

The Challenge of Live Access and Distance Experiences in Museums

by

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The Covid-19 pandemic impacted museums and galleries detrimentally as it did other organizations and institutions traditionally associated with a more physical, experiential model of engagement. Museum closures have been witnessed on a global scale since the onset of the Covid grip in early 2020. The closure of these museums has created significant challenges for the employment of museum professionals and the financing of the museums on an operational level but museums have also suffered from a sense of public estrangement borne out of enforced physical disengagement with museum visitors. After all, it is for the people that museums exist. As observed by Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk (2020), ‘access to culture (understood also as access to cultural heritage) is one of the human rights>’. Kuzelewska and Tomaszuk cite European legislation spanning 70 plus years from the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights to the 2000 Charter of Fundamental Rights in the European Union to support their stance on cultural access (2020). Sustaining this ‘human right’ to cultural access has presented a significant challenge to museums since the Covid pandemic began. Together with colleagues at University of Padua and University of Glasgow, the European Museum Academy has been monitoring how museums are responding to the Covid-19 situation by using digital means. We have especially been interested in developments which may point to the interesting use of technologies for encouraging virtual engagement in the future.

In the last two decades, museums have initiated and increased the use of digital engagement via their home websites and social media but the current pandemic has created a rapid surge in museums’ development and use of digital programmes to reach the public. The scale of this surge is notable and it may be claimed that the Covid-19 pandemic acted as a catalyst for accelerating museums’ digital development further than we have seen in the last 20 years. Covid-19 propelled museums to make collections available and accessible online using a variety of digital initiatives. If the museum is to remain relevant for the public at large and not simply for a limited elite, the digital initiatives developed must address the demand for interactivity and participatory governance which are as important as ever. This paper will explore possible features of digital engagement that might encourage virtual visitor accessibility and will illustrate these features using digital programming and initiatives designed and implemented by museums between March and August 2020.

In response to the Covid-induced temporary closure of the Design Museum in Denmark, Copenhagen, the Museum Director, Anne-Louise Sommer, identified a use for technology in facilitating public engagement with the museums’ collections. Anne-Louise captured the classical atmosphere and collections of the museum using film and audio then posted the recordings on YouTube. In one film (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRSztH_n-sY), Anne-Louise visits the museum’s archive and shares a selection of drawings and water colour paintings by the artist Finn Juhl. The film introduces the viewer to Juhl’s work and in so doing, demonstrates the value of using modern technology and social media to transport the world of museum artefacts to an otherwise inaccessible audience. Anne-Louise’s talk is focussed on a particular aspect of the museum’s collection and her carefully structured session conveys a

welcoming and relaxed tone. The Design Museum has produced a number of guided digital tours to showcase specific objects in the collections. Specialists tell the stories of objects' and re-create virtual contexts similar to that in which objects would traditionally be viewed thus creating a classical museum experience. No doubt, the frequent, committed museum visitor will readily engage with the Design Museum's collections through the virtual offer. For the public this opportunity to view collections virtually presents an offer similar to that presented via other media platforms where the viewing offer is available remotely and immediately, if desired. While remote, immediate access may be attractive to some, the viewer has no influence on the content. They are not part of the production and questions may be left unanswered. The visitor is an observer, the recipient of a museum experience rather than an active participant, involved in an exchange or interchange.

In contrast to the experience offered by the Danish Design Museum, the 360 degrees museum experience at Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam produced by Q42 (<https://www.rijksmuseum.nl/en/from-home>) offers the viewer the opportunity to view objects from the museum's collection in a more participatory manner. The virtual visitor can move around the museum's galleries, experiencing an enhanced viewing through the lens of a robotic camera. Paintings can be viewed at an individualised, leisurely pace and the viewer can manage the visit with increased autonomy. This enhanced viewing may appeal to the visitor who is already passionate about what can be experienced in and through the museum but it may also entice the novice virtual visitor to engage with a sample of the Rijksmuseum's collections. While the Rijksmuseum's digital offer encourages the visitor to navigate their own tour, this is done so within the limitations of what has been pre-determined for filming by the museum. Then again, any visit to a physical museum offers the potential for engagement with a collection or collections pre-determined and organised by the museum staff. What the Rijksmuseum have done is to create the opportunity for a virtual museum visit that is reflective of a visit in person.

Another example of effective use of technologies to encourage the virtual museum visitor is available at the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam. Here, they have chosen an approach where the digital visitor visits the collection, piece by piece (Watson, 2020). This digital visit is technically impressive in many ways, encouraging the virtual visitor to engage with multiple narratives associated with Van Gogh ranging from narratives conveying the emotions of the artist to narratives associated with his artistic technique and style (<https://www.thedrum.com/news/2020/07/29/how-dept-brushed-up-van-gogh-museums-virtual-experience-remote-covid-19-world>). While the experience offered by the Van Gogh Museum is a visually and intellectually stimulating one, the sense that the visitor remains somehow physically distanced from the museum's collection persists.

Generally, despite the intended interactive character of the virtual visit, it remains close to the encyclopaedic experience where knowledge and information govern the territory leaving little room for the exploration of social skills, feelings and values.

In the pre-Covid days when physical public visits to museums were the norm, museums aimed to attract a broad range of visitors, varying in gender, age, cultural identity, education, and social background. Digital engagement for these groups often appeared in the form of digital interactives and an exhibition could come alive with the press of a button or operating a 'scroll and search' screen. These interactives usually presented information and questions of varying comprehensive levels, connected to exhibitions which in turn could provide an inclusive dimension. In other museums, interactivity was facilitated by real people, sometimes dressed in

costumes, providing performances to inspire a sense of living history. Living history has grown steadily as a popular method in museums throughout the world, not least in the popular open-air museums and archaeological parks such as Jamtli Open Air Museum in Ostersund, Sweden (<https://www.jamtli.com/en/>) and the Museum of Island Life on the Scottish Island of Skye (<http://www.skyemuseum.co.uk>). But how might we emulate and possibly enhance this kind of immersive interactive museum experience using technologies? Virtual Reality (VR) where the user is placed inside the experience may seem an obvious way of recreating the immersive museum, gallery or heritage experience but creating a suitable application can be costly. VR is becoming increasingly accessible but it remains the domain of large, well-funded museums for now. For approaches to be utilised more widely, they need to be financially viable in the short term.

To date, we have mostly seen a quantitative explosion in museums' use of digital outreach, but the Covid-19 pandemic has also inspired a few interesting ways to include the public more on a more intensely personal level. An interesting example is the Museum of Childhood Ireland initiative where children are invited to produce and share illustrations based on a theme that changes every week. The children's illustrations are then presented in a digital exhibition on the museum website (<http://museumofchildhood.ie/project2020/>). The approach used by the Museum of Childhood Ireland promotes co-production of the exhibition by museum staff and the young visitors. Most probably the children are as proud to participate in the exhibition as their parents and carers are to have their children's work exhibited. While the children may require support to upload their work (or possibly not!), restricting artistic contributions to the children is one way to inspire museum engagement with the younger generation.

Another interesting example at Randers Regnshov in Denmark moves further towards merging the best of an analogue museum experience with the digital means. At Randers Regnshov (Randers Rain Forest) they have offered biology lessons through Facebook (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w9SQmccKxd0>) to school classes in Denmark. The initiative has enjoyed a hugely positive response. At their most effective, lessons are combined with the use of text messages which, during a lesson are sent by the pupils or their teacher to the museum educator who then answers in real time. At the same time, the museum educator can ask for reactions from the pupils in school, also in real time. This gives the museum visit the features which are otherwise missed: it is really live; it is interactive, and it provides the opportunity for the museum to make direct contact with the individual, creating a sense of immediacy and intimacy. This is clearly a breakthrough in the use of digital means, and it will be interesting to see how this approach to digital engagement can be further developed in the future. This way of providing educational offers does not need to be the exclusive domain for formal education or one target group. A group visit with adults learning informally could be executed in a similar way and the museum could offer similar non-formal or informal educational experiences to promote inclusivity for groups who might otherwise feel physically or socially excluded.

Digital Heaven and Hell?

The above examples of museums using technologies to encourage interaction and engagement have their pros and cons depending on perspective. To get a better understanding of the challenges it is important to critically consider the factors associated with digital online engagement. To begin with, there is the perspective we could call the blessing of digital

collections as opium for the people. What is meant by that is the tendency to see digitalization as the answer to everything about access but forgetting that the digital mass production does not in itself serve the needed contextualized access and indeed not for everybody. The digital revolution now has a few decades of history in its own right. There are indeed many fascinating developments coming from the combination of digitalisation and the internet. You can sit at home or anywhere in the world where you have internet access and with a few clicks see digitalised traces of the past. This offers a fascinating prospect for endless opportunities to digitise the museum experience for the older generation, often more familiar with analogue access but also for young people for whom digital access is a natural and taken-for-granted part of their daily lives.

Remote digital access can help to increase awareness of and political engagement with one of the greatest environmental challenges of our time; climate change. With millions of people in Europe owning a mobile phone, digital access to museum collections is now possible for vast numbers of the population. Digital access is a positive, climate-kind means by which museums can engage the public with collections without the need to transport people or collections. This is good for the climate. It is even good for the collections and it makes access possible beyond local, regional and national borders. However, while accessibility might be a reality for many, it does need to be remembered that access is restricted to those with access to technology and the right kind of technology at that. Facilitating digital engagement is only partially accommodated by museums offering digital programmes online. As highlighted by the Covid pandemic, not all members of the public own technological equipment that is compatible with all online platforms. In political circles, questioning the positive effects of digitalisation is difficult as there is a very strong tendency for these matters to be discussed politically as though the challenge is only on the part of the users. Repeatedly, it is said that ICT development must go hand in hand with digital skills which are not evenly acquired by or accessible to all ages and social groups (Pasikowska-Schnass, June 2020). This is undoubtedly the case but to focus on the user side detracts from the much needed discussions on the quality development of innovative technologies on the part of suppliers. Museums need to consider how digital online programmes will translate to different types of technological equipment if they truly wish their online programmes to be widely accessible and for this to happen, they must work closely with platform designers.

While positive that technology can provide access to museum collections, access to information without any guidance does not comprise learning provision in itself. When the museum adds a layer of guidance, the information becomes something else. The meeting with information becomes a learning experience in a deeper sense. The layer of guidance and facilitation is key to what defines the potential of the learning experience. The above examples of three-dimensional robot digital visits and short films found at the Design Museum, Denmark and the Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam with expert guidance are ways to provide a facilitating layer to collections. The third example, Randers Regnshov's use of text messaging with real time performance and possible interaction stands out from the others. It is that difference which makes it exceptionally popular with the virtual visitor. The primary difference is the opportunity to explore feelings for the learner and to have the attention of a real person and not just any other person, but an expert.

That element is crucial to the success of the museum learning situation and has historical roots dating back over 200 years. In Denmark, the first director of the royal antiquity collections was the archaeologist Christian Jürgensen Thomsen (1788-1865). Thomsen is not only famous for

introducing the three-age system of stone, bronze and iron based on the material of archaeological findings, he is also known as the father of museum education in the country. That great posthumous title was founded on his willingness to meet visitors to his museum in person and to guide them through the museum, explaining the exhibits and answering questions from all members of the public. It is said that Thomsen made no distinction between social standing or age. He understood that what was on show to the public needed to be explained (Adriansen & Hyllested, 2011 and Boritz 2012). The important lesson from Jürgensen Thomsen, not a trained educationalist by any means, is that the visitor, the learner, became almost spellbound by the knowledge of the curator – the museum educator and as Vygotsky would suggest, the more knowledgeable other (Jaramillo, 2020). Visitor engagement was encouraged by an openness to listen and react to all questions and observations. We can imagine the same dynamics when reading about schoolteachers who are recognised for excellence in teaching. The words used by the nominating bodies are always the same: it is about the teacher’s ability to communicate, to show empathy and to relate. In the best situations in the museums this is what constitutes successful learning experiences in analogue circumstances.

In the same vein, a virtual visit to the museum in real time can offer an intensity and immediacy of experience. Progressive museum professionals in Spain recently used the term *museum language* to capture the incredibly special experience which a successful museum visit can be:

The museum language is the fundamental base of a Transforming Museum. The activities carried out in the museum must take this into account so as not to fall into the trap of becoming informative but not museum-based, which may be better targeted by other types of establishments with a more local scope, such as civic or cultural centres. (El Museo Transformator, 2020).

It is not sufficient to use virtual museum tours to simply attract interest. Interest needs to be sustained if visitors are to be encouraged to return, be that virtually or physically. Michael Alexis’ Museum Hack 2020 study of the first wave of post-Covid-19 digital museum ‘try-outs’ presented a less than favourable view of virtual or photographic representations of museum spaces and collections:

The data shows that we are past peak interest in virtual museum tours. The mainstream market isn’t interested in seeing these world class institutions in virtual 3D spaces or photo galleries. (Alexis, 2020).

While Alexis’ conclusion seems rather negative towards virtual museum access, it is now widely recognised that “metadata-enriched open collections are not enough to foster a broader engagement with cultural heritage.” The expansion of museum digital engagement caused by the pandemic has not changed that (Zuanni, 2020).

This is possibly the key to understanding why the example above with real live internet experience combined with real live dialogue is a success. It raises however important questions. As suggested by Jordi Baltà Portolés, we can ask if museums are really ready for such a methodological and organizational challenge in their use of technology? (Balta Portoles, 2019). Another question is about the limitations to learning when a particular digital learning method is adopted. Pedagogically, the method selected may not best facilitate quality learning and impact.

Are we ready? Where are the challenges?

There are several challenges for museums in offering digital live experiences with dialogue options. Technical challenges and even financial challenges may be overcome if the determination is there but there are other challenges which may be trickier to overcome.

One such challenge is the traditional thinking in many museums. Museums want to provide the best and may very well consider digital live offers as just a second-best substitute for the physical analogue experience. It may also have to do with the traditional way museum professionals think about a museum education program. Items from collections are most often the central tool in much museum education and the authenticity is used to create the seriousness of the learning situation. The aspect is difficult for the museum to uphold as the experience for the learner is based on a two-dimensional image.

The problem which museums meet here is the traditional empirical perspective on collections as basis of knowledge and therefore the starting point of museum education activities. If museums instead allow themselves to use the wanted learning outcome as the perspective around which they organize the experience it will be a different story (Bamford & Wimmer, 2012 & Cultural Learning Alliance, 2011). To do so effectively requires an understanding of the relationship between learning outcomes and planned learning experiences.

Even current museum thinkers consider that the uniqueness and the authenticity may be experienced by the museum *netizens* – the digital visitor, by adopting transmedia thinking at the concept stage, rather than as an adjunct or a complementary addition to a bigger project (Debono, 2020). The idea is that using a variety of multiple ways of communication through internet, phone, radio, etc. it should be possible to shape and provide a unique experience. On the other hand, based on experience from, for example, visitors' feedback in open air museums it can be strongly argued that cultural experience is, if not solely, then at least amplified when done together with others. Culture becomes social. At the same time, the experience can be lively and sensual as the visitors together share and interact so that the total visitor experience in fact is only to some degree controlled by the museum (Bloch Ravn, 2020).

The possibilities and limitations are many in what can and cannot be offered through digital means. If we revisit the different approaches presented in the beginning of this short paper, we may structure them the following way:

With digital access to collections and information about the individual items where the tour and depth is in the hands of the digital visitor – for example through a robot camera – we have a *collection driven encyclopaedic* approach. The museum can provide huge opportunities to knowledge and glimpses. A key feature is that it is visitor controlled (even though never governed) when it is best.

The pre-made movie where the expert in the museum tells one or more stories can naturally be multiplied and the museum can offer numerous such in depth searching and exploratory stories. The *collection driven story telling* approach primarily keeps the control of the stories told in the hands of the museum but when it is best it can be of high artistic and scholarly quality.

Providing live experiences with interactive dialogue opportunity is the third way. The visitors meet the museum staff in the museum synchronously for an experience on the pre-advertised and pre-defined topic. The successful museum staff use the museum around her as much as possible – collections, colleagues, scenography, buildings, or something else. This together with interaction with the visitors shapes the uniqueness. *The interactive live driven experience*

approach provides the advantage of imagined shared visitor and museum governance and the risk of less control of the situation for the staff.

The three different approaches have their different pros and cons. The interactive synchronous experience does provide qualities which tend to make it attractive beyond comparison. The approach makes live experiences realistic and accessible within the time zone. The museum goes from local or regional outreach to a much bigger area. It therefore is natural to ask why this approach is not more popular among museums in quite the same way as the other two approaches have been during the period of pandemic. One might observe that the approach is resource intensive and is perhaps more demanding on the technological knowledge and skills of museum staff. To use the third approach, a museum needs staff with the appropriate technical competences and the time to facilitate such initiatives. Both requirements have financial implications.

During the pandemic it has been reported that Netflix, HBO and other streaming providers have sold better than ever. If the individual museum is as good as those of us who are passionate about museums believe, then it should be possible for a museum to provide an interactive synchronous experience which digital visitors will pay for. Most experimental approaches to digital provision include the use of crowdsourcing and open challenges, as well as the creation of living labs, to find novel solutions to pressing challenges and promote co-creation (OECD digital innovation, 2019).

Getting started and producing the basic experience may be possible for the museums to finance through original funding. Museums are usually innovative when it is about financing. The interactive synchronous experience may well be further developed. One approach might be to utilise online platforms such as Future Learn (<https://www.futurelearn.com>) to provide access to online material as a supplement for self-study in support of deeper academic engagement. Museums need to be careful and aware that using online platforms raises issues of safety and security that are especially sensitive when children are involved. As materials are created and exchanged, the issue of authorship and ownership of intellectual property rights can become contentious, especially when higher education institutions are involved (Chircop, June 2020). These issues associated with online engagement require serious consideration, but they are resolvable.

For museums, it may be better to keep the interactive synchronous experiences simple and draw on the knowledge and skills that come naturally to the museum staff, i.e. the narrative and visualisation shaped authenticity based on knowledge. The level and quality of digital accessibility continues to vary considerably, internationally. Approximately only half the students in Poland and Japan in 2015 reportedly used desktop computers, laptop, or tablets in their studies even though they had access to them. In countries like the Netherlands and United Kingdom the same percentage was close to 100 percent (OECD skills outlook, 2019). This has to be weighed against the potential for the museum to invest in interactive synchronous experiences far beyond the normal physical limitations if museums wish to be inclusive of the needs of international virtual visitors. If museums truly wish to design digital online platforms for internationally inclusive and accessible engagement, museums need to address practical limitations such as different time zones and languages not to mention the capacity to connect with multiple technology devices and types. Perhaps the rapid response demanded of museums by the Covid pandemic to move collections and programmes online will spark increased

commitment to investment in effective online digital engagement. After all, Covid-19 and its implications for physical distancing seems here to stay for some time.

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