

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Shaping cultural participation through social media

Michela Arnaboldi  | Melisa L Diaz Lema 

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Management, Economics & Industrial Engineering, Milano, Italy  
(Email: [michela.arnaboldi@polimi.it](mailto:michela.arnaboldi@polimi.it))

**Correspondence**

Melisa Diaz Lema, Politecnico di Milano, Department of Management, Economics & Industrial Engineering, Milano, Italy.  
Email: [michela.arnaboldi@polimi.it](mailto:michela.arnaboldi@polimi.it)

**Abstract**

The public sector has embraced a user-orientation paradigm, which has expanded through the open and democratic medium of social media. Although the potential of this digital technology and its visible outcomes have been analyzed in previous studies, there is virtually nothing on the complexity behind its implementation. This paper uses a case study involving three Italian museums to explore how social media strategy is shaped and enacted through their day-to-day business and activity. Museums are an ideal field for this kind of research because of the central role played by cultural participation and social media's critical function in pursuing new audiences. The study reveals a deep change to practice, touching praxes and practitioner skills, and modifying strategies planned around the user's approach, in the duality between authoritative and democratic voices. The findings disclose an emergent heterogeneity that is mapped along social media practices and the various associations linked to the praxes, opening the way for future studies concerned with the link between a user's (traditional) physical experience on social media and the level of democracy in user engagement.

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**KEYWORDS**

digital transformation, museums, social media, strategy as practice, user participation

**1 | INTRODUCTION**

User engagement and participation have become a (new) paradigm in the public and nonprofit sector (Hadley, 2017; Martin, 2010; Mazzei et al., 2020; Osborne, 2018; Reilley et al., 2020), leading to coproduction and cocreation (Cluley & Radnor, 2020; Osborne, 2018; Torfing et al., 2019). Within this trend, social media are seen as a potentially powerful technology to amplify user engagement, increasing interest in research within a variety of fields (Agostino, 2013; Agostino et al., 2020; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). Social media are an apparently easy technology to implement, allowing institutions to interact with users in a more open and democratic way (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016). Many researchers have studied this digital relationship, observing online behaviors on platforms, providing frameworks and scale of participation (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Begkos & Antonopoulou, 2020; Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Sabate et al., 2014), and measuring institutional participation and communication efficacy in diverse settings (Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2020; Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Bellucci & Manetti, 2017). Previous studies are, instead, less concerned with the organizational implications of dealing with social media, with most examples referring to the private sector (Arnaboldi et al., 2017; Kane, 2017; Muninger et al., 2019) or not entering into the detail of the institution's practices (Knudsen, 2020). In this paper, we are delving into the organizational dynamics involved in enacting social media, with reference to the cultural setting of museums. The two research questions addressed are: "How are social media embodied in the strategy of museums with reference to the wider organizational environment?" and "How and why do practices vary in this process of organizational translation?." There are several reasons why cultural settings are particularly relevant when studying and conceptualizing the complexity of change within public and nonprofit fields. Museums are being pressured into increasing their cultural participation (Mygind, Hällman, & Bentsen, 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Simon, 2010), while also being asked to factor in the various forms of cultural consumption where the internet has gained prominence (Fanea-Ivanovici & Pana, 2020). The special value of social media in a museum context lies in their capacity to facilitate relationships with users, in a dialogical approach. Social media deconstruct the conventional view of museums as hierarchical top-down organizations, proposing instead a democratic bottom-up structure (Booth, Ogunidipe, & Røyseng, 2019), shaking the role of these institutions at their core.

Traditionally, museums set themselves up as mediators of information and knowledge, taking on a hegemonic role and offering users ways to access content on their own terms and conditions (Kelly, 2004), but social media, with their democratic structure, have put the museums' curatorship authority under discussion (Pulh & Mencarelli, 2015). This situation has often generated controversial debate and a reluctance to engage in social media activities, as extending public involvement easily reaches a point where traditional relationship models, structures, and organizational dynamics are challenged (Etter, Ravasi, & Colleoni, 2019; Styliaras, Koukopoulos, & Lazarinis, 2011). While some previous studies have perceived the inevitability of social media practices entering museums (Baker, 2017; Fletcher & Lee, 2012; Gerrard, Sykora, & Jackson, 2017), others have pointed to the tensions placed by social media on traditional museum practices (Wong, 2011; Bauer & Pierroux, 2014).

At the empirical level, this organizational translation is explored through an analysis of three Italian state museums that have included social media in their strategy, a choice found to be effective in reaching a substantial number of followers. The field work was conducted over a period of 18 months following a case study approach. Data were collected from several sources to gain a wider and more critical angle of observation into the three museums' onsite and online settings, and include national policy documents, social media analyses, interviews, and focus group discussions.

To frame and interpret the findings, the study draws on the strategy-as-practice (SaP) as conceptual frame, where strategy is seen as a socially accomplished activity (Jarzabkowski, 2005), structured around "practices,"

“practitioners,” and “praxes” (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 1996). The choice was considered appropriate to capture the heterogeneity that emerge in the “doing” of strategy, that is, how practitioners arrive at strategy formulation and implementation (Huijbregts et al., 2021; Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009). This is a relevant perspective in our context given that social media strategy in museums is mediated by the adoption of emergent structures of social media use.

To set out our argument, the paper is articulated as follows. The next section introduces the state-of-the-art for online participation in museums via social media. Section 3 introduces a framework for analyzing museums social media strategy, followed by the context and methodology. Section 4 describes our findings, with a discussion and the conclusions of the study.

## 2 | CULTURAL PARTICIPATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Cultural participation—defined as engagement in cultural activities (Stevenson et al., 2017)—plays an important role in the contemporary cultural policy debate because it implies that individuals are able to express themselves, use their creative potential, and understand and influence the world in which they live (Tomka, 2013). In this scenario, audience development is increasingly being seen as a vital part of the work undertaken by cultural organizations in their pursuit of cultural participation (Hadley, 2017). Audience development is by no means automatic; the need to adopt new participatory practices has been highlighted in several studies (Mygind et al., 2015; Nielsen, 2015; Simon, 2010), set against the background of various forms of cultural consumption where the internet has gained prominence (Fanea-Ivanovici & Pana, 2020). Online access to cultural material has noticeably changed the way people consume culture (De la Vega et al., 2019). Social media and mobile technologies are especially apt at altering the context of cultural participation, as they enable a process whereby the institutions and the public mutually construct each other’s presence (Gronemann et al., 2015). Despite being open and democratic by nature (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016), social media should be managed and directed from an organizational perspective. Museums that endorse social media as part of their cultural offer must certainly change their communication processes, and they must also give deeper thought to their overall strategies (Badell, 2015; Booth et al., 2019; Drotner, 2018).

Authority and participation are two focus points that reveal the tension (found, as mentioned, in previous studies) that museums currently face in both the real and the digital world (Schweibenz, 2011), where online participation endangers the museum’s notion of control over its content and authority over its interpretation. Despite concentrating on access, diversity, and multiplicity, museums are struggling to negotiate and accept the challenges to their authority implicit in a project of “becoming social” (Kidd, 2011).

In this setting, museums are often reluctant to engage with social media (Badell, 2015). Some institutions believe that the communication focus of a museum “becomes deliberately diluted with the contributions by the users” (MacArthur, 2007). For others, platforms akin to Facebook “are not very serious” and affect the museum’s perceived professional standing (Vogelsang & Minder, 2011). Nevertheless, social media contribute to raising the museum’s visibility, as well as expanding its message and, alongside advancing dialogue and engaging with visitors, social media help visitors to interpret their own cultural experience (Vassiliadis et al., 2017). In the literature, the authors for whom social media are an inevitable paradigmatic shift contemplate how these tools endorse traditional museum functions (like inspiring visitors) through social media expressions (Gerrard et al., 2017). These authors are also concerned with evaluating the features provided in these online communication channels, analyzing what type of content yields the greatest impact, as measured in user responses (Baker, 2017). Some authors have looked at how these platforms had pervaded the museum context, examining which social media sites are being used, to what purpose (Fletcher & Lee, 2012) and in what context (Badell, 2015).

Other scholars have, instead, entered the authority and participation debate, observing how social media are both in tension and in synergy with modern museum practices (Wong, 2011), as well as the museum professionals’ attitude toward online participation (Lotina, 2014). Bauer and Pierroux (2014) investigated the ways in which the curators’

expert knowledge and purposes can become relevant to how young people interpret cultural material, and Gronemann et al. (2015) explored how to establish, uphold, modify, and develop potential processes of co-construction on social media. From an organizational perspective, Booth et al. (2019) noted that any museum engagement with social media embraces a form of institutional change.

It is still uncertain, however, whether museums with substantial user response via these online platforms have managed or not to overcome the debate on authority and participation, and to what extent is this conflict part of their organizational practices.

SaP vision contrasts with the dominant paradigm of perceiving a strategy as a grand vision that is formally planned and executed to guide an organization's collective action in a top-down manner (e.g., Prahalad & Hamel, 2007), putting people, who perform and engage in strategy practices, back to the center of focus (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009; Whittington, 1996). SaP explores the interrelation between the wider logic of an initiative, the actors' purposive action, and the implementation of practice. The common conceptual categories for investigation of the field are all part of a whole and influence each other, rather than being distinct groupings. In this view, the implementation of any social media practice is not a clear-cut logical process springing from unequivocal managerial intentions but is a fluid and dynamic process designed to ensure that the techniques are operational. Practitioners (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009) make sense of and give sense to the museums' strategy of cultural participation, shaping their organizational initiatives and structuring their programs. In doing so, the strategy itself evolves.

### 3 | FRAMEWORK AND METHOD

To understand the implications for an organization when technology is a key element in the social agency shaping its strategy (Kwayu et al., 2020; Scott & Orlikowski, 2014), we have drawn on the perspective of SaP. This conceptual lens goes beyond the formality of strategy and intention, entering the day-to-day work of practitioners, who shape, refine, and actualize strategy through what they do (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Whittington, 1996). From a SaP point of view, strategy is a situated, socially accomplished activity (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009), and a relevant perspective in our context; given that, we are seeking to explain what museums are actually "doing" to enact their social media strategy. Within this outlook, social media approaches targeting museums' online audience affect and are mediated by the way that museums adopt (and respond to) the emergent structures of social media use. Considering this interlaced perspective, we have examined the dynamics of practice, considering them to be closely entwined with their organizational context. The process of shedding light on these dynamics also demands an analysis of the actors in action (Whittington, 2003), to explore their behavior and the decisions embedded in the museum's prevailing logics (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008).

The SaP view is in contrast with the dominant paradigm of perceiving a strategy as a grand vision that is formally planned and executed to guide an organization's collective action in a top-down manner (Prahalad & Hamel, 2007), placing the people who perform and engage in strategy practices back at the center of focus (Jarzabkowski, 2005; Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009; Whittington, 1996). SaP explores the interrelation between the wider logic of an initiative, the actors' purposive action, and the implementation of the praxes. The common conceptual categories for investigating the field are all part of a whole and influence each other, rather than being distinct groupings. In this view, implementing any social media practice is not a clear-cut logical process springing from unequivocal management intentions, but is a fluid and dynamic process designed to ensure that the techniques can be operational. The practitioners (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009) make sense of and give sense to the museums' strategy of cultural participation, shaping their organizational initiatives and structuring their programs. In so doing, the strategy itself evolves.

This approach allows scholars to grasp the heterogeneity of how social media are managed and their role in the cultural participation strategy. At the methodological level, following the SaP framework (Vaara & Whittington, 2012; Whittington, 2014), we have focused on three research parameters: *practices*, *practitioners*, and *praxes*. By bringing

humans into the strategy, SaP overcomes the weakness of other strategic approaches that are perceived as mechanical (Chan & Reich, 2007), acknowledging that people are able to get work done within wider organizational and societal constraints (Friesl et al., 2020).

The first element, *practices*, refers to the social, symbolic, and material tools through which strategy work is enacted (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009), the guidelines and routines for “doing something” (Huang et al., 2014). As an element of SaP, practices must consider both technology and social agency (Kwayu et al., 2020). In our context, social media practices in museums refer to a museum’s understanding of social media usage, as well as to the museum’s perception of the role played by social media (Chung et al., 2014) as a tool to develop and engage with its audience. The guidelines set out how the museum and, more specifically, its experts relate to its online audience, shaping different types of relationships, where the museum’s traditional authority is challenged by a more participatory approach (Schweibenz, 2011).

Looking at previous studies into museums and social media, *practices* range from a lack of enthusiasm for social media on the part of museums that tend to replicate traditional authoritative ways when approaching their audience (Cooper, 2006) to the idea in some museums that specific social media features, such as access, reach, speed, and engagement (Fletcher & Lee, 2012), are essential because online communication is how they keep in contact with a distant and heterogeneous audience (Kelly, 2010; Schweibenz, 2011).

A museum’s social media strategy is further conceptually fine-tuned as the people in charge develop and inject a certain meaning into their *practices* by acting (or not acting) upon them, leading to the second SaP element, *practitioners*, the people who do the strategy work (Jarzabkowski & Paul Spee, 2009). In the context of social media, they are the mediators between the logics of cultural participation defined at senior level and the putting of social media practice into effect. Mediation may vary according to the background situation, given that people in museums often manage social media alongside their “main” task (Lessard et al., 2017). In our setting, *practitioners* prepare the museum’s social media posts, adapting the tone of the messages on social media as appropriate, and shaping, more or less indirectly, the trade-off between authoritative and democratic relationships. In order to analyze this complex undertaking, in this study, we explored the level of autonomy enjoyed by museum social media *practitioners*, in the light of their interaction with museum directors and other colleagues in various roles, and their position within the organization.

Last, the third element of analysis reveals the extent to which social media *practices* are implemented and embedded in the organization as *praxes*, connected or disconnected from each other. The term *praxes* refers to the stream of activity that results in the strategy being fulfilled over time, and associates the micro actions carried out by individuals or groups with the wider institutions where the actions take place and to which they contribute (Jarzabkowski et al., 2007; Reckwitz, 2002; Sztompka, 1991). A museum’s strategy of connecting with its users through social media is enacted through social media posts, which carry content, timing, and associations to the real museum or to its virtual representations (Li & Xie, 2020; Noguti, 2016; Sorensen et al., 2017). Another feature is linked to the well-known authority dilemma mentioned above; previous studies have indicated that a museum’s relationship with users improves when it posts messages that leverage on the audience’s own knowledge (Gronemann et al., 2015).

An element of analysis within the *praxes* is editorial planning, which relates to the content of posted messages. Plans are important in how they contribute to shaping the museum’s overall strategy, with the analysis determining beforehand whether the plans are more or less rigid, as deliberate or emergent planning can lead to prescribed or creative strategies (Charest et al., 2016). More than in other communication channels, the *Praxes* of planning in social media is strictly linked to monitoring and evaluating effectiveness (Agostino & Sidorova, 2017), which in turn leads to generating new posts and, ultimately, to shaping the underlying social media strategy.

### 3.1 | Context

To understand how social media developed within the three museums, it is important to give a brief outline of the wider political and institutional setting. All three are Italian state museums and were subjected to a major reform in 2014,

the Franceschini reform, named after the enacting Minister. The reform gave museums a new centrality and autonomy within the Italian cultural heritage system, as stated in the website of the Italian Ministry for Arts, Cultural Heritage and Tourism (MiBAC, 2020):

Since 2014, as part of a reform package from the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Tourism, important steps were made to reinforce policies for the protection and promotion of our heritage, giving a **higher level of autonomy to our museums**. Under the museums decree enacted on 23 December 2014, museums evolved from being recognised as simple offices of the public arts authority to being institutions with technical and scientific autonomy that carry out protection and promotion activities for their collections, ensuring and furthering public access. (Bold inserted)

This section highlights the importance of the change and the major role of communication, with museums being “recognized” as autonomous entities separate from the Superintendence.<sup>1</sup> According to this change, museums are charged with shaping their own strategies and encouraged by central government to find their own identity. MiBAC induced museums to pursue the two objectives of increased cultural participation and digitization. In both his mandates, Minister Franceschini strongly promoted these two lines through official and nonofficial channels.

### 3.2 | Empirical strategy

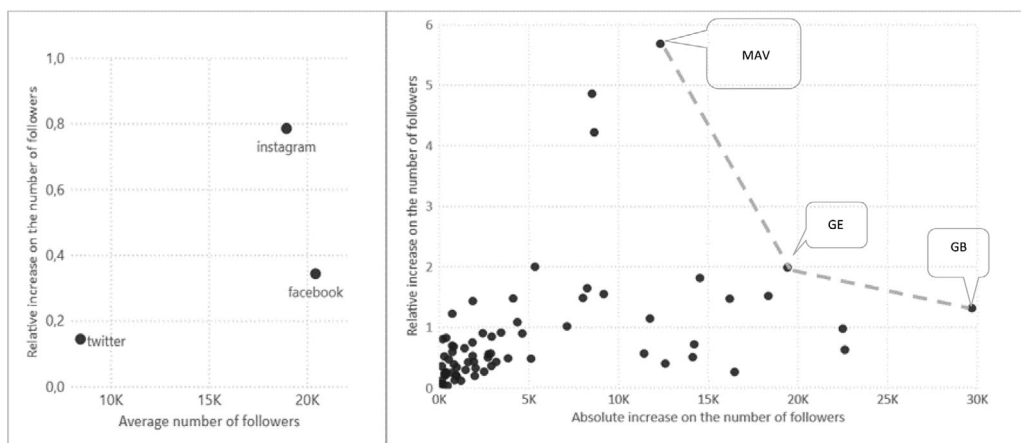
At the empirical level, we adopted a case study methodology as the means for fully exploring a given phenomenon in its natural setting, in order to understand and interpret how people create and maintain their social worlds (Denzin, 2010; Yin, 2014). Case study methodologies are deemed particularly useful for investigating process dynamics (Liguori, 2012) and grasping the complexity behind the unfolding and interweaving of practices, practitioners, and praxes enacting museum’s social media.

Sampling was contingent on how Italian state museums perform on social media platforms, selecting the cases pursuing online audiences, on the basis of metrics used in previous studies (Agostino, 2013; Agostino & Sidorova, 2017) from among the museums placed by MiBAC on its social media monitoring platform. In terms of metrics, we looked at the number of followers and their growth on Facebook and Instagram over 1 year (2019), discarding Twitter because growth and penetration were not significant for these institutions.

We identified three exemplary cases, whose absolute growth was also their maximum relative growth. Over the year, Galleria Borghese (GB) of Rome attracted another nigh-on 30,000 followers, the equivalent of a relative increase of 130%. Gallerie Estensi (GE) in Emilia Romagna gained a further 20,000 followers, an increase of 200% compared with the previous year, and the Archaeological Museum of Venice (MAV) secured an additional 12,000 followers, 5.7 times its initial fan base (Figure 1).

Data were collected according to a multiple source strategy over a period of 12 months. Social media channels were the main source, coupling the quantitative assessment adopted in the sampling with a qualitative analysis of the content and pace of the social media interactions. Official documents and digital channels (such as websites) also provided good sources of information about the museums and their strategies. The interviews were key (Yin, 2014) in capturing the range of perspectives from people in different positions and for triangulating information. “Snowball sampling” techniques (Gioia et al., 2010) were used to gather information during interviews with the museum directors, curators, social media officers, external companies, “practitioners,” and the general director of MiBAC. We conducted 11 interviews in total, each lasting between 1 and 2 h and, where possible, recorded and transcribed verbatim. When recording the interviews was not allowed, detailed notes were taken and transcribed straight after the meeting.

Data were analyzed according to an interpretive and abductive reasoning (Lukka & Modell, 2010). A first within-case analysis starting from the primary sources, with two authors independently identifying the relevant subcategories in relation to the framework of analysis. The authors, again independently, then mapped the patterns of



**FIGURE 1** Fan base growth

dynamics, looking at the three dimensions of the SaP frame. Last, a cross-case analysis was carried out to compare the emerging patterns and the relevance of the dimensions. Backed by abductive reasoning, the emergent categories and patterns were checked in all the data analysis phases and fine-tuned against the framework literature and previous studies on social media participation.

## 4 | FINDINGS

The results of the three cases are analyzed in this section and each case is viewed through the parameters of the SaP framework: practices, practitioners, and praxes.

### 4.1 | Archaeological Museum of Venice

The thing about our museum is that we are in St Mark's Square in Venice, which says it all! And the ticket to the Doge's Palace is valid for us too [...] The problem is that 90% of our visitors come from abroad and most don't really understand who we are, as we are attached to the Correr Museum. There is a sign telling visitors they are in another museum, but they just don't get it. So they go from the Correr Museum, which is all about Venice, to all our archaeology, leaving them scratching their heads. This made us think [...] We don't have our own identity. It's a problem of quality not quantity, as there was never an issue about visitor numbers, and we are now targeting Venetians, as they don't know us. (Social Media Manager)

#### 4.1.1 | Practices

The comment above exemplifies the cultural participation strategy in MAV, which is at the basis of its social media strategy. After gaining greater autonomy in 2014, the director embarked upon a gradual and broad reformulation of the museum's role in and for the city of Venice. As mentioned, MAV has plenty of visitors, but mostly as the result of the combined museum ticket, meaning that visitors arrive without really knowing about MAV and, as said, "bemused."

In a city like Venice, overflowing with culture and museums, MAV struggles to get recognized or be distinctive, and risks being a walkway for tourists and disregarded by Venetians.

MAV sought to create a new strategy based on high quality participation, targeting Venetian people by highlighting its overlooked uniqueness:

We are the oldest museum in Venice. We know we are one of the earliest in Europe, but nobody in Venice knows they have an Archaeology museum. The children know because they come with their schools, we have mummies and stuff like that. Apart from them, nowt. (Social Media Manager)

The new strategy placed at its center the users with whom the museum wished to engage, rather than its collections, going away from the traditional model, where content and language is driven by the curatorship authority. The museum's starting point was to observe Venetians through social media. It identified two large and popular Facebook groups, "Venice and Venetians" and "Venice yesterday and today," for people with a common interest in the city. MAV latched onto these accounts, sharing its posts to put itself into the sightline of Venetians on social media.

MAV's approach was progressively shaped by this social media exposure, and was not defined or established systematically in advance. The director was well-aware that curators and "normal people" (informant's words) have different perspectives in how they view cultural heritage and they see different things in artwork. MAV progressively combined the museum's traditional hegemonic approach (Graham, 2012) of "transmitting" knowledge (informant's words) with a more relational online and onsite approach to its visitors. The museum's relationship with its users was reciprocal from the beginning, as for MAV, it is more important to observe and listen to its users' narrative and reactions than to hang on to an authoritarian role. In practice, the museum mediates between the curators' vision and that of its visitors, merging the latter's input with the former's knowledge of its collections.

We started to observe our visitors, their behaviour, what they look at and what they skip, how long they spend in a hall looking at one item and what they say. We used all this to shape our communication strategy [...] our ideas are also based on what people ask us. We realised that they love stories, legends and everything to do with mythology.

#### 4.1.2 | Practitioners

MAV's practices on social media outlined in the first section were shaped by the director's decision to put two museum guides in charge of these platforms. This choice was partially determined by a lack of funds for new staff, but there was also the explicit desire to see social media as part of a broader strategy to bring the museum to a wider audience. Both guides are young, with a grounding in educational activities and accessibility programs, such as museum tours for blind people. Their new role of social media officers was added to their functions and they are still running the guided tours. They stressed the value of retaining their dual role, which kept them in close contact with onsite visitors, helping them to understand the public's expectations and requirements:

As guides, we often work with schools and have an ongoing relationship with the public [...] In other museums, the communication officer or whosoever is in charge of communications is hunkered down in the office, we are nearly always around visitors in the museums' halls.

Regarding social media, however, they had no background in online communication, and had to start from zero. This lack of resources meant that, alongside interacting with other people, their training was based on haphazard opportunities to go on courses and practical workshops, as they explained:





**Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia**

22 gennaio 2019 · 🌐

#IMPOSSIBLEQUESTIONS

"Excuse me, why do you have a statue of Voldemort?"

"Excuse me?"

"The statue of Voldemort, Harry Potter's enemy, why is his statue here?"



Actually, our artwork is the basalt portrait of an Egyptian, it dates back to the 1st century BC and it comes from the collection of Ascanio Molin.

#museoarcheologicovenezia

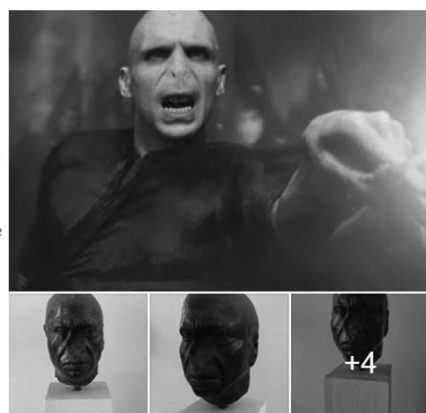
#ledomandeimpossibili

#harrypotter

#voldemort

#ralphiennes

#jkrowling



Commenti: 71 Condivisioni: 79

**FIGURE 2** Was Voldermort an Egyptian?

In 2018, the museum's management let us take some ESF (European Social Fund) courses, and some run by our regional government and the university. We learnt how to manage social media platforms. And we worked hard [...] We got tips from the youngsters on internships and we spent three months doing things differently. And it all worked out fine.

The museum director gave them a substantial *level of autonomy*, almost a free rein to develop new ideas. The benefit of being exposed to both online interactions and onsite visits soon paid off, with the guides' gleanings from the public proving extremely popular on social media platforms. In 2019, they held a day on "impossible questions," answering questions on Facebook to the most common or bizarre questions asked by museum visitors. For example, they realized that the public had found a name for an ancient Egyptian male head with no nose, calling him "Voldemort," as he closely resembled the Harry Potter character, so they used this moniker to promote the museum online, while rectifying the misconception (Figure 2).

The two guides enthusiastically pointed out that their social media success, which led to a better understanding of their visitors' perspective, has been invaluable in their guided tours.

We ran a guided tour based on the success of our online "impossible questions," and it sold out immediately. People keep asking us to repeat it.

### 4.1.3 | Praxes

MAV's social media strategy was translated into a daily initiative inserted into the yearly program, which is modified on the basis of the users' reactions, simply by measuring what works on social media and what does not, as the following comment highlights:

We prepare an annual plan and, for example, at the end of the year, we look at what's working and what we missed out, and go from there. We set up a yearly skeleton plan, fixing the main topics for certain days of the week.

Instead of being rigid, the annual editorial plan reflects the effectiveness of user engagement, and assures internal sustainability in terms of content generation and language setting.

For us it makes sense to have an annual outline, it means that we have mostly covered the entire year more or less straightaway, and then, month by month, we go into the detail of the topics we've decided on. We ask ourselves: "What do we talk about this month in our bite-size mythological snippets?" We get our ideas by trying to understand what people like and learn more about it. Mythology and legends, for example, are a big hit.

The digital content relates often to the physical collection or recall episodes with visitors inside the museum's walls. The museum's most recent online sections include Mondays with a competition on small wonders, Tuesdays with mythological snippets and Thursdays with scenes from the museum's history. The sections are flexible enough to be easily adapted and are usually rather ironic in tone, like those on impossible questions (Figure 2). This format is also used when creating extemporaneous content, often connected with social media or trending topics in and on Venice. One of the most entertaining tactics used by MAV was not inspired by its visitors but by studying other museums' social media.

So we tried to imitate the Sandretto Foundation in Turin. It's a modern art museum with a superb promotional team, just that they've drawn the short straw with the Egyptian Museum of Turin, in the sense that everyone goes there and couldn't care less about them [the Sandretto Foundation]. So what they did was to photoshop VIPs at their museum and we did the same.

This is how MAV started to look out for famous people visiting Venice and then photoshopped them visiting the museum, matching each person to an item in the museum's collections, and then posting the result online. Michael Jordan, for example, was placed alongside a three-meter-high statue of Agrippa in the museum's courtyard (Figure 3).

## 4.2 | Galleria Borghese

The point of social media is that they make people familiar with museums and artwork, and do the groundwork to draw them into the museum, so I'd say it's both things. To get more visitors into the museum and to introduce them to our artistic and cultural heritage [...] we must remember that social media are always an extra and can never replace a live visit.

### 4.2.1 | Practices

GB considers social media to be a natural extension of a public museum's mission of promoting, preserving, and enhancing the country's cultural heritage. To do so, the museum has to capture people's attention and make them appreciate cultural heritage, its quality, historical and present-day value, and national and world-wide importance. The social media approach set out by the director is vast and goes beyond GB's perimeter, so that "people become familiar with historical and artistic heritage." The director is aware that GB needs a different language on social media to align its narrative to the public's, so it describes itself as a mediator:



Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Venezia ✓

1 luglio 2019 · 🌐



+++BREAKING NEWS+++

Avvistato Michael Jordan al Museo Archeologico. Dopo una visita al cortile storico, ammette: "Agrippa è più alto di me" 🤔

Michael Jordan is in Venice. In the historical courtyard of the Archaeological Museum he admits: "Agrippa is taller than me" 🤔

#museoarcheologicovenezia

#venezia #venice

#michaeljordan #jordan

#agrippa #agrippavincefacile



👍👎❤️ 504

Commenti: 34 Condivisioni: 77

**FIGURE 3** Michael Jordan at the Archaeological Museum of Venice—but is he?

In the end, it's how we convey things that makes the difference. It's up to us to change the way we communicate to reach our public, not the other way round [...] offering original material with high scientific value means a massive effort of cultural mediation and that's not a given. (Communications Officer)

The museum's work to adapt its attitude to reach a wider public in the social media domain, whilst maintaining a high standard, required translating highly scientific content into popular narrative.

GB's broader cultural strategy is reiterated, underlining the fact that it does not have a problem with visitor numbers, but that it is crucial to "increase the desire to participate" (Museum Director) and that social media platforms help in this course of action.

The point of social media is that they drive desire, which, sad to say, is the key to any consumer spending, however sophisticated. (Museum Director)

From the communication officer's perspective, people had always been the ones coming to the museum, and it was now the time for the museum to go to the people.

The museum wants to get into people's homes, those of our visitors, potential visitors and maybe never-visitors. We can't know what will be, but we can reach them and so convey our cultural message anyway.

A wide public implies staging a broad perspective of the collections, able to capture many different interests: "We must work on making our offer as continuously ambitious, far-reaching and diverse as possible."

This broad cultural exertion to increase the public's "desire" for culture and artistic heritage was then linked to the actual museum, introducing the concept of identity. The informants pointed out that diversification should not prevent GB from building a recognizable identity, "our content should speak immediately to our public, tell them who we are" (Communications Officer). For this reason, they came up with a single coordinated museum image, and also restyled all their online sites and platforms. In their perspective, social media platforms have inevitably become the museum's public face.

Although this image is also built through the public, its visitors and followers, GB is aware that social media platforms, if use correctly, are engrained in participation because participation is what they were made for, and they deliver increasingly more captivating ways of participating. While this process entails a journey of knowledge on the part of the public, it is also a path of discovery for the museum, which sees its collections through the eyes of its audience. GB can learn what people like and the traces left on social media helps it to understand if it is neglecting something in its collections.

We often upload our visitors' material to social media, so the flow goes both ways. There is a back-and-forth not possible in the real world [...] we were able to take a sort of fly-on-the-wall view of our visitors' tastes, we learnt what they like best, and what is missing. If we bang on about masterpieces and neglect items that are just as important, then we have helped to push this bad habit of only pointing out the great works. (Museum Director)

#### 4.2.2 | Practitioners

For social media we need people who know their stuff, and who also know how to talk to the public, convey the language of an image, combine different languages. It's a highly complex job description. (Museum Director)

We have both communication experts and art historians, and this work spans both worlds [...] We have people with the job of making the content and an external company deals with processing the images, uploading the posts and responding to users. (Communications Officer)

GB is aware that is quite difficult to find a person with the right combination of skills to handle social media in a museum, which is why it gambled on team work, using an external company for image processing and posting on the different platforms. This company works alongside an art historian and an intern with a background in communications, who take care of the text and pictures, plus two other people, one being the communications officer, engaged in coordinating the curators' and the communication experts' worlds.

An important feature is that the external company works closely with internal museum staff, identifying initiatives in social media networks that can be extended to GB's own social media channels. Because this is their area of expertise, they can exploit creativity in a digital setting, a key skill according to the communications officer for people working on a museum's social media, "creativity must be generated within a digital setting." This perception has allowed GB to come up with projects based upon digital platform features, rather than just adapting the projects to those fea-

tures. For example, in its recent section, “Across Art,” it tells the story of the museum’s masterpieces through a Spotify playlist with well-known musicians.

We created a playlist on Spotify with songs by contemporary Italian artists around a theme set every week, a great theme connected to masterpieces in our collections, on things like love or war or freedom. So we release the playlist inspired by this theme on the Saturday and, on the Sunday, we put out on YouTube a recording of the words of one of the songs spoken by an actor. (Communications Officer)

Despite this flexibility, the creative people’s proposals must fit the museums editorial lines and any new section is discussed with the director, who believes that “the museum has direct responsibility for what it puts out on social media.” After receiving the director’s broad consent, the team works on its own to produce the content. The single authoritative figure of the museum director is then replaced by the balance within the team of curators and communicators.

By now, most of the sections go online on their own, we all know what is expected, the editorial guidelines and so on, so it would be pointless to refer back to the director all the time. Now we really only ask her to approve new sections, mainly if we want to launch something more substantial. (Communications Officer)

### 4.2.3 | Praxes

GB works out a monthly editorial plan, blocking in the fixed online sections and events, as well as other one-off proposals, like special guide tours and exhibitions. This skeleton outline is filled in every month, or even on a weekly or daily basis. The plan also contains additional information, such as what things are happening on that day, nationally and internationally, for example, mother’s day, earth day, and so on, or what is trending online, adapting to historical-artistic insights relating to GB.

We have a monthly editorial plan based around our events, with a series of weekly online sections, which are fixed and just run along easily. And then we add all the museum’s temporary or special initiatives, like the exhibitions [...] We often post historical-artistic articles linked to the calendar, for example on “landscape day,” we upload photos of landscape-related artwork in our collections, with some high-brow information. (Communications Officer)

The fixed online sections can be changed or updated on the basis of user response. GB does try, however, to publish them regularly, each week at the same time “to create continuity and familiarity with the sections.” This continuity does not imply a static program, as in practice, GB’s posts in each section will switch between recognized masterpieces and unknown artworks, between sculptures and paintings, or between baroque and archaeological items. The constancy is a double-edged sword, as, while it helps to create familiarity among users, it is also a technique that simplifies the museum’s work “to understand the best days and best times to publish something on social media.”

“There has been much improvement” in GB’s online posting since 2019, now the museum posts less but each post contains more analysis, communicated always in a simple and captivating language.

The museum held a special initiative in 2019 on Gian Lorenzo Bernini, one of the museum’s stellar artists, every week presenting a different work situated outside GB in churches, other museums and places of culture around Rome. The online posts showed the artwork in relation to the museum and its location on Google Maps (Figure 4). These initiatives tell us that museums turn to many digital inspirations (satellite maps) for their social media postings. Align with the *practitioners* which skills look after creativity developed in the digital setting.

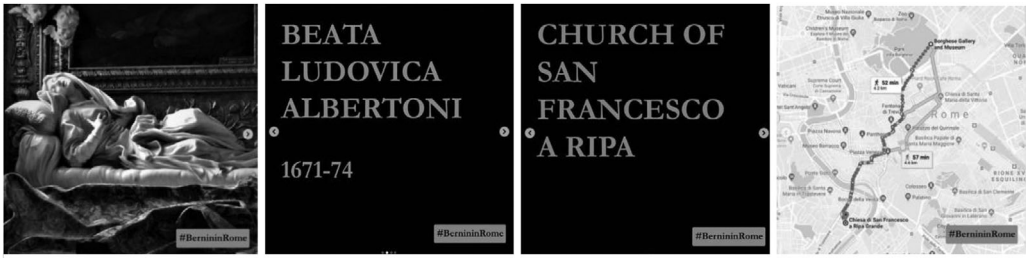


FIGURE 4 GB's outreach

### 4.3 | Gallerie Estensi

GE has several major collections but it is relatively unknown as it's not a "brand" like the Uffizi or the British Museum. So we rely heavily on social media to draw attention to our small provincial museums and their artwork. We use them firstly to give us an identity, and secondly to present ourselves clearly and simply. [...] Thirdly, we promote our scientific research projects and, alongside curious onlookers, we reach people whose function in life depends on them. (GE Director)

This comment gives a good idea of the challenges for GE in the interpretation of its director, who places the "important" collections at the center, but understands that the museum should be recognizable to different audiences. Social media are a component of this path.

#### 4.3.1 | Practices

For GE, creating its identity is a key issue in its social media strategy and, more broadly, in its cultural participation strategy. This is a hard call, partially because of the museum's rather unusual location and partially because it is a "diffuse museum" (informant's words). GE consists of five museums in three small cities; the main museum is in Modena, as are the Estense University Library and the Estense Lapidary Museum; the National Art Gallery is in Ferrara and the Ducal Palace is in Sassuolo. Central government took the decision to combine the five museums in 2014, to call a halt to the fragmentation of cultural heritage management, and because of the history of the collections, which had belonged to the House of Este:

This is one of the largest family collections in Europe, and merging the museums reflects their history. (Curator and Social Media Overseer).

Creating a unique identity was hence a major issue, one that involved social media on a grand scale, and which was behest with operational challenges:

The only way to make it work was to put them together under one label. At the beginning, there were five Facebook accounts and I don't know how many on Twitter. They were sort of fighting each other. (GE Director)

The idea was that putting them all under the single name of GE, including in all social media, could help them "create an itinerary through different places and unique collections" (GE Director).

For the director, social media are the “reality we live in, a half virtual and half physical mashup [...] and I think we can’t do without it.”

In her perspective, if managed properly, these platforms are a good way to capture people’s attention and bring them closer to the museum.

Museums are nothing like history. Basically there is everything in these pictures, violence, bravery, wars, hope, love, but despite everything being there, they are still difficult to interpret without the right knowledge. (GE Director)

Since expertise plays a relevant role, GE is actively concerned with retaining its museum authority through a curatorial approach on social media. It has no intention of changing the messages it wants to convey as a museum, only to satisfy its followers:

[...] it’s not ideal for a museum to tag along behind, as it should be us leading and the others following.

### 4.3.2 | Practitioners

Social media management in GE depends on three different positions, the director, a curator, and an external organization that operates in the sector of social media marketing and management. The dynamics work as follows:

The director points us in the general direction, setting objectives, proposing the topics to be addressed and is the one that holds the reins of everything. (Curator and Social Media Overseer)

The external organization, follows the director’s guidelines to define a weekly editorial plan, which is reviewed by the director and the curator, the latter acting as a bridge between the external company and the rest of the museum.

We tell the outside firm what we want and they propose an editorial plan, we review it, they make the changes [...] We clearly give them the photos, the right expertise, etc. (GE Director)

According to the curator, the advantage of having the external organization is that “they give us insider insights,” including how to transmit content between different channels, evaluate progress given by the number of followers and their reception of the content proposed, and can also advise on the type of content to sponsor on Facebook. However, the external organization’s level of autonomy within the operating team is low, their job is to propose how to present the content, not what to present.

The direction we want to set in choosing contents and the contents themselves must come from us. (GE Director)

The museum is satisfied with its level of control over the content and the messages to transmit to the public, “we have seen from social media that users slowly learn new things from us and even start asking more complex questions” (Curator and Social Media Overseers), but handling this area without a specific internal person is taxing.

It would be better if internal staff could act as a link; even with a supplier who provides this service, it’s clear that it’s essential to link up internally. This connection comes and goes rather [...] If people were working directly for the museum it would be much easier to react to unexpected situations, be more agile in following trends, be more responsive. (GE Director)

They acknowledge that, as a small museum, they do not have the resources to set up an interdisciplinary team for social media, which would be the ideal scenario, but, all things considered, they are aware that their current approach goes as far as they can.

We are still at the trial stage. We are growing, trying to understand what works and what doesn't. It's more complicated than it seems, as there must always be interaction between the person who knows the artworks, be it the art historian, custodian, restorer or architect, and the person who knows how to present them to the public. We'd really need a team of people, as nobody has the ability to do everything [...] It's a pity that we can't do it because we just don't have the right people; actually, we don't have people full stop. As you know, Italian museums must cope with 40% less staff, especially in the technical and scientific areas, so this is the best we can do now. (GE Director)

### 4.3.3 | Praxes

Social media activity is framed around the museum's calendar, in particular around the cultural events for a given year inside the museums. Everything published on social media is dependent on the museum's exhibitions and new acquisitions.

We plan our exhibitions one year ahead, sometimes more. And we work on them for a year, or two. So we start off early with our communications, the exhibition layouts, the prices [...]. We even have time to see what will work and what won't and we cover ground we know very well and get well prepared. (Curator and Social Media Overseer)

To balance its long-term cultural program, GE prepares a weekly editorial plan with what is going to be published on social media. There are no regular weekly online sections but rather a sequential approach where GE tries to publish the same amount of material for each of the five GE museums, as well as by each of their curators:

Even for the magazine, everyone's articles are included and we try to cover various topics, and especially the various locations, keeping it all in balance. (Curator and Social Media Overseer)

Occasionally, GE launches special initiatives that involve a series of social media articles or a social media campaign, for example, showing all our favorite artwork,

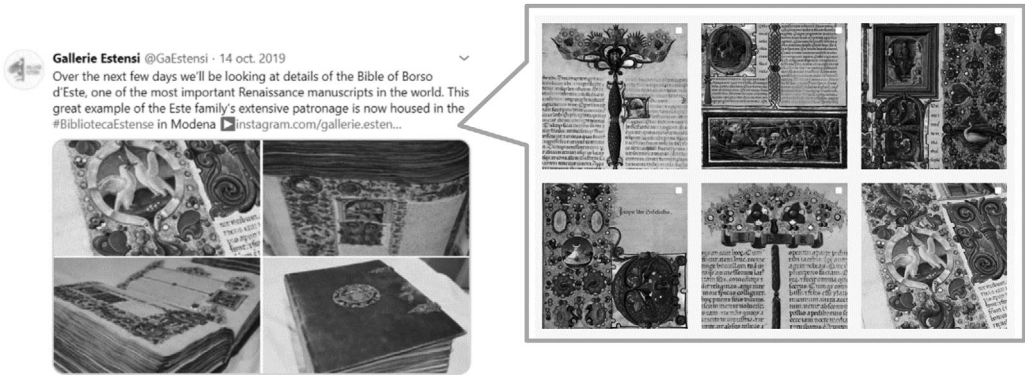
[...] not only the curators', everybody's, from the custodians to the restorers. In my opinion, that was a successful campaign because it signalled that the museum speaks to everyone, not just the curators. (GE Director)

Alongside the special, temporary initiatives and ensuring that all five museums are equally represented on social media, GE taps into topics trending in the sector (e.g., museum weeks), drawing on the external company's advice about what is going on within the broader cultural sphere. Before GE takes the next move concerning whatever it intends to post, it looks at the external company's quarterly report on the performance of the various channels.

This is important to see if what we're doing is ok, or whether we must change direction. (Curator and SM Overseer)

In terms of content, GE focuses on certain features of social media platforms.





**FIGURE 5** The Bible of Borso d'Este, made in 1455–61 for the then Duke of Ferrara, set to capture the imagination of online viewers

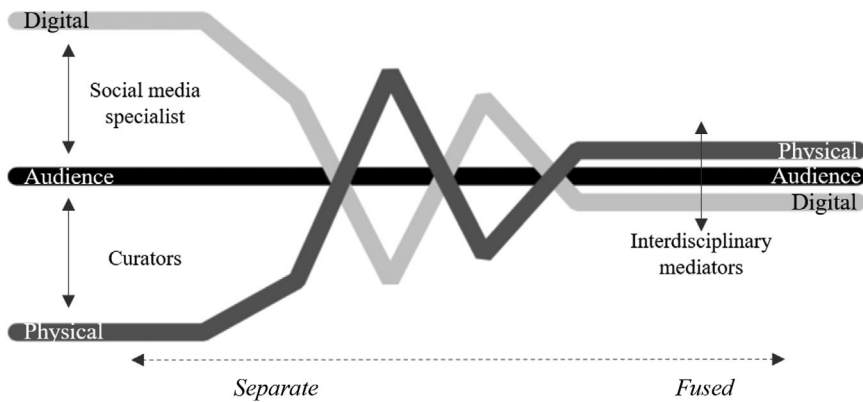
Facebook, for example, is mainly for promoting events [...] Twitter is more specialized, with slightly more niche content, and other museums can retweet our stuff. Instagram is the most informal. (Curator and SM Overseer)

GE chooses a weekly theme, something adorned and fascinating like the Bible of Borso d'Este (Figure 5) or a broad topic like superheroes, deploying this material—books, paintings, artefacts, and sculptures—in all five museums, giving a narrative and more details during that week.

## 5 | DISCUSSION: MAPPING THE HETEROGENEITY

The three cases, each in its own setting, are the empirical basis for framing more general considerations on the process of enacting social media strategies in museums. Applying the SaP conceptual lens allowed us to carry out an in-depth study into the actual implementation of their social media strategies. The exploration highlighted commonalities and dissimilarities between *practices*, *practitioners* and *praxes*, inducing a conceptualisation of how a strategy unfolds.

All three cases highlighted a common element that gradually became ingrained in their *practice*, in that social media led museums to move away from the traditional hegemonic approach of curatorial authority (Kelly, 2004), drawing closer to the language of their online audience. It emerged that this had not always been their intention; the initial impulse was for everything to be on social media because the medium was seen as a “mandatory channel” for audience engagement. The considerations about their role, whether to be more or less democratic, came later, with the day-to-day implementation and the observation of their audience’s interaction online. The study found that museums also took a similar inductive path when they became aware of their “physical” museum presence on social media. This intersection between digital and physical emerged out again progressively during the implementation of their strategy, when they were considering in their approach if and how they wanted the two layers to overlap. This second element was strictly interconnected to the third common element, that of the need to introduce new skills to handle social media. The museums took different choices and, as revealed by the informants, their decisions were based on contingent constraints in resources. To explain, GB, with its greater financial resources, opted to invest in a twofold way by setting up an interdisciplinary internal team to develop content, while externalizing the most specialized tasks where social media professionals can bring greatest value through their wider experience and access to different sectors. GE, facing stricter resource constraints in both finances and people, settled for externalization alone. MAV, the museum with the highest financial constraints, opted for developing skills internally by leveraging on young “physical” guides who revealed themselves to be both enthusiastic and effective in dealing with social media.



**FIGURE 6** Polar approaches to the physical–digital divide in cultural participation, ranging between keeping the digital and the physical worlds separate, to the two being blended

These elements delineate the common dimensions and issues for museums constructing their digital identity. However, the in-depth exploration of the cases made it possible to grasp the subtleties and nuances, leading to the second period of reflection, this time on the dissimilarities. These considerations became evident in the detailed analysis of the *practitioner* and *Praxes* elements. To draw more general considerations, we framed the discussion on the diversities by defining two theoretical polar types, these being conceptual categories into which the cases can be positioned, offering a more general lens for use by both scholars and practitioners. Figure 6 helps to explain the discussion visually. The audience is placed at the center and the core element of diversity stems from the physical–digital divide. The two polar approaches to cultural participation range from keeping the digital and physical worlds separate and distinct in audience engagement, to the two being blended.

The first polar type is at the extreme left of Figure 6. Here, there is a sharp divide between the physical and digital participation environments. The output of this choice is a *praxis* of social media posts underpinned by digitally native technologies, which can build an experience intentionally very different from the on-site cultural occasion, and requires *practitioners* to be proficient in the many platforms involved. This option allows cultural institutions to increase their expertise in digital and social media languages, getting nearer to a previously unknown public, but it requires advance planning to delineate a distinct digital image that is not in conflict with physical and traditional choices of participation.

Among the three cases, GB is exemplary in its desire to maintain a distinction between the two realms, a position it reached along the process. Its social media posts combining playlists and satellite maps are clearly calculated to provide the museum's online audience with an entirely different experience from a physical visit, rather than being an extension.

The other polar type, to the extreme right in Figure 6, creates a digital identity by merging and reproducing the physical layer in the digital realm. Such a hybridized format must be based on observing, interacting and co-creating content with users, enabling a spontaneous and highly interactive environment. Cultural institutions making this choice can set up their digital image as a reflection of their physical portrayal, or even vice versa. However, if the process is not handled properly, there are two risks: the potential perception that the physical museum experience is of lesser value and the impression that curatorship and heritage knowledge is not central to understanding cultural value. MAV was the case closest to this polar type, and the museum overcame these risks by using narratives extracted from social media to turn onsite visits into more amusing and participative experiences. The *practitioners* in the MAV case had to combine their acquired social media skills with their expertise as physical guides. The physical and digital realms crossed over sequentially between the polar types, fabricating a sort of “half virtual and half physical mashup” (informants' words).

## 6 | CONCLUSIONS

User participation has been presented as a new paradigm for the public and non-profit sectors (Hadley, 2017; Mazzei et al., 2020; Osborne, 2018; Reilley et al., 2020), with scholars analyzing the outputs/outcomes from various angles. Social media have powerfully entered this user-engagement turning point, with a large body of research focused on the users' output, studied through their followers' online traces and user engagement (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Alonso-Cañadas et al., 2020; Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Begkos & Antonopoulou, 2020; Bellucci & Manetti, 2017; Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Sabate et al., 2014). Previous studies are instead less concerned with analyzing the practices behind the most visible outputs, which not only hide the changes to the processes and skills involved in online interaction, but also, at a deeper level, to the role that public institutions play in this process, whereby content authority becomes democratic (Arnaboldi & Coget, 2016)

Public institutions have a responsibility that certainly goes beyond engaging and interacting with users; they have a public mission and, theoretically, higher authority linked to their role and sectorial competencies. This traditional and more authoritative role is now being challenged by the openness and democratic nature of social media (Etter et al., 2019; Torfing et al., 2019). The purpose of this study was to analyze how organizations are facing this challenge and the diversity of the emerging modes. Museums were exemplary in this study of social media implementation, with its hidden facet of strategic and operational challenges. The results provided answers, but also opened avenues for future research.

By adopting SaP as a conceptual lens, the redefinition of authority was revealed to be progressive, shaped by praxes and practitioners, something carried unconsciously but never not controlled. The museum context, being traditionally hegemonic, allowed us to expose the importance of this control, which comes in various forms. The polar type delineated in the paper *conceptualizes* elements of an organization's (here, the museum's) strategy and digital identity. The user is always central and social media a more democratic space, but authority over cultural heritage knowledge, a museum's key public function, is never delegated.

Aligned with previous studies (Arena et al., 2010; Kwayu et al., 2020; Martin, 2010), the practitioners' actions taken within the implementation of social media strategies were found to be embedded in the museum's practice along with all other elements belonging to the framework, each influencing one another reciprocally. It also emerged that, in the context of this study, (digital) technologies play a more central role, shaping cultural participation strategies when practitioners experiment with new praxes, trying out novel languages and techniques and observing the public's reaction. This situation is linked to social media being open and democratic, and only partially governed by their "deploying" organizations. These results pave the way for future studies on digital participation in other settings where there is an authoritative role, but with different implications; for instance, in policies for education or health. Furthermore, more extensive studies could be conducted to analyze the museums' style of communication and level of engagement achieved.

At the theoretical level, the findings of this research have contributed to public sector studies on engagement in the digital age (Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016; Begkos & Antonopoulou, 2020; Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Sabate et al., 2014), by looking at how the day-to-day implementation of digital participatory practices shapes different strategies and levels of public involvement. Our in-depth research captures another element not mentioned in previous studies on social media in public services, that of the divide or overlapping between the digital and physical experiences. Social media are described as the museum's public face and the most powerful communication channel to reach users who have never visited a brick-and-mortar museum. The process of implementing social media ensured that museum senior management are aware of the possible "confusion" between the two experiences. This topic is worth investigating in future to understand how a different mix of physical and digital settings can influence user engagement and also the basic function of institutions with a public mission.

Last, the limitations of this study must be outlined. The methodology adopted allowed us to conduct an in-depth investigation of organizational dynamics, which had been conceptualized though abductive reasoning and theory

(Lukka & Modell, 2010). The results can be expanded to a broader range of purposes and exploitation, but this conceptualization cannot be considered as a generalization. A further limit is linked to the concentration of strategic choices in a few institutions and actors, mainly museums pursuing online audiences through social media and their directors. Although the directors are embedded in the environment and constrained by their available resources, they have a certain degree of freedom in setting their strategy. Further research is needed to explore how the framing changes in a setting where senior level decisions are shared among multiple actors and where institutions are more reluctant to engage in social media.

## ORCID

Michela Arnaboldi  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0950-454X>

Melisa L Diaz Lema  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-0062-1686>

## Note

<sup>1</sup> Superintendence are peripheral ministry bodies with the remit of protecting and promoting Italy's cultural and landscape heritage.

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