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Museums During the Pandemic. The Important Role of Social Media

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Nowadays, the absence of a museum in the digital world means its invisibility in the real world (Merkelsen et ál. 2016, 21). Local reach is no longer a goal, today museums should think on a global scale and with the help of the increase use of social media as a facilitator on that task, museums are becoming globalized institutions. Social media plays a key role in the construction of the so-called information sharing communities (Richiani et ál. 2016, 2), and making cultural institutions more accessible from the point of view of interaction has allowed us to transform not only the way these institutions operate (Gonzalez 2017), but also the way we, society, perceive them. The public not only has an active voice now but is also invited to access the unknown side of museums. In addition to creating an idea of proximity and interaction from both sides, the museums and the public are generating the much-desired engagement. This engagement becomes crucial when museums plan to attract visitors from their digital presence.

Wouter van der Horst, Digital Learning Educator of the Rijksmuseum, says that the best way for a museum to work with the creation of experiences that integrate the physical and the digital is, first of all, to focus on the technology that visitors carry with them, specifically their mobile phones (Scott 2019). Because when a museum invests in the acquisition of technological equipment must understand that these not only require maintenance costs, but they also end up being out of date in a space probably of two or three years.

Social media has become one big tool for museums, specially in the times of the pandemic crisis. Museums were directly affected by the pandemic crisis, where about 90% to 95% of museum institutions around the world closed their doors during the first wave, and one in ten will not open again (ICOM 2020, 2). Due to their simplicity and ease of interaction, the social media platforms become an essential tool for museums these days. Through them, museums have been increasing their reach, as well as encouraging their users to create a connection, whether through creation, consumption, sharing of content or proposing new approaches and dialogues. The COVID-19 pandemic has intensified the use of digital media and museums have been able to keep up with these changes, promptly redirected their teams and developed strategies based on the online sphere. However, this was also a period in which investment asymmetries and resources focused on digital action were highlighted, with a clear reflection on the digital presence of each museum.

According to the Network for European Museum Organisations [NEMO] (2020), about 70% of museums have increased their online presence since the beginning of the confinement and, after three weeks of closing the doors to the public, about 80% of museums had increased their online activity (NEMO 2020, 12). Approximately 80% of museums redirected their teams to accommodate current needs, and 30% of museums changed the tasks of their teams to create a team oriented towards digital activity (NEMO 2020, 12).

Museums are using social networks more than ever, as well as the number of virtual visits and online exhibitions has increased (NEMO 2020, 12). More than 40% reported an increase in their online visits since they closed their doors (NEMO 2020, 14). About 70% of respondents by NEMO (2020) reported that the museum increased its activity on social networks, 80% used Facebook and 20% used Instagram as the main platform for the development of its activities (NEMO 2020, 15).

The production of new digital content during to the pandemic, in some cases in association with the education and health sector, but also as a tool of fighting isolation and loneliness, brought museums to a closer approach to their audiences, encouraging closer, participatory, and collaborative actions.

The COVID-19 pandemic is an adversity that has become an opportunity, with the unhappiness of your situation sustaining the importance of digital communication and access to museums digital collections. Museums became a source of optimism and made their collections viral through campaigns to share and promote artistic content interacting with



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their communities. These rushed to respond to the institutions appeal and the result was achieved in the joint creativity between museums and the public in digital territory. On Instagram we saw the growth of the Covid Art Museum, and other initiatives such as The Getty Museum's proposal on Twitter, for their followers to select their favourite work of art, and with three objects from their home to try to recreate the work of art (Elassar 2020). The museum later shared some of the best creations. Other museums were quick to adhere to this trend (Elassar 2020), and the phenomenon reached such a scale that it started to be disseminated by various information channels across the internet. Now we find this type of initiative on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter.

Although the time gap needed to understand the true impact of this pandemic on museums does not yet exist, it was possible to understand how museums used technologies to combat the impacts of confinement. Now it is imperative to form teams and develop strategies that incorporate digital communication in the communication of the museums. The pandemic has brought great changes, and the digital is here to stay.

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