

Learning from the Best – What Can Museums in Croatia Learn from the International Museum Practice of Web 2.0

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Summary

Since the first appearance of Web 2.0 in 1999 we have witnessed constant increase in the number of users of its services, especially the society networks and blogs. This trend has eventually encouraged the museums as well to study their possibilities and to start implementing them actively, which is borne out vividly by numerous examples from the world museums. In this paper the most representative ones will be analyzed, i.e. those which make it possible to determine the diverse purpose of using the society networks and blogs – from the promotion of the museums themselves and the cultural heritage they take care of and attracting of real visitors to communicating with virtual users as members of the community within which the museums are active. The latter usage fits into the new mission of the museums and their perception as potential promoters of social changes and active participants in various social processes. The second part of the paper will provide comparative analysis of the examples from Croatia, giving recommendations to the national museum society itself regarding the ways in which actions should be undertaken in order to make maximum use of the mentioned Web 2.0 services.

Key words: social media, museum communication, web 2.0, heritage, virtual community, blog, Facebook

Introduction

Since the appearance of the Internet and the World Wide Web a lot has changed in the global information environment. Today the Internet is a network of different computer networks (network of networks) interconnected in circuits whose dimensions are far beyond imagination. The latest estimates say that in the world today there are more than 1.73 billion Internet users¹. Along with its development the communication models kept changing as well and they rendered the on-line contents identifiable characteristics. This is particularly evident in the new Web generation, i.e. Web 2.0, which, apart from the standard communication models, promotes also the new, so-called social model where communication occurs among all the participants and in all directions. Based on Web 2.0 the contents like blogs were created and then also the increasingly popular and inevitable social networks. The term blog (blended from Web log) appeared in the 1990s and until today the virtual community of its users has grown into the so-called blogosphere which includes more than 133 million blogs followed according to some estimates by more than 346 million users². Blogs are publications on the web, similar to common websites, characterised by periodical publishing of articles in the reverse-chronological order. They feature all the elements of websites and although the static characteristic of the contents is partly common, through their basic characteristic of being regularly updated and the possibility to communicate with the readers by means of the comments option, blogs already belong partly to the mentioned Web 2.0. The term popular *social networks*, supported by social networking service, covers the combined and well-connected web communities of users that communicate by means of different communication platforms. The best known such web services are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr. Facebook, the currently biggest social network has more than 600 million active users², whereas the number of Twitter users has been estimated at 200 million³ with a tendency of further growth. Obviously, the potential of Web 2.0 and of social networks has been recognised the same as once the potential of the Web itself. This comes as no surprise considering the main characteristics of Web 2.0 which makes it possible for the user, apart from searching the data and providing information, to actively participate in the design of web contents. Every user of

¹ Royal Pingdom. *Internet 2009 in numbers*. <http://royal.pingdom.com/2010/01/22/internet-2009-in-numbers/> (21.6.2011)

² The Future Buzz. *Social Media, Web 2.0 and Internet Stats*. <http://thefuturebuzz.com/2009/01/12/social-media-web-20-internet-numbers-stats/> (21.6.2011)

² MSNBC. *Goldman to clients: Facebook has 600 million users*. http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/40929239/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/ (21.6.2011)

³ BBC. *Twitter co-founder Jack Dorsey rejoins company*. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-12889048> (21.6.2011)

the service or platform which acts on the Web 2.0 principles can add, delete or change the contents and participate in the discussions on a certain topic. And this is what makes Web 2.0 especially socially attractive, and at the same time powerful as well.

The world of museums and Web 2.0

Over the time the museums have recognised the importance of new technologies and the Internet, but as it very often happens, the adjustment to them and to the resulting new forms of action is slower than in some other social areas. The presence of the museums on the Internet in the form of websites has become almost a must, and there is an evident increase in the development of the presentation of collections and items from the museums and other heritage institutions on-line. The availability of the material in the digital form on the Web is certainly socially desirable, but the design and maintenance are often time and money consuming. Nevertheless, the use of information technologies has brought to significant changes in relation to the communication between the visitors and the museum.

One should keep in mind that the World Wide Web environment covers the following communication models: *one-to-one* (i.e. user to user), *one-to-many* (i.e. user to users – web pages and blogs) and *many-to-many* (i.e. users to users – social networks and wikis)⁵. The first two communication models are widely present in the museums and they have helped in building and determining the authoritative position of the museums and their respectability and relevance as professional institutions in the field. However, the museums offer also the authenticity, which has been, maybe only seemingly, undermined in the so-called post-museum environment⁶ and where communication by means of social networks is based on the *many-to-many* communication model. However, such an approach can result in a stronger on-line interaction and interest of the users for the museums and their collections, as well as for the new interpretative moments and richer dialogue with the audience. However, all this requires a clear attitude and strategy in the museums and similar heritage institutions.

Expressing a clear attitude and design of a clear strategy are in a way hindered by the observed scepticism and discomfort in the interaction with the audience and leaving the communication and interpretation space to the visitors in the way usual for Web 2.0. Reading the recent discussions on this topic, it is difficult to understand the noticed paradox. Regarding their basic function the museums, namely, collect and keep items of the heritage which are, as witnesses of

⁵ Russo, A; Watkins, J; Kelly, L; Chan, S. *How will social media affect museum communication?*. // 'Proceedings Nordic Digital Excellence in Museums (NODEM)', Oslo, Norway, 2006. http://eprints.qut.edu.au/6067/1/6067_1.pdf (10.5.2011)

⁶ Ibid.

their time, primarily representatives of a certain time, society or community. This makes the desire to research and present these items in a proper way to the community completely acceptable for the museum experts, and nobody opposes this. However, at the same time the statements can be found such as: "don't feel comfortable in using 'work' time for something that overlaps into a 'social' activity"⁷ or "to what extent is the museum willing to promote community knowledge over its own?"⁸. They undoubtedly witness the dilemmas of the museum experts regarding the usage of these new forms of communication with the public. These dilemmas are particularly hard to understand in the publicly owned museums, since they, as public institutions serving the community, should be the ones to recognise the importance of social networks and "social" activities. However, some may say that a high percentage of museums and other heritage institutions in the Western world is of private character and therefore less burdened by performing the social function. Similarly, the mentioned perception of the job and the evaluation of leisure time versus time spent working is problematic, since everything is time consuming. Why would time spent on blogging be less valuable than the time spent on usual curatorial work? These statements show the strong prejudice about what "serious" work represents. The impression is that leisure time and its quality are less important than the time spent on the job. However, the museums are also part of leisure time activity; that is, they are thus qualified within the bureaucratic apparatus. Does this mean that such a qualification makes them less valuable?

Let us mention again, the main components of Web 2.0 are its openness and user orientation⁹ which represents new challenges, but also opens up new possibilities for the museums and other similar heritage institutions. The Internet has increased the visibility of museums and their collections and has made them more easily available to the users; however, Web 2.0 has provided preconditions for new communication platforms.

One of them is blog. In fact, blog is currently the most desirable form of Web 2.0 used by the museums. Although first blogs appeared as early as in the 1990s, the first museum blogs were recorded as late as 2002, and we know them as *infoTECMuseo*, *Museum People* and *Modern Art Notes*¹⁰. Even today the

⁷ Dicker, E; *The Impact of Blogs and Other Social Media on the Life of a Curator*. J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds). // *Museums and the Web 2010: Proceedings*. Toronto: Archives & Museum Informatics. Published March 31, 2010. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2010/papers/dicker/dicker.html> (25.5.2011)

⁸ Russo, A; Watkins, J; Kelly, L; Chan, S. *How will social media affect museum communication?* (10.5.2011)

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Spadaccini, J; C. Sebastian. *Radical Trust: The State of the Museum Blogosphere*. J. Trant and D. Bearman (eds). // *Museums and the Web 2007: Proceedings*, Toronto: Archives & Museum

museum blogs are rare on the Web, witnessed by the fact that according to 2007 estimate¹¹ there are only two hundred of them. This in itself shows the fact that museums unwillingly and with difficulty opt for risky and unpredictable project with unknown effect and uncertain outcome¹².

On the other hand, experts emphasise that the advantages of a blog are great, that they are easy to start and use, inexpensive and least damaging to the current information policies of the museums. The museums can use blog, as well as social networks, to go beyond the frames of their community and to become part of the global events. In this they have to satisfy two conditions – they have to have a constant connection to the Internet and be capable of maintaining their web contents in the English language if they do not belong to the English speaking area. It is a well-known fact that the English language is the *lingua franca* of the new age and that it is considered the official language of the Internet world. Due to this fact the bi- and multilingual websites and blogs have become everyday part of the Web.

In the first place, blog can serve to connect with the current visitors and users, by exchanging ideas and information and by stimulating various discussions. In this case the communication is facilitated by the very fact that the medium of the blog, as well as of the social network in general, is based on informal approach and it is optional for the participants. The users find it easier to provide a comment if this may be done anonymously or using a nickname, but even in this case the author of the blog still keeps all the rights of editing and deleting the comments. Furthermore, blog is an excellent means of promoting museums and their activities, and may be used for expansion and attracting new users and potentially future visitors. The fact needs to be kept in mind here that a great part of the social network users belongs to the younger population which is sometimes part of the museum non-visitors. They require a specific approach, responding well to the Web 2.0 rules – informality, openness and innovativeness – which is why these forms of communication can only be of help to the museums in attracting this problematic part of the potential public. The presence of museums on the social networks and the existence of museum blogs provide a new public image of museums as institutions which keep pace with new technologies, close to the young, who understand their language and are not afraid to get involved in the projects with immeasurable results, all this in order to be closer to the members of their community.

Regarding responsibility for the museum blog, by analysing the existing examples we have noticed that in some museums this is the job of one person only. It

Informatics, published March 1, 2007. <http://www.archimuse.com/mw2007/papers/spadaccini/spadaccini.html> (25.5.2011)

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

is usually the blog of the institution itself, having the character of an official channel for the communication with the users. Not so often there are museums with several blogs edited by several persons, usually curators interested in specific topics, as well as the description of collections and jobs they perform. Some museums use the approach in which every project, regardless of whether it is an exhibition, workshop or any other specific project has its own special blog. The most striking examples are the blogs that record the creation of temporary exhibitions. It happens often also that the institution has one blog that represents a museum, with several persons, usually curators, being responsible for its management, i.e. writing and publishing articles on the blog. In this way the continuity of publishing articles is ensured, as well as the diversity of their contents and a larger span of topics creating the feeling of unity and togetherness within the institution.

Letting the curators manage the blog does not necessarily mean that this is additional work for them, but rather it is considered part of their professional work. This means that they are expected to independently use the necessary services and to make the entire process, from the idea and writing of the article to designing and publishing it on the blog, on their own, since by understanding the social networks and by active participation in the entire process, each participant can best approach the task, feel the "pulse" of the network and act in compliance with the users' requirements and their own preferences and discretion. In this way the curators can also experience the entire project of blog management as their own project, and this may in turn motivate them to get involved with greater dedication. It should also be mentioned that in cases when several departments of a museum manage the blog (e.g. curators, IT department or Web department) the entire process is slowed down and is subject to unpredictable and unnecessary complications.

When starting a blog its purpose and basic topic need to be well considered. In principle, one may speak about two main types of museum blogs. One, that primarily addresses its community, and the other type of blog is of a more professional nature and addresses the museum professionals. One classification mentions also blog as curator's portfolio where the curators present certain aspects of their work and interesting facts bringing closer in this way the curator's job to the public, at the same time rendering the museum a human note.

Museum blogs are often of limited duration, which is in fact rather far from being characteristic of the blog form. The reason for this lies in the fact that they have been designed exclusively in the function of one project, usually, as already mentioned, in the function of temporary exhibitions which are excellently promoted and popularised by the specific insight into the process of their development and very interesting '*behind the scenes*' approach on the blog. The users play here a very important role since on the blog they can provide interesting ideas or suggestions while the exhibition is in the phase of being created and

thus they can participate in its front-aid (content level) and formative evaluation (display elements).

The attendance rate of the blog, including its success, are maybe most affected by the frequency of publishing new contents, regardless of whether this refers to articles, photo materials or videos, because these keep the readers constantly interested. The diversity of blog topics is also an important factor which ensures greater attendance rate and more permanent readers, but the main idea and the blog topic should be always kept in mind. Publishing of two articles (i.e. posts) per week proved to be optimal, whereas rare updating and displaying of new contents leads usually to the reduction in the number of active readers. One should also keep in mind which is the potential and target audience so as to form the topics and contents in compliance with their needs and objectives. The blog will be the more successful if it manages to reach its audience and if it establishes the dialogue with it. One of the parameters of a successful blog is also the number of comments realised per article. Referring to a blog as a marketing aid should be made with caution since this is not its primary task. If blog, as well as any other social network, is used exclusively as means of promotion, they very soon become uninteresting to the users and thus fail in their purpose. Smartly designed, interesting and well visited blog is the best marketing an institution can wish for.

Apart from the blog, various **social networks** have proven as excellent. The advantages of social networks such as Facebook include easier access to the users' opinions, simpler presentation of the museum activities and a kind of low-budget marketing. For social networks many equal rules and pieces of advice are valid as those mentioned for the blogs. The difference lies in the fact that on social network the basic idea is not regular publishing of articles, but rather provision of short pieces of information, sharing of interesting links or initiating discussions on the forum. Social networks serve for strong connecting among people who share common interests. One of the frequent objections to social networks is their unpredictability in operation, changes they bring and the number of users. The museums cannot predict in which ways the social networks and the information published on their services are going to be used, what number of people participate in a social network and which is its scope, which results in the impossibility of making any long-term planning of activities or of the duration of participating in such an environment. Because of many dilemmas, the lack of research in the area of social networks and their overall unpredictability there is need to a kind of *radical trust*. Radical trust is a term which refers to the trust that the institutions must have towards the rules of conduct and the operation of social networks when they decide to use them. In this sense Darlene Fichter says: "*We don't have a million customers/users/patrons ... we have a million participants and co-creators. Radical trust is about trusting the*

community..... *As an online community we come up with safeguards or mechanisms that help keep open contribution and participation working*"¹³.

Examples of using Web 2.0 in museum practice

As already mentioned, statistically looking in relation to the overall number of blogs on the Web, there are few of the museum ones. However, it may be said that there is quite a number of them which are of high quality and interesting. This leads to the conclusion that although the museums need a long time and a lot of motivation to get involved at all in such a project, those that eventually opt for it, take this job very seriously and invest a lot of efforts in order to keep the blog at a high quality and respectable.

In compliance with the earlier typology of the communication model on the Web, several examples will be given that stand out by the contents or organization. The first one is *Eye Level*, the Smithsonian American Art Museum blog which in the description, almost in the manner of the museum mission explains the representative mission of the blog which is quoted here in full: "*The name Eye Level imparts a sense of clarity to which the blog aspires. The name refers to the physical experience of viewing art, but it also plays on the many roles and perspectives that make a museum a reality—roles that will come into focus here. (...) Using the museum's collection as a touchstone, the conversation at Eye Level will be dedicated to American art and the ways in which the nation's art reflects its history and culture. The discussion will extend beyond the walls of the Smithsonian American Art Museum's collection to include other collections, exhibitions, and events. Eye Level will also document the extraordinary collaboration between curators, conservators, handlers, historians, enthusiasts, critics, exhibition and new media designers, and of course bloggers that has motivated the past and present of American art history*"¹⁴. All this shows that the blog belongs to the group of museum blogs which serve to present the museum and its work, based on the desire to communicate and discuss the American art among the blog readers as well. The blog is managed by several curators who publish new articles relatively often and regularly. Each article provides key words, i.e. tags or labels, to facilitate the search, and it is equally possible to divide it into nine different social networks. However, let us be sincere and say that such a blog can be established in America precisely within the Smithsonian, the only museum group at the federal level that is particularly keen on an excellent public image.

In the well-known London Victoria & Albert Museum with a long tradition they opted for a different approach. They organize, namely, special blogs for every

¹³ Russo, A; Watkins, J; Kelly, L; Chan, S. *How will social media affect museum communication?* (10.5.2011)

¹⁴ Eye Level. <http://eyelevel.si.edu/> (4.6.2011)

major exhibition or project. Thus on the blog *Creating the Cult of Beauty* all the details can be read about the respective exhibition, from the organisation and the entire process of design to the very opening and finally closing that is planned in July of this year. In his latest article on the blog the curator of the exhibition says: “*It is hard to believe that The Cult of Beauty has now been open to the public for two months. I still enjoy going down to the galleries and hearing the reactions as visitors see the exhibition for the first time, as they take their first glimpse into Rossetti’s bedroom, step into the projected Peacock Room or come almost face to face with Eros. I thought I would use this, my final blog post, to suggest some other Aesthetic buildings and events you might like to add to your itinerary. To echo the words of many online retailers, ‘If you enjoyed The Cult of Beauty you might also like to try...’*”¹⁵. The blog therefore acts in the typical 'behind the scenes' manner with numerous comments and positive reactions.

An example of blog which is not institutional, but can be called a museum blog is *Museum 2.0*¹⁶ managed by Nina Simon, a well-known museum exhibition designer and author of the book 'The Participatory Museum'. Her blog addresses primarily the museum community, and deals with a wide spectrum of museum topics. Nina Simon publishes articles minimally once a week, has a large number of readers, responses and comments and is an excellent example of a blog that acts as a platform for information and ideas exchange, offering at the same time also a place for discussion.

Unfortunately, the museums in Croatia have not yet shown courage to start their blogs and therefore there are no national examples to present.

When speaking of social networks, Facebook leads regarding the number of users and therefore, any major museum in the world has its open so-called page within Facebook which, like *profile* for individual users, serves the organisations, institutions, etc. as a form of participation. There is also the option of *group* which can be founded by one or several Facebook users with the aim of connecting with the people sharing the same interests. The popularity of a group is seen in the number of group followers who receive regular reports (i.e. news feed) on their *wall* about new information sent by the group. In Croatia the situation on social networks is much better than the blogger one. The museums in Croatia tend to accept this type of communication more. The preference to social networks over the blogs can be explained by the fact that forming of groups or profiles on Facebook requires minimal time and is completely free. Sending information, invitations or links is very simple and efficient. Several dozens of museums in Croatia out of two hundred of the existing ones can be found on

¹⁵ *Creating the Cult of Beauty*. <http://www.vam.ac.uk/things-to-do/blogs/creating-cult-beauty> (4.6.2011)

¹⁶ *Museum 2.0*. <http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/> (4.6.2011)

Facebook, but the fact that the entire process of accepting and using social networks in Croatia is still in its experimental phase is confirmed by the fact that the majority has been registered as individual users, i.e. *profile*, and not as *page* which is the option intended precisely for the institutions and organisations.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to illustrate the current condition of using Web 2.0 and its tools in the museum environment. In spite of many drawbacks of the Internet communication and Web 2.0 and their uncertain development, everything mentioned leads to the conclusion that the advantages and benefits of blogs and social networks in the operation of museums are multiple.

Blog or social network can present a big gain both for the museum as an institution and for every individual museum professional. Regular and high-quality communication with the users can help the curator to remain focused, be aware of the world around and some other and new perceptions, and even different attitudes. It provides help in thinking and looking *outside the box*, which ensures that the results of the work remain interesting and relevant to the community and the society in general.

Also, the usage of these tools allows communication and connection among museum professionals in the entire world. This is precisely what makes in fact the museums, not only their collections, but rather their employees as well. Providing them with the possibility of exchanging information, experiences and ideas, and the insight into the best practice, it will be easiest for them to learn, develop and act creatively. Such employees will make the museum an institution recognised and loud in the community, the one which is not only an active participant in the social processes, but rather also an initiator of new and important initiatives and projects.

However, by including the museums into the Web 2.0 community the winners will also be the users. Their communication with the museum experts will be facilitated and they will have faster, easier and less emotionally or psychically burdened access to certain information, and maybe even more important, they will have opportunity of expressing their opinions, criticism, suggestions or desires. Also, a group on the social network such as Facebook can connect the users among themselves who, by participating in this group, expectedly, share the same interests.

And finally the most important issue – the informality of communication provided by blogs and social networks allows bringing the users closer to the museums and recognising the museums as friendly and easy-to-access places for everyone. The museums, on the other hand, are provided with better fulfilment of the known mission of being oriented to and serving the users, the community and the society in general.

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