

Online or not online - that's the question!

Online presence of museums and cultural institutions in times of Covid19.

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Keywords: *science communication — pandemic — museums — citizen participation.*

CHNT Reference: Monamy, E. (2021). 'Online or not online - that's the question! Online presence of museums and cultural institutions in times of Covid19.', in CHNT – ICOMOS Editorial board. *Proceedings of the 26th International Conference on Cultural Heritage and New Technologies*. Heidelberg: Propylaeum.

In the years 2020 and 2021 we faced a situation we could have not imagined. Living an epidemy is possible, we had few regional ones in the past years. But living a pandemic is totally new for 99% of the world's population. We all had to adapt somehow between home-office and home-schooling. Looking at museums or cultural institutions we see totally different and contradictory approaches to online presence, science communication and citizen participation. In this presentation the author would like to reflect on the last 15 months examining especially visitor's expectations, reality and if online presence is an advantage for museums or not. We will not differentiate big and well-known museums as Louvre (France), Metropolitan Museum (United States of America) or Kunsthistorisches Museum (Austria) or small regional museums as Römermuseum Wien (Austria), Welterbemuseum Hallstatt (Austria) or Museum für Urgeschichte(n) Zug (Switzerland) and site museums as Keltenwelt Frög (Austria), Bibracte (France) or Pfahlbauten Unteruhldingen (Germany). And we will mainly focus on the opinion from outside i.e., the sight from the contemplator as other submissions will focus from the inside i.e. the museum's view. We will have a quick assessment from one institution totally turned towards participation and see how lockdowns affected its work.

Expectations

Museums' online presence did not start with the pandemic. Some museums had already a homepage filled not only with visitor's information but also with background facts such as description of some specific objects, history of the building and collections. Some had children's corner with online or downloadable games. With the first lockdown worldwide life came to a standstill. Businesses had to rethink their communication habits to customers or fear to fall into oblivion. And "out of sight out of mind" is the worst situation for a B2C oriented establishment.

Museums or cultural institutions had to find new communication channels to attract online visitors. A homepage was not enough. People locked in at home wanted to be entertained in their homes in new or unconventional ways. We all learned very quickly how to use online meeting programs as webinar, zoom, jitsy or Microsoft meet. Short impulse conferences about individual objects or specific not well-known aspects of the collections or fun facts about the museum to tantalise future visitors

have been expected. Big exhibitions have been announced and could not open to public. Here a glimpse behind the scenes or the installations, and ideas about exhibition concepts without revealing too much would have been a perfect fill until the reopening. Or explanation on how the big exhibition as the KHM's "Tizians Frauenbild" is prepared for example: like where do the paintings come from or how are they transported, have they been restored just before would have been interesting questions to fill the blank and make you want more and look forward to the exhibition.

Small museums could have used zoom to present the museum, its collections, its history to stay in mind of future visitors. This is not a big investment and still a small step towards a wide audience.

Huge museums had the great idea to open up their collections online. They feared not to get visitors as soon as travelling would be possible again. But on the contrary, this made people interested in seeing the objects in reality after seeing it in the web.

Limits of online events

Some big museum having the financial and technical means started with online conferences which seemed to be well appreciated. Other museums had to invest first in the technical aspect and in advanced training of their employees. And suddenly there seemed to be so many different online shows, conferences, etc. that interested people were submerged with online events. At first, during some months, supply and demand balance each other out. But rapidly institutions and museums had to face the lack of interest. In autumn 2020 people were satiated from online work and online leisure activities. Furthermore, facing screens during hours is tiring and people lost their concentration. Here in Vienna where we had 4 lockdowns people got fed up very easily and they were mostly looking for light entertainment. The various regulations led to people only trying to organise and manage their everyday lives. In this phase they did not look for anything cultural. They were overloaded.

The example of Archeomuse

Small cultural institutions focused on citizen participation such as Arge Archäologie, Erlebnis Archäologie, ArchöoNow or Archeomuse had to stop their attendance activities and reinvent themselves. But how to transfer an antique cooking class into an online cooking show? The ambiance is not the same, the knowledge transfer is mostly one-way. It became a passive consumption instead of transfer and participation! Let me tell you some words about my experience: I had to find a new way to stay in the loop without cooking classes, children's workshops and museums tours. That's when I decided to focus more on the blog that existed but due to lack of time could not be updated regularly. Actually, I have noticed that the blog has been very well read and that this continues to this day, despite an almost normal life since May. Through the blog I could continue to reach out to customers and interested people. Another format was offered. I started to have monthly free short online meetings called the "Archeomuse Aperitif" where one topic around food in archaeology or history is presented as an impulse conference with a chat afterwards.

But still, you cannot compare these activities with personal cooking classes or conferences. The atmosphere is totally different: you do not meet liked-minded people, there is no exchange between laymen and archaeologists.

Conclusion

Going online is, as we saw, not a very simple action for cultural heritage institutions and museums. And for once the financial aspect is not prevailing. It is more the feasibility of transferring citizen participation toward online activities.