

# Liberating Narratives – Museums and Web 2.0

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## Summary

*The paper attempts to put into relation the social web environment and museums. In a retrospective view on the formation and dissemination of knowledge in museums, discernible are several stages also connected to the public access and the social role of these cultural institutions. The virtual environment is seen yet as another stage which with the Web 2.0 technologies creates possibilities for a redefined role of the museum at a more socially profound level that might be characterized as multivocal and collaborative.*

**Key words:** Museums, knowledge formation, Web 2.0, users

As it has been known throughout history, a revolution usually occurs in stages and is often not fully recognized until majority of people unintentionally accept the pattern of behaviour, thus creating a new world. Although the World Wide Web was born in 1989, it took next five to six years for the general public to start using it. This new tool for spreading information enabled contents to be available, though theoretically<sup>1</sup>, to everybody. They were digitally published on web sites as predominantly static, not interactive and proprietary<sup>2</sup>. In short, those websites included “read-only” material and provided one-way flow of information. Further development of the web that happened in the next half decade brought about a new method, the one which emerged in the business sector

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<sup>1</sup> The reality is that even today the luxury and advantage of the web technology is not available to everybody.

<sup>2</sup> O'Reilly, Tim. “What is Web 2.0.” O'Reilly Media. September 30, 2005. <http://www.oreilly.com/pub/a/oreilly/tim/news/2005/09/30/what-is-web-20.html> (June 20, 2009)

and offered new possibilities of information exchange. For Tim O'Reilly and web entrepreneurs "the bursting of the dot-com bubble in the fall of 2001 marked a turning point for the web" since the only businesses that survived were those that used the technologies now popularly know as Web 2.0<sup>3</sup>. This new label seems to mark a specific advance in Web technology that differs from its predecessor, the so called, Web 1.0. However, it rather refers to a set of techniques for Web page design and execution, and represents a model defined by a change of mindset. The shift from Web 1.0 to Web 2.0 is a direct result of the change in the behaviour of those who use the World Wide Web. As opposed to Web 1.0, Web 2.0 is characterised by a new approach in content building in which numerous users simultaneously produce and consume information. The main attribute of these protagonists of the Web 2.0 era is that "they have embraced the power of the web to harness collective intelligence"<sup>4</sup>. In other words, users become contributors to various forms of content, whether by producing or distributing them, providing their comments or marking content with their own individual (associative) meaning. They are free to share and reuse, openly communicate and enforce decentralisation of authority. All they produce becomes incorporated into the structure of the web and available to all users to discover and become engaged. The web grows as a result of collective activities bringing improvement to services with a growing number of users.

"...participatory production of content, collaborative categorization of sites by freely chosen keywords..."<sup>5</sup> reflect an alternative direction in the formation and organization of knowledge in the virtual sphere where *expertise* is shifting from the position of *a few* to the position of *many*, as well as from *professionals* to *amateurs*.

In addition to the business sector, such developments strongly influence the cultural sector, more specifically museums, which had stepped into cyber space somewhat bashfully but soon realized the possibilities of "unlimited space for display and communication"<sup>6</sup>. However, apart from being of relevance, digital environment also presents a challenge to some of the basic museums tasks such as collecting, preserving, and communicating which has additionally been stressed by the emergence of Web 2.0. The museum, as traditionally authoritative institution, faces yet another reality to which it is called to adapt in a newly created social context, even a virtual one. With regard to its role in the creation and dissemination of knowledge this transformation follows a series of modifications that occurred in different periods and contexts in the course of its history.

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid

<sup>4</sup> Ibid

<sup>5</sup> Ibid

<sup>6</sup> Müller, Klaus. Museums and Virtuality. // Curator. 1(2002), 45; p.23

## The Story of Museum

In today's world which is dominated by both mechanical and digital reproduction it would almost be impossible to rely solely on authenticity of materiality in attempts to communicate museum meanings. Still, museums have popularly been regarded as treasure houses of authentic objects. One reason for that might lie in the fact that the concept of collection and material culture studies have formed constituent elements of museum practice and created an "image which points to the central importance of objects, to the material world, in constructing narratives of cultural authority"<sup>7</sup>.

Looking back into the history of not only the museum but also to forms of its etymological predecessors, objects were of central importance and their use, as in the case of Greek statuary, ranged from religious veneration (ancient Greece) to trophies of conquest and cultural veneration (ancient Rome) and profane aesthetic contemplation (Christianity). However, it was the Renaissance culture that brought back the interest in Aristotle's methods of study<sup>8</sup>, the culture in which the Medici Palace emerged only to be later cited as "the identity of origin for European 'museums' and for European collecting practices"<sup>9</sup>. During the sixteenth century, collections, mostly owned by princes and scholars, became rather commonplace in Europe. Those *cabinets of curiosities*, as they have often been called, were organised differently but what they all shared was a "strange" juxtaposition of objects we would today call unsystematic. Their representational system reflected idiosyncrasy, the subjective worldview of the person who owned them. The underlying principle of collecting was founded on relativity, aesthetic impression, resemblance, emphasising the magical aspects of the world. Moreover, the prince/scholar stood in the centre of his collected objects dominating over them, and at the same time dominating the world. They constituted a unity in which various objects were placed in one space expressed the sameness (books were placed next to antiquities, natural things, instruments...). Clearly, we today would consider all those things as disparate elements which need to be separated exactly because of their difference. The *naturalia* would, therefore, find their appropriate place in an institution such a natural history museum, just as books would be placed in libraries.

Community, that is, the "museum audience" was in this particular case of little significance than it was going to be in subsequent periods since in the Renaissance world, the order of the macrocosm (the world) resembled that of the mi-

<sup>7</sup> Witcomb, Adrea. *Re-Imagining the Museum – Beyond the Mausoleum*. London: Routledge, 2003, p.102

<sup>8</sup> During his travels to the island of Lesbos, Aristotle began collecting, studying and classifying botanical specimen

<sup>9</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*. London: Routledge, 1995, p. 23

crocosm (man) and secrete knowledge gave the prince specific powers and advantages in assuming symbolic position in the ruling strata by presenting their collections to few relevant people. In *The Birth of the Museum*, T. Bennet speaks about the social role of the cabinets of curiosities as public representation of the princely person not to the masses but to an exclusive group of people, such as foreign emissaries and political opponents. Objects were safely stored in a hidden part of the house and kept away from the view of the masses. The beginning of the seventeenth century brought a change in the relationship between objects in the scholarly approach to material culture and in the context of knowledge formation. What used to function as a unifying principle of analogous correspondence now translated into the practices of contrasting in order to discover identities and differences by way of measuring and ordering. "Order established elements, the simplest that could be found, and arranges differences according to the smallest possible degrees. Difference was defined by visual morphological features, rather than by the interpretation of hidden resemblances. The seeing of things was now privileged over the reading of things. To see was to know".... The ordering of things by means of signs constituted a knowledge based upon identity and difference"<sup>10</sup>.

This new epistemological paradigm induced changes in the practice of exhibiting. Thus, what used to be placed together in order to illustrate the variety and richness of the world and "tied" together according to hidden resemblances, was now classed into the same family on the basis of morphological features. What looked the same was placed together and it was important to finish the series. The spatial arrangement in the exhibiting spaces divided objects into "sections". In other words, the space became strictly defined and controlled and one in which "deliverers of knowledge" became scientists whose primary objective was to acquire knowledge through newly founded institutions - scientific societies. "Institutionalisation was seen as a more productive way of pursuing scientific enterprise"<sup>11</sup> and it called for the distribution of the knowledge to people, much the same as churches spread religion. Along with scientific societies that started emerging in Europe in the end of the seventeenth and the beginning of the eighteenth century science was to be facilitated by the establishment of museums (among other institutions such as libraries and botanical gardens, to name just a few). However, during the period of their articulations, museums were still exclusive institutions where access was socially restricted to the newly formed bourgeois public who was differentiated by the attendance to museums from the "rough" general public. It was not before the mid nineteenth century that museums as institutions opened to the whole population. They were born within a newly formed cultural and historical context and connected to new po-

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<sup>10</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 135

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, p.142

litical and social purposes. The museum as cultured place was transformed, as Bennett says, into a space of homogenisation at the same time setting the classes apart. "In its new openness the museum was envisaged to be an exemplary space in which the rough and raucous might learn to civilize themselves by modelling their conduct on the middle-class codes of behaviour to which museum attendance would expose them"<sup>12</sup>. On the other hand, it was a place that offered an opportunity to people to share what used to be kept and enjoyed by princes, kings and scholars. Thus it symbolically proclaimed liberty, democracy and triumph over tyranny. It was a programme of the government to "manage" population. Naturally, new display practices needed to be introduced in order to achieve this goal. A great amount of material that was coming to museums required care and administration. Private property became the property of the state which the state could filter, reorganize and transform. New narratives supporting democracy and egalitarianism were formed out of the royal and aristocratic ones. Physical objects became exponents of the "true history" based on structural relations among exhibited museum objects. "The selection of items that were to be displayed and the separation of these from the items that would be stored or otherwise disposed of, led to the development of new categories of inclusion/exclusion, and to new "curatorial" processes"<sup>13</sup>. Curatorial research and organisation of collections were the practices that gave the authority to the institution resulting in a divide between the subjects who produced knowledge in the hidden rooms of the museum and the subjects who consumed it in the public space. Museum objects played a central role in the formation of the grand narrative through their constructed relationship, facilitated by the academic principles and the space itself which reflected the scientific principles of the "order of things". The museum entered into space between History and various histories showing difference, development and progress, as opposed to the earlier, eighteenth-century arrangement by strictly visible features such as size and material.

A shift in the view on objects occurred in the modern museum where material things no longer represented themselves in their physical existence and historical development. Their connection based on taxonomy was expanded to form relation to human beings. Material things were composed as objects through their connection to histories, stories and people. An important change in respect to this new relationship of objects removed the object from its central position and placed an emphasis on narration. The social history approach introduced a practice in which object of little monetary value but important for the life of a certain community started to be collected together with the object that once demanded traditional connoisseurship. Ideas are now more important and curators

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<sup>12</sup> Bennett, Tony. *The Birth of the Museum*. London: Routledge, 1997, p. 28

<sup>13</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and the Shaping of Knowledge*, p. 179

choose objects which illustrate the story they form. Various sorts of information have received significance that emphasise not only the "representative" but functional and commonplace. New disciplines of social sciences such as sociology and psychology deployed in museum practice prompted another point of interest for the institution – the museum user/visitor. The public function of the museum which used to be disciplinary and instructional now offered new educational methods and place for entertainment.

This change of perspective and the emergence of "post-museum" which Hooper-Greenhill takes it should "play the role of partner, colleague, learner (itself), and service provider in order to remain visible as an institution"<sup>14</sup>, was to a great degree supported by electronic technologies and mass media which created a modern public sphere. This sphere was in later stages reinforced with the virtual sphere on the Internet that has presented itself as a "non-hierarchical space of communication which encourages social interaction"<sup>15</sup>. In such an environment, the museum was bound to become responsive to the new social structures and to satisfy their quench for information. The focus on objects had yet to be changed. Nevertheless, objects have remained important but in as much as they "emit" information which can be communicated through different media. However, the break in the concept of *auratic* and authentic quality of the physical object occurred before the advent of the electronic age. Mechanical reproduction gave birth to the notion of multiplicity of the museum object and increased access to them<sup>16</sup>. In the similar way digital reproduction, (the Internet) obliterates the unique existence of objects in time and space thus in a way influencing changes in the issues of ownership and access. However, in addition to the displacement of both objects and their place, digital reproduction created possibilities for simultaneous processes, such as merging of information about dispersed museum items, or linking objects with distant sites, perhaps of their origin. What is most significant about it is that the architectural space of the museum can now be extended into cyberspace where the exclusiveness of the institution is to a great degree undermined, and which presents an environment that facilitates less restricted access to people as well as opportunities for socio-cultural interaction that is just "a click away". This openness was to a certain degree concurrent with the increased role of the museum in the community and with the development of "user-centred philosophies for the creation and deliv-

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<sup>14</sup> Hooper-Greenhill, Eilean. *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London: Routledge, 2004, p. ix

<sup>15</sup> Witcomb, Adrea. *Re-Imagining the Museum – Beyond the Mausoleum*. London: Routledge, 2003, p. 109

<sup>16</sup> Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*. // *Illuminations – Essays and Reflections* / Arendt, H. (ed). New York: Schocken Books, 2007

ery of networked information resources”<sup>17</sup>. Systematic documentation that became the fundamental principle of curatorial practice in the museum of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created easy ways of information search and retrieval on the web. The virtual environment that many museums took use of in digitally representing themselves and their collections furthers the insistence on ideas and story-telling as well as it presents advantage in the form of an unlimited space and new creative ways for display, communication and knowledge sharing as added features to the physical museum reality.

### **Influence and Use of Web 2.0 in Museum**

Museums found themselves engulfed by the new media in the mid-1990s when the need to face the potential of the new technology was recognized by ICOM in the 1995 policy statement that recommended museums to actively contribute to internet information with their own programmes and collections in order to more thoroughly play their role in society<sup>18</sup>. However, it is with the occurrence of Web 2.0 that more particular changes in the interaction between museums and their users could be encouraged. Museum audience have for the last two decades been in the focal interest of the institution and information about users has been obtained through surveys as part of a museum market research. The main purpose of the research is to “identify the users” (...) “determine their needs, characteristics, attitudes and behaviour”<sup>19</sup> since the visitors’ book no longer provided sufficient information. The Web 2.0 applications, in this respect, offer even greater possibilities of acquaintanceship as well as interaction. Unlike the first stage of museums’ extension in the virtual world where museum activities and events were broadcasted to the internet users and completely produced by the institutions themselves, at the second stage with Web 2.0, museums could proffer a democratic approach to their audiences, draw things out of them and call on their expertise. The Web 2.0 applications, namely blogs, wikis, social bookmarking or tagging and podcasts present this opportunity in the context of museums.

Blogs as a conversational mode present new means of creating wider community of museum users and outreach possibilities. With markedly participatory characteristics, blogs might be taken as a way of encouraging free comments from the public unsolicited by the museum provided that the institution takes them into consideration. Museums can use blogs in a more traditional way as a

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<sup>17</sup> Trant, Jennifer. Social Classification and Folksonomy in Art Museums: early data from the steve.museum tagger prototype. <http://dlist.sir.arizona.edu/1728/01/trant-asist-CR-steve-0611.pdf> (July 27, 2009)

<sup>18</sup> Parry, Ross. *Recoding the Museum – Digital Heritage and the Technologies of Change*. London: Routledge, 2007, p.93

<sup>19</sup> Šola, Tomislav. *Marketing u muzejima*. Zagreb : Hrvatsko muzejsko društvo, 2001, p.148

sort of virtual visitors' book, or as a tool for promoting discussion on specific museum activities. An advanced way could include picking of the mental attitude of the community and using it as a feedback, taken integrally, and incorporating it in the managerial mindset.

Similarly to blogs, wikis help capture and collect community's knowledge making it accessible to everyone. The museum thus becomes a place for discussion and functions on the principle of peer collaboration and editing. It actively invites participation allowing the public to give their own knowledge about a certain item or topic related to the museum collections and objects. Therefore, it could be a powerful tool for creating stories based on collective memory of community/ies which strongly resembles O'Reilly's concept of harnessing collective intelligence. In addition to predominantly textual tools for sharing content, podcasting includes audio and video material to be created and broadcasted on the web. With this technology, a big section of distant audience can download the latest material automatically from the web. The use of podcasts in museums can enable people to explore a sample of the collection or enjoy virtual tours of the museum while they're on the move. Yet another advantage of this software is that it might encourage people to produce their own audio and video material in relation to museum collections, but also museums to create audio and video narratives based on people's contribution. Unlike the above mentioned applications which allow contribution in content creation, something that is more in line with museum interpretation/communication, tagging is an activity more related to documentation. Documentation has always been an essential part of museum practice based on taxonomy and standardization of data which gave the museum its authored voice. With tagging, this strictly professional approach to objects preceding interpretation might be moderated in a way as to allow users to create additional means of access to museum objects. This new sort of openness of the institution is important in promoting social engagement with its audiences. Yet, another way which is a sort of infiltration into the virtual community is social networking which helps in building a "relationship with an on-line community so other institutions, organisations, groups of interest use our [museum] data to create more complex and richer on-line experiences (and vice versa)"<sup>20</sup>

In that way the museum can act as a subject in the virtual sphere, thus adapting to different socially and culturally defined groups of social networks (thus being active in managing its own virtual identity), or as an object in which case it is a reference that people use in order to form a group around it (thus being passive).

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<sup>20</sup> Methven, D.; Hart, T. Organisational Change for the On-line World – Steering the Good Ship Museum Victoria. // *Museums and the Web 2009*/ Trant, J.; Bearman D. (eds). Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics, 2009. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2009/papers/methven/methven.html> (June 14, 2009)



All the mentioned means of (virtual) public engagement with museum activities can serve to empower users to create knowledge and share it with others, but at the same time their involvement can encourage institutional advancements in the matters of knowledge creation and presentation, and, in effect, democratization. Social media can stimulate engagement of museum users and encourage them to develop a relationship and response to museums that could be meaningful for the institutions themselves. Seen as a platform built by the new media, museum can be a site where users could establish cultural dialogue between themselves and in such a way prompt a two-way relationship between museums and communities – the one in which the museum is formed by the communities and in which communities shares the values which are being formed by them in collaboration with the museum. On the basis of such an interactive platform, the museum becomes a site “for exploring the complex subjective relationship between individuals, communities, objects and power within the broader project of social transformation”<sup>21</sup>.

### **Instead of conclusion**

Seen in retrospective, museums as social institutions have undergone a process of different degrees of openness and accessibility to the public – from the moment they opened their doors to restricted groups of people in end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century wider circles during the 19<sup>th</sup> century, to the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the present day when the institution became accessible to everyone. Each step of the way material culture, which has been the basis of museums in most cases, was intricately connected to the formation of knowledge and degrees of accessibility. The recent shift of focus from physical characteristics of objects to narratives is not to say that materiality ceased to be relevant and important in museums and that the virtual sphere with digital representation of objects and emphasis on ideas represent a break with the past practices. On the contrary, museums need to use both material and immaterial sources of knowledge but in a way as to invite a multiplicity of interpretations by allowing the community to step in. Thus, regarding the connection of material objects and the creation of knowledge in museums four main aspects could be discerned – those closely tied with ownership (objects exclusively owned by an individual who forms the knowledge on the collection), connoisseurship (objects analysed only by experts and presented to the public from a single and unquestioned cultural perspective), contextualisation (museum narratives formed by professionals based on objects in connection to people’s experiences) and collective collaboration (narratives weaved together by professionals and community).

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<sup>21</sup> Graham Janna; Yasin Shadya. *Reframing Participation in the Museum: A Syncopated Discussion*. // *Museums after Modernism: strategies of Engagement* / Pollock, G.; Zeman J. (ed). Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2007, p. 167

Museums have always had one of the essential roles in the formation and dissemination of knowledge. The changes at the beginning of the 21st century create space for the museum to accept new possibilities of bringing into play entire collective memory, provided by an each individual's contribution, for the benefit of humankind, in order to prove and retain its significant role in society.

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