The Role of Information in Art Museum Communication Process

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Abstract

The way that nowadays world is constantly changing influences both individuals and organizations. They have to act in an innovative, fast environment, pursuing their goals. The amount of information increases and it becomes difficult to filtrate and transform it. This is a conceptual paper, which aims at analysing art museums in nowadays society from a communication perspective. It starts out by describing how the museum institution managed to adapt during time and the way it modified under the action of innovation. It describes the needs and functions that such an institution has in society and corroborates them with the information sending process, offering scenario in which an elitist approach of the art museum and a leisure oriented approach can coexist.

Keywords: art museum; communication; information.

1. Introduction

The world is constantly changing. The days when people used to ask for change to make a quick call from the phone booth in the street corner or when after spending two hours watching the new movie at the cinema downtown one knew he had to wait a whole week for the movie to change seem to be long forgotten. The changes that led to the nowadays incredibly fast, highly informed, communicative and technology-wise state of the art society are indeed major and the way they are perceived by individuals is very diverse. Depending on the amount of information possessed, or simply on the inner structure or on character, people may regard this as a chance to gather as much knowledge as possible and grow; others could see this as a cliché while some might become nostalgic and think of the past as simpler, happier period. Regardless of the way it is seen, the world today provides each and one

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of us with both challenges and opportunities. Acting as a response, individuals pursue their goals and based on the information they have (which is atomized, imperfect and hence incomplete) they make decisions and contribute with their actions, transforming the data/producing more information. While organizations aim at profit, people seek satisfaction, but the overall effect is that innovation occurs, leading to progress. Such innovation needs resources, and the economic context starting with the 2008 economic crisis (the end of 2007 in the United States, according to some authors) left severe marks on this area for all actors in the market. Innovation kept occurring or was produced, better yet not only in the economic sector, but also in all other social areas.

Innovation is a characteristic of the competitive market; it generates information and leads to change and progress. Given all of the above, we can state that change based on transformation of information is found in culture, in all the entities inside the cultural area and therefore in museums, specifically in art museums.

2. Evolution and innovation in the museum institution

The way people see museums is, as any other bias process, different from one person to another. If one might think of such an “institution” as a dark, cold place where old or strange objects are stored and shown to the few interested people, others might associate them with learning or with having fun. Judging by the purpose of these organizations, according to the Law of Museums and Public Collections, no.311/2003, modified and updated by Law no.12/2006. The functions of the museum, presented in the law mentioned above are:

- collection, conservation and restauration;
- research and scientific development of the patrimony of the museum;
- dissemination of research findings;
- education of the public.

If a historical perspective should be considered, we could go back to the time of the sumptuous palaces and royal court painters and think of the collections of paintings (mainly portraits) kings used to own and consider them as the first private collections, which could be visited by few privileged ones. Yet, public museums, in the true, current sense of the word appeared later. The first institution was funded at the end of the 18th century and was regarded by cultural critics as “alienated, alienating [and] inauthentic” (Hetherington, 2006, p. 576). We can state that, at their apparition, museums were condemned for exactly what was to become their most known function - collection and conservation. Quatremé de Quincy criticized these relatively new institutions for their “removal of artifacts from a supposedly living, authentic cultural context and placement of them in an inauthentic and fabricated social space and their reduction of artworks to things in need of preservation rather than the manifestation of ongoing, living, creative process of creation” (Hetherington, 2006, p. 576). During time, the perception of museums has changed and instead of being rejected and disappear, they adapted to the evolution of society and specialized, focusing on different field, sciences, phenomena or even people.

The innovation process managed to surpass, at the theory level, the technological progress. Therefore, at the beginning of the 20th Century, Frederick Kiesler thought of the Telemuseum, which basically consisted of “sensitised panels that that would act as receiving surfaces for broadcasting images of masterpieces to one’s home.” (Staniszewski, 2000, p. 10) Even though such an invention would have helped educating the public art-wise, the technological support for it could not be constructed. A simulated version was presented at the 1927 exhibition at the Anderson Gallery in New York City, USA (Staniszewski, 2000, p. 10). Technology finally managed to catch up transforming the Telemuseum in a virtual museum. An example of such “museum” is the Google Art Project. Unfortunately what Kiesler imagined as an interactive multimedia experience, can be regarded as a walk in a “deserted gallery space devoid of fellow visitors or even staff, where crude arrows take you from silent room to silent room.” (Danny Birchall, 2012, p. 1) Apparently, the virtual museum is accused of showing an inauthentic, lifeless display, just as the museum itself was perceived in its first years.

At the end of the 20th Century, in his essay on museum without walls, Malraux states that due to technological changes, “the museum could now be liberated from the space of the universally concerned yet location tied museum and be made accessible to all in virtual form. […] Bringing artifacts together in one space provides them with a single rather than dispersed context for interpretation that allow for new insights about technique and style to emerge through comparison with works of other times and places.” (Hetherington, 2006, pp. 597-598)
Stepping a bit closer to the virtual museum, the museum without walls transgressed the alienation accusation brought to those before it, but received other critics in change. Maurice Blanchot considered that “making things available, does not make them accessible” (Hetherington, 2006, p. 598). In other words, just providing the customer with the representation of the art work and simulating the contemplating environment does not succeed to offer the educational component that a direct interaction with the museum would.

Emerging in 1990, the new museum “participates competitively in the field of leisure industries, against pastimes as diverse as cinema going, shopping, and attending sporting events.” (Message, 2006, p. 603) According to Kylie Message, new museums are described as physically new institutions that exist globally and aim to be defined primarily against a highly self-conscious image of newness, which refers to the style of architecture, the approaches toward installation and the modes of publicity circulating around the museum, rather than what they exhibit.

3. The museum institution between education and competition. The market.

Analysing the historical evolution of museums in general and art museums in particular from the perspective of innovation offers us the possibility to corroborate the relationship between information and the institution, on the one hand, with the museum functions on the other hand. Finding out where information and implicitly communication stand is relevant for the present paper in order to determine the role of the art museum in the market.

According to the legal framework, the museum institution „possesses juridical personality and its activity is financed by self generated revenue and other funds from the state or local budget” (Law of Museums and Public Collections, no.311/2003, modified and updated by Law no.12/2006). In order for it to manage to become financially auto-sustainable and to fulfill the missions stated by the four basic functions, the museum needs to remain competitive on the leisure activities market and manage to constantly attract visitors. The necessity for introducing the financial component in museum’s action arose both from the “worldwide unbridled growth in building and remodelling of museums” (van Aalst, Boogaarts, 2002, p. 195), thus the increase of competition and from the fact that “these days, museums have an economic objective that guarantees their survival and profitability” (Camarero, Garrido, 2008, p. 7).

The art museum has to face fierce competition, both direct and indirect. Direct competition comes from other museums, or even art galleries and auction houses hosting temporary exhibitions. Indirect competition refers to the whole range of pastime activities. Due to the increasing number of museums and types of leisure activities (including mass entertainment) and lack of free time, museums need to differentiate themselves and transmit their offer to the public. We can therefore state that the art museum is involved in a communication process. The process is very ample, works in several directions and consists of several transmitters and receivers (mainly all stakeholder categories). The information transmitted by the institution towards the public is supposed to both educate and promote the museum. We can speak about sending meaningful information in order to inform and facilitate the learning process of the visitors, on the one hand and about advertising the exhibits, exhibitions, events, other services and attracting visitors on the other hand.

4. Information and the Communication process

4.1. Metacommunication

The researchers of the Palo Alto Institute analysed the communion process and managed to determine the logic of communication (Cabin, Dortier, 2010, p. 79), the most relevant axiom for our study being the one stating that „the simple presence of a person is in fact an act of communication” (Philippe, 2010, p. 70). According to an extract of the paper Pragmatics of the human communication. A study of interactional patterns, pathologies and paradoxes (1967) (Lohisse, 2010, pp.136-137), Paul Watzlawick strats from the premises that „a human behaviour does not have a contrary. In other words, there is no such thing as «non-behaviour», or to put it even simpler, it is impossible not to have a behaviour.” (Lohisse, 2010, p. 136) Therefore, in any interaction, the human body transmits a message, making an act of communication. The second premise of the author it that „one cannot state there is no «communication» unless it is intentional, conscious or fulfilled, meaning when mutual understanding is reached.”
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(Lohisse, 2010, p. 136). The author sees the behaviour as a message, which is sent either voluntary or involuntarily, as a whole which is the sum of all nonverbal, kinesic and proxemic elements.

Based on these premises, Paul Watzlawick formulates the axiom of metacommunication: the possibility of non-communication does not exist. (Rus, 2002, p. 21) Applying the axiom to the communication process of the museum, we can state that even if the museum does not intentionally act in a certain way or inform a certain public, the communication process still exists. This case of an art museum not actively informing the public can either be regarded as uninteresting by the public, or it can rely on a strong pre-constructed brand (with negative long term effects).

4.2. The value of information

According to the Dutch authors, J.J. van Cuienburg, G.W. Noomen și O. Scholten în Communication Science, there are three types of value an information can comprise.

Informative value

The reason and the manner in which the value of information within a message can be measured was determined by Claude Elwood Shannon and Warren Weaver based on the Mathematical Theory of Information, in 1949. This theory is a mechanistic one, which although uses „the particular acception of informaton, that of an assembly of signals lacking meaning [...] and is indifferent to the content attibuted by the transmitter and the receiver” (Lohisse, 2010, p.40), manages to explain the need for this measurement, „in order to avoid degradagation of information and improve quality of transmitions.” (Van Cuienburg, 2010, p. 28). They offer a series of mathematical equations in order to make these measurements possible. Furthermore, the authors establish an equation from which derives the value of information: „as the degree of uncertainty of the receiver regarding the message on situation X increases, before the situation has occurred, the informative value of the message that afterwards manages to elude the initial uncertainty also increases” (Van Cuienburg, 2010, p. 28) To sum up, the authors state that the informative value increases as probability of the respective event to occur decreases. This is a very important aspect useful in developing the communication strategy.

The mathematical model is based on the effective and efficient transmission of the message and therefore a redundancy is established, which can be understood as a safety net in overcoming noise within the communication channel. In a nutshell, it is prooved that though suprimation of redundancy can be cost effective, this operation can make the message become vulnerable to outer noise. (Lohisse, 2010, p.33) In designing the communication, the volume of information and the flow should be calibrated to the used media.

Semantic value

Whenever in a relationship, as it is named by Daniel Bougnoux, between a transmitter and a receiver a message transfer occurs, the transfer is actually made based on the meaning given to the signals according to social conventions (Van Cuienburg, 2010, p. 26) From a semiotic point of view, the possibility to send information based on signs is not solely a result of social conventions, but derives from the human capacity to „produce, use and exchange signs and symbols.” (Sebeok, 2009, p. 25) According to semiotics, the entire intelectual human life (and implicitly the communication process) operates using signs and symbols. As Charles Peirce stated in his definition, „a sign or a representamen is a prime which maintains with his second, the object a triadic relationship so authentic that it can determine a third party, named its interpretant to maintain with the object the same triadic relationship it itself has with the object. The triadic realtionship is authentic, meaning the three members are connected to eachother in a way impossible to be reduced to a sum of dyadic relationships.” (Radu, 2005, p. 277)

The two processes which are the basis of attributing meaning to reality ar semiosys, defined as „the capacity of a species to produce and understand the specific types of models that are necessary for the transformation and codification in a personal manner of the perceptual entering” (Sebeok, 2009, p.194) and representation, defined as „the process of attributing a certain form to a given referent” (Sebeok, 2009, p.194). We led the semantic value of information to this semiotic approach because „the semiotic side of the information eventually comprises the transmision of a knowledge horizon [specifically] the amount of information regarding the extension and depth of the given situation” (Van Cuienburg, 2010, pp. 26-28) is an aspect that can also be found in semiotics. Semiotics
speak of the human signs, which can be captured in a sign. The denoted referent is not something specific in the world, but is a prototype of a category. The sign can be deliberately extended in order to comprise other types of referents which seem, through association or analogy, to have something in common with the denotant, extensional process also known as connotation whereas the new referents are known as conlates (Sebeok, 2009, p. 23) The communication process uses all types of signs defined by semiotics, because the semiosis and the representation are characteristic processes of the human mind and language is intrinsic to the individual, hence giving importance to the knowing and understanding of the process which gives meaning to reality. In order for the process to be conducted successfully, the encoding and decoding rules need to be mutually understood by the transmitter and the receiver.

Pragmatic value

The pragmatic value of information refers to „whatever happens to the received piece of information or its effect on the receiver” (Van Cuijlenburg, 2010, p. 26). This is in direct connection with the last and most important stage of the communication process: the result. Communication literature states that the pragmatic value of information cannot be evaluated in the same way as the formal informative value which can be problematic in the present context. In the nowadays world, where in terms of audience measurement, Killbourne states that each individual is exposed to at least 2000 commercial a day (Kilbourne, 2009) it is very difficult to transform a person in a recipient of the message transmitted by system. Moreover, in a situation where the members of society are overwhelmed with messages belonging to advertising, the latter is transformed in a powerful educational force of society; commercials manage to sell more than the product they were designed for: „values, images and concepts of succes and prize, of love and sexuality, of popularity and normality.” (Killbourne, 2009). This way it becomes more and more difficult for the message of the organisation to make itself understood. The pragmatic value of the message is truly reached when the receiver realizes that the system does not actually try to sell a product, but speaks of the organization, its mission, vision or values, attitudes or especially designed programmes.

4.3. Information and the art museum

The information transmitted by the museum should have all three characteristics stated above. In a world similar to the one described by Killbourne it is very difficult to design and aim right messages at right audiences. Even more, in such a fast moving world, abounding in information, art tends loose its recreational character. The case of museum in general and art museums in particular is special due to their need to educate the public, hence transmit factual information, which is not easily understandable, and commercial information in order to enhance the number of attracted visitors. In order to face the competition, the message developed by the museums tends to lose the complex nature of the signal broadening access and making room for two different approaches: one that states that the communication should be of elitist nature target initiated consumers and specialists and another that focuses on a form of mass entertainment, aimed at all society members. The first approach would attract customers led by own motivation (as an inner component), thereby an internal stimuli, while the latter would focus on offering incentives that should act as external stimuli of the individual.

Taking a position in either of these categories would make the institution loose an important part of its public and confront with both disappointment from the “excluded category” and decrease in revenue and inability to meet financial objectives. Therefore a need for a differentiated communication arises.

5. Edutainment

Starting from the idea that “learning is fun”, museums have increased the number of undertaken subsidiary activities and became part of what Hannigan calls edutainment: “the joining together of educational and cultural activities with commerce and technology of the entertainment world.” (van Aalst, Boogaarts, 2002, p. 197) Even though a museum cannot change the product (work of art) to fit the marketplace, the product mix can include: (Camarero, Garrido, 2008, p.3) the collection and the experience created by the objects in the collection, the related services, the symbolic capital and also a series of peripheral services, such as stores, restaurants and libraries. Such
an approach makes the user become more responsible for what he chooses to learn (Addis, 2005, p. 732) and manages to combine the public driven by motivation and the public expecting incentives.

6. Conclusions

Art museums are institutions of great importance in the development and innovation process of nowadays society, due to the information they can provide to the public, therefore educating it. The rapid development and increase in the number of museums made room for a reinterpretation of their main purpose and the way they place themselves relatively to the public and to the other organizations offering services from competing ranges. Hence finding the equilibrium between an elitist and a consumerist approach is vital in order for museums to fulfil their main functions and remain competitive on the leisure activities market. Using the information in a right way transforming and internalising it in order to improve the character and features of the institution on the one hand and calibrating information in order to suite different categories of public would lead to a coherent and effective communication process.

Involving customers and making them feel in charge, but also responsible for what they choose to learn may be the best way to attracting both motivation - driven and incentive - driven individuals.

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