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From physical to digital: the Covid-19 challenge in Greek museums

Introduction

Apart from the obvious technological renovation that they have been facilitating, digital technologies are offering to the museums a radically new way of communicating with their potential audiences. Even if we do not take into consideration the frantically evolving field of social media, the easily navigable world of the internet makes museums' digital "headquarters", i.e. their websites, an effortlessly – even if accidentally – accessed destination. The burden of planning and supporting large scale promotional campaigns using the wide spectrum of traditional communication tools – poorly undertaken by the majority of museums as relevant research has established – is being replaced by the creation and support of just one website. Although this kind of digital presence seems an old story already, only recently, most museums have decided to seriously invest in it. The continuously changing image of the museum websites' field makes it very difficult to undertake solid observations that can retain their value for long.

Still, we can say that some of the major problems of museum websites stressed by relevant research have been successfully faced: aesthetic quality, originality, and overall attractiveness have significantly ameliorated, content is being enriched, and technical problems are rather uncommon. To put it in another way, all factors that websites' evaluation models maintain as critical for a website's quality have been taken into consideration by museum site developers.

However, we can argue that all these praiseworthy efforts are based on a more or less unchanged assumption: that physical visit to the museum is a paramount and indispensable experience, and consequently the digital visit is either a useful preparatory stage or an acceptable substitute when a physical visit is out of the question. The latter being a sort of "charity" addressed to those who cannot afford the physical visit. Previous studies^{1,2,3,4} have shown that the online visitors prior to a museum visit are mostly interested in acquiring practical information related to a physical museum visit (opening hours, entrance fees etc.), if the website itself has persuaded

¹ Fillippini Fantoni, Silvia; Rob Stein; Gray Bowman: Exploring the Relationship between Visitor Motivation and Engagement. Online Museum Audiences. In: Museums and the Web (2012). Online available at:

http://www.museumsandtheweb.com/mw2012/papers/exploring_the_relationship_between_visitor_mot.html (accessed 17 February 2022).

² Marty, Paul: Museum Websites and Museum Visitors: Before and After the Museum Visit. In: Museum Management and Curatorship, 22(4) (2007), pp. 337–360.

³ Goldman, Kate Haley; David Schaller: Exploring Motivational Factors and Visitor Satisfaction in On-line Museum Visits. In: Museums and the Web (2004). Online available at:

<http://www.archimuse.com/mw2004/papers/haleyGoldman/haleyGoldman.html> (accessed 17 February 2022).

⁴ Marty, Paul; Michael Twidale: Lost in gallery space: A conceptual framework for analyzing the usability flaws of museum Web sites. In: First Monday, 9(9) (2004). Online available at:

<https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/download/1171/1091> (accessed 17 February 2022).

them that such a visit is worth the pain. In some cases, after the visit, people return to the website in an effort to delve into online artefacts' images, collections data and research materials². On the other hand, the blurry term “virtual museum”, used for a great variety of endeavours, promoted the idea that a museum visit realised in the digital world is always rooted in the physical one; the “virtual” is regarded as the opposite of the “real” and, consequently, a virtual visit can be nothing but a simulation. Nevertheless, nowadays, numerous transactions, education programmes and many other activities digitally accomplished show us that very real things can happen in the internet world as well.

The reluctance of the museums to systematically explore this field and offer self-contained digital experience in their websites can be related to the fear in the prospect of losing potential physical visitors/clients. Nevertheless, according to Marty's study (although it was not largely verified), online museums rather drive physical museum presence instead of discouraging physical visits. On the other hand, the audience's mistrust of digital museum products is certainly stemming from the belief that the quality of a museum experience is mainly based on the authentic objects' aura. Interestingly enough, the Louvre Museum has launched a virtual reality application related to *Mona Lisa*⁵, having observed that the physical visitors could not even slightly enjoy the painting, standing in front of it for a few seconds, squeezed in a crowd of tourists, and deafened by hundreds of camera clicks.

The Covid-19 pandemic made physical access to museums' exhibitions difficult or even impossible for everyone, for the time being. Almost 90% of museums worldwide had closed their doors to the public during the first months of the pandemic⁶. The bright side of

⁵ 'Mona Lisa: Beyond the Glass' (accessed 17 February 2022).

⁶ UNESCO Report 2020: Museums around the world in the face of Covid-19. Online available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000373530> (accessed 19 February 2022).

this unexpected situation is that it can make us think, among other dystopian scenarios, of a future with no physical museums. So, considering the lockdown as a “dress rehearsal”, we decided to examine whether Greek museums were ready to present a satisfactory digital self. In other words, we examined whether Greek museums used digital tools and products to keep the relationship with their visitors alive or even reach a wider audience. Furthermore, we addressed the question of how they used them, providing an insight into the ways that Greek museums rose to the challenge of Covid-19 lockdown.

Materials and Methodology

In order to answer the research questions, we referred to the Hellenic National Cultural Portal *Odysseus*⁷, developed by the Greek Ministry of Culture. Data have been retrieved concerning 272 Greek institutions that are officially acknowledged as museums, including archaeological museums and archaeological collections, Byzantine, post-Byzantine and Christian museums, diachronic museums, historical and folklore, art, theatre, cinema, music, photograph, maritime, science and technology, natural and history museums, museums of Asian art and museums with topics of special interest. We focused on the first lockdown period in Greece, namely from 20 March – the date when museums closed all their onsite operations – until 4 May 2020.

This official list helped us build the general image and trace potential differentiation among museums, as far as their digital activities are concerned. Since the *Odysseus* portal offers minimal information and does not include multimedia and interactive content, we checked whether the above-mentioned museums had their own official website as a prerequisite for our research. Those that fulfilled this criterion

⁷ <http://odysseus.culture.gr/h/1/gh12.jsp> (accessed 15 February 2022).

underwent further analysis concerning online activities during the lockdown period. Social media were excluded from our research, since they constitute a different means of online communication, which will be approached in a future research effort. Activities housed in the museums' websites were further categorized on the basis of qualitative traits, as follows: simple announcements concerning the museums' closure, general announcements (mainly Easter wishes and cancellation of events due to Covid-19), online participatory events, educational programs, virtual tours and pre-existing or new multimedia content. Excel and SPSS Statistics software have been used for descriptive data analyses.

Results

Key findings emerged from our research. The majority (n=176, 64%) of museums of our sample (n=272) lacks its own website. Of those possessing a website (n=96), only 54% (n=52) were engaged to digital visitors through any kind of activities. Among them, ten (10%) museums provided multimedia material and six (6%) provided digital educational programs. An at any time accessible digital narration tour concerning the museum exhibition was performed by only five archaeological museums (5%). Three museums (3%) created participatory digital events for their website visitors and only one museum (1%) openly invited its visitors to a Live Streaming Tour (Archaeological Museum of Rethymnon). Similarly, only one museum (1%) (Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki) allowed open access to its publications.

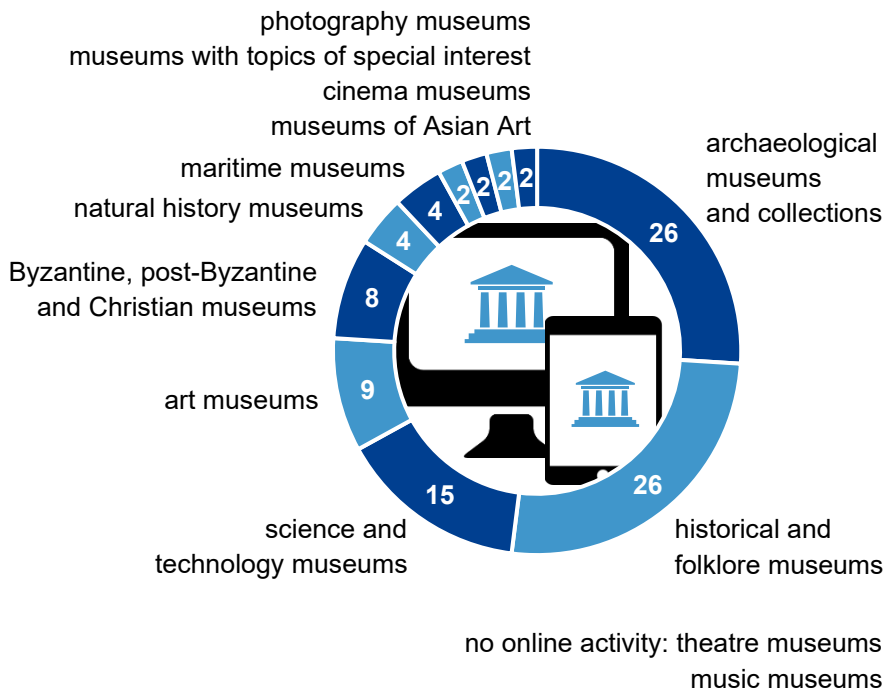


Fig. 1: Type of Greek museums with online activities during the quarantine (in % of responding museums with website, n=96). Source: research by the authors, chart⁸ Stéphanie Wintzerith.

Our results demonstrated that the archaeological, the historical and folklore and the science and technology museums were the most active in terms of online activity (see figure 1). The most active online engagement with multiple activities during the quarantine was undertaken by the Acropolis Museum, the Greek National Archaeological Museum, the Archaeological Museum of Thessaloniki, the Byzantine and Christian Museum of Athens, the Museum of Byzantine Culture of Thessaloniki, the Diachronic Museum of Larissa

⁸ Icons: screen from icon-icons.com, smartphone from flaticon.com

and the Archaeological Museums of Aiani, Heraklion, Igoumenitsa and Pella.

Discussion

During the pandemic, 94.7% of the museums worldwide were closed between 7 April and 7 May 2020, including 97.1% of European ones⁹. The sudden and unexpected Covid-19 lockdown undoubtedly has had, and apparently will have, a great impact, not only from an economic point of view, but also on the bond between museum and visitor. Ironically, it also created a challenging opportunity for museums to develop and deploy the significant potential of digital applications.

According to the ICOM global survey⁵, digital communication activities, including online collection, online exhibitions, live events, newsletters, podcasts, quizzes, contests and social media, increased in at least 15% of the museums. However, this concerned mostly activities on social networks that increased or started after the lockdown for almost 50% of the museums surveyed – a field not included in our research – which was rather expected due to the preponderance of social media as a powerful communications medium, with widespread influence. Four out of five (most of them European) museums have increased their digital services according to the Network of European Museum Organisations survey¹⁰. Interestingly, two out of five museums reported an increase in online visits, ranging between 10%

⁹ ICOM - International Council of Museums: Museums, museum professionals and Covid-19: survey results. 2020. Online available at: <https://icom.museum/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Report-Museums-and-Covid-19.pdf> (accessed 18 February 2022).

¹⁰ NEMO: Survey on the impact of the Covid-19 situation on museums in Europe – Final report. 2020. Online available at: https://www.nemo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/NEMO_COVID19_Report_12.05.2020.pdf (accessed 19 February 2022).

to 150% during the reporting time (between 24 March and 30 April 2020), corroborating the urge for digitisation. The significant role of new technologies referred to in the 2015 *UNESCO Recommendation on Museums* has been affirmed during the Covid-19 lockdown¹¹.

Our research results show that, as a whole, Greek museums were inadequately prepared for this challenge. *Ad hoc* digital material is not easy to build up, especially under pressure. Instead, it has to be established in time depth and demands a long-term investment and relative experience.

The majority of Greek museums lacks its own website; therefore, museums with a sole presence in the Odysseus catalogue (i.e. without own website) were shut down in every sense during the lockdown. However, the existence of a website, although necessary, is not a sufficient condition for the development of online activities. Indeed, only half of those possessing a website took action, mainly informing the public about the mandatory closure¹², along with other general announcements, Easter wishes being the most popular theme.

Our research showed that only a small group tried something more: ten museums provided multimedia content¹³, six educational

¹¹ Mairesse, François: Report on the Implementation of the UNESCO 2015 Recommendation on Museums & Collections: Recommendation concerning the Protection and Promotion of Museums and Collections, their Diversity and their Role in Society. UNESCO: Paris 2019. Online available at: <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000371549> (accessed 17 February 2022).

¹² For example announcements informing the public about the provisional closure of the National Archaeological Museum, online available at: <https://www.namuseum.gr/en/new/provisional-closure-of-the-exhibition-areas-of-the-national-archaeological-museum/> (accessed 19 February 2022); the Metropolitan Organisation of Museums of Visual Arts of Thessaloniki (MOMus), online available at: https://www.momus.gr/en/news/momus_suspension (accessed 19 February 2022).

¹³ For example multimedia material (in Greek) provided by the Heraklion Archaeological Museum (accessed 19 February 2022).

programmes, five archaeological museums offered a pre-existing virtual tour¹⁴, and one museum invited its visitors to a live streaming tour. Needless to say that we are referring here to well-known archaeological museums with large audiences, rather stable revenues and funding, permanent staff and external collaborators with expertise in digital media. Most digital content pre-existed when the Covid-19 closure occurred, and only a few museums, such as the Acropolis Museum, developed new multimedia content during the quarantine.

Only three museums created online participatory events for their website visitors. For instance, the Thessaloniki Archaeological Museum organised two open online actions¹⁵. Although appealing and original, these activities cannot be considered as an alternative to museum visits¹⁶. They remind us of the music playing during a phone call waiting time: their role is to keep the audience warm until the end of the lockdown. The fact that the same museum allowed open access to its digital publications, during the pandemic restrictions, shows that even if a museum is willing to exploit digital affordances, lack of systematic work in this direction leads to rather awkward actions.

Our research results ascertain that museum websites' principal aim is to attract physical visitors. However, the Covid-19 closure seems to have significantly affected museums' communication with their

¹⁴ For example virtual tours of the: Archaeological Museum of Igoumenitsa, online available at: <http://epirustreasures.gr/?p=2499&lang=en> (accessed 19 February 2022); Diachronic Museum of Larissa, online available at: http://dml.culture.gr/Virtual_Tour_DML/Virtual_Tour.html (accessed 19 February 2022).

¹⁵ “Poetry in the shape of things”. (in Greek). Online available at: <https://www.amth.gr/news/i-poiisi-sto-shima-ton-pragmaton-psifiaki-ekthesi> (accessed 19 February 2022); “Everything changes in time and all remain the same”. (in Greek). Online available at: <https://www.amth.gr/news/ola-ston-hrono-allazoyne-ki-ola-ta-idiamenoy-n-psifiaki-ekthesi> (accessed 19 February 2022).

¹⁶ Similar initiatives, although in a significantly larger scale, are the “Getty Museum Challenge” and the “Museums Unlocked” by the Pitt-Rivers Museum.

audiences in the short and long term. We argue that it is time for museums to develop comprehensive digital experiences, not only as a reaction to social crises like the present one or for other cases that definitely deserve our attention, such as people with disabilities or people from remote areas. There are many institutions worldwide that think beyond their established *modus operandi*, catch the spirit of the times, bring into play innovative technological applications, and develop alternative experiences in the digital world. They invest time and resources for the digitisation of their collections, they offer virtual tours, they even create virtual reality exhibitions. This foresight demonstrated its value during the Covid-19 lockdown. But is this enough, or will the user just change a routine scroll down in Facebook with a scroll down in the Louvre? A fundamental question then arises: is a digital experience capable of offering an equally integrated experience than a physical visit does? Referring to all the criticism digital initiatives have provoked so far is beyond the scope of this research, but we can argue that technical affordances are evolving disproportionately to the evolution of museums' theoretical frames and methodological tools. We are still breathlessly running to catch up with technological innovation, hoping that digital wonders incorporated in our traditional practice will be enough.

So far, most Greek museums have been reluctant to digitally share their collections. Therefore, during the pandemic, even the already digitised museum objects were not used. And when used, the digital product is, in fact, an online catalogue. But let us for a moment move our focus from the self-contained artefact and its inherent significance to the potential multiple narratives in which this artefact can be entangled. Then, as Lev Manovich¹⁷ argued twenty years ago, this digital database can constitute the ideal starting point for numerous alternative open-ended narratives. In this vein of

¹⁷ Manovich, Lev: *The Language of New Media*. Ed. Lev Manovich. Cambridge, Massachusetts & London, England: The MIT Press 2001.

thought, the distancing from physical objects, caused by the pandemic, offers an advantageous situation that allows museums to explore digital narratives without the burden of material objects' agency. In the familiar environment of their home, digital visitors can perhaps overcome the usual awe and become critical; they can turn their exclamation points into questions, thoughts, objections, even anger.

Having said that, we do not claim that physical exhibitions or physical interaction with the collections are useless. What we are trying to say is that, by functioning for a while without them, we can discover what is missing from our suspended physical normality: active cultural artefacts and active audience.

We believe that the awkward response of Greek museums to the pandemic situation will be bequeathed to the future as an awkward use of digital affordances. The example of the Acropolis Museum – a museum with ample funding and adequate resources –, is quite enlightening. Its recent digitisation project produced more than twenty applications that exploit a limited spectrum of digital possibilities and show remarkable lack of content originality, when children are not the target group. The 360° tour offered to online visitors is, once more, a poor substitute of the physical visit, and certainly not an experience one would expect from a museum with worldwide fame. In our opinion, we have to do, at least, with a problematic strategic plan. Thus, the problem, if we believe that there is actually a problem, won't be solved when Greek museums will obtain, somehow, the necessary substructure, financial means, and digitally informed personnel. It will be faced when a different way of thinking will be adopted.

Hopefully, the pandemic will soon be over, leaving us with significant psychological issues, and the realisation that, locked or not, we live in a hybrid world. Museums should, therefore, review and restructure their web strategies, as they constitute a promising field offering extra time and space to fruitfully interact with their audiences. What is really challenging is to determine the activities

that can differentiate the digital from the physical museum experience and enhance, not just support, the already established museum's social role.