a useful distinction between contributory projects and collaboration, stating that: "If contributory projects are casual flings between participants and institutions, collaborative projects are committed relationships". Here we invoke the condition of temporality. Museologist Raymond Silverman (2015), in writing on his concept of 'slow museology', argued the "incompatibilities of 'collaborative time' and 'institutional time'" (p. 13), with the former requiring a gradual and ponderous pace. Yet what we have seen over the last year is a rapidity of response, a pace aligned with the digital environment more generally. Regardless of whether we read the emerging practices explored in this paper as contributory or collaborative, the dynamic temporality of museum communication, and its resulting effects, are being co-constructed by people and their institutions.

References

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