

# The Transformation of Museum Dialogue During the Covid-19 Crisis

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*Abstract:* Museums as cultural institutions encourage daily dialogue and provide a sense of inclusiveness. Their mission is to enhance cultural participation and interaction for people of all ages. When the Covid-19 virus appeared for the first time in the city of Wuhan (China), in December 2019, no one thought that it would continue and take on the global proportions of a pandemic, which would defeat any form of thinking and behavior. Furthermore, it was not known to what extent the impact of such a pandemic would be destructive in different sectors and fields, and one of them would be the cultural sector, specifically museum institutions. With a great speed, everything ceased working, not in the human aspect, but in that of interaction, travel, entertainment, desire and interest to discover the world and delve into new knowledge and cultures. The digital surveys, observations, organization of online meetings and investigations from several museum's Facebook are used as primary resources for the analyzing how museums healed the barriers of dialogue from physical to digital environment, transforming practices and looking to inclusiveness of the digital audience.

*Key-words:* dialogue, Covid-19, museum, initiative, digital, pandemic

Received: March 24, 2022. Revised: October 23, 2022. Accepted: November 18, 2022. Published: January 31, 2023.

## 1. Introduction

Even today, I remember the exchanged messages with a friend of mine, whom I had known in China, not from the Wuhan, in which I kept asking how the situation was in her area, and to what extent measures were being taken to cope with the situation and its normalization.

Calmly and confidently, she answered that her country was taking action against the situation there, never experiencing the anxiety that I had begun to feel as soon as the first cases began to appear on the other side of the coast, in the neighboring country, Italy.

The cultural sector has been severely and persistently affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, with museums particularly hard hit. The UNESCO report estimated that nearly 90%, or an estimated 85,000 institutions, had been closed for varying lengths of time [1]. This was the first

signal of the deterioration of the fate of culture, especially museums, which globally are places of cultural attraction for foreign tourists, and which generally in Albania expect to have the highest flow of visitors starting from the very first months of spring and up until the fall season. As many countries expect the normal rise of tourism in the beginning of the March, that culmination did not happen, throughout 2020.

Globally the first phase of lockdown started in March, with specificities of each country. This large number of visitors could not be reached throughout the year 2020, especially in the first phase, the period from March 11 to April 3, 2020, [2],[4] then in the second phase between April and until the opening date announcement that was to happen on 18 May 2020, [3]. Culture and tourism kept their doors closed for about three months, a fate from which museums were not excluded.



Fig.1 Communicating the closure of all activities in museums and cultural institutions.

### 1.1 Facing closure

The Covid-19 crisis initially made it difficult for museum managers to find a solution regarding the staff management mechanisms so they could ensure full physical health and then, safety and proper care for the collections of the museum premises.

In the other side different museums encountered challenges producing digital content. Although this situation cannot be generalized, because many museums used previous digitized resources [5], to rebuild the social distance communication with the audience. The health crises showed the existing digital storage of many museums and the necessity to rethink and create new ones.

What this global crisis began to highlight, from the very beginning and in continuation, was the common interest of museums in creating a dialogue between museums and museum staff, with the aim of sharing experiences, discussions and exchanges, either of management situations within museums, but on the other hand, the need to create and build new forms of online communication.

Their existing knowledge with shared experiences, discussions was a paramount mission, for finding best solutions and continuing the social cohesion by building new paths of online dialogue. The museums initiatives were offered to public and to the audience in the online format, with the purpose of healing their mental wellbeing.

Thus, the museum initiatives from the museum leaders were transferred for the public and the audience in the online format, whether interactive

or listening way, as in the case of the series of online guides: "*The stay at Home Museum*" [6], from the Museum of Fine Arts, Ghent Belgium or the occasional "*Le passeggiate del direttore*" [7], from the Egyptian Museum, Turin, Italy

This adaptive and immediate transformation of communication with the audience also brought creativity for the museum mentality, which was considered important; in order to maintain the role and mission of museums that is conveying culture from anywhere and for everyone. This digital form of opening the doors of museums for free encouraged and influenced further discussions on the necessity to adapt and strengthen the role of museums as educational and inclusive places. However, although in an ambiguous situation and while at the same time increasing mass use of technology by museum staff and virtual audience, museums, even though operating with reduced staff and an overwhelming lack of financial income as a result of not visiting museums, they continued to encourage the spread of culture.

### 1.2 Museums and Covid-19

Never more than during the Covid-19 crises, museums have ever felt the necessity to be connected to the technology network, as one of the tools within which museums carry out dialogues and find the motive to serve the audience with all their possibilities. This became evident to the way in which the work and activity of the museums would be transformed and adopted from the direct confrontation with the visitor and the tourist to an interaction where the efficiency would lie in the

creative aspect and the way it would reach the citizen and further to online audiences quickly and efficiently.

NEMO report [8], showed out the exhausted situation of museums. The report indicates the struggle of museums starting from March 24 to April 30, 2020. Here the financial impact and action needed to heal their situation is divided in: a) the need for economic support for museum activities; b) investments in digital cultural heritage; c) resilience of museums in adapting during crises.

More than ever before, the ways to attract an online audience had to be simple, direct and interactive, where everyone could get the proper knowledge, take an interest in the object or collection and then ask for more information from the other side of the online museum, where the museum curator and guide would serve as a quality factor to attract the interested visitor. Now more than ever the need to have digitized collections faced these institutions with a deficiency which should have been an essential element in serving the museum and online visitors. Albanian museums had not encountered such a confrontation before, against the hermetic mentality of having the collections open only to museum visitors and not to those on the network, who are as demanding as the physical ones, to know, understand and discuss about the inheritance.

## 2 Research Method

In the times of crisis and adaptation this would turn out to be the key to success for museums and managers when each of them with their staff and creative skills, conveyed important messages of cooperation and facilitation to handle and exhibit the treasures of their museums.

It was during the period of quarantine isolation starting from March 12, 2020, that the Albanian cultural and museum institutions realized that the knowledge and resilience to respond to this reality was a necessity as well as a need to exchange knowledge and experiences between museum professionals and heritage practitioners.

To better analyze and investigate the complexity and the impact of Covid-19 were facing Albanian museums, I initiated with other museum and heritage practitioners, Gladiola Caka, Edvin Lamçe [9], a series of webinars with the aim of facilitating the sharing of experiences between Albanian museum institutions in the country, which was directly involved in the complexity of

working online with their museum collections and with the online audience. These webinars were addressed within our means, and to some extent personal acquaintance, extending the call to other professionals in the field. In total to my call responded 14 museum professionals, museum directors, staff, guides, heritage professionals and representatives of ICOM Albania.

The list of museums involved in these webinar talks were: Oso Kuka Ethnographic Museum, Durrës Museum Center, Vlora Independence Museum, Gjirokastra Foundation, Kadare Studio House, Ethnographic Museum Berat, Elbasan Ethnographic Museum, Ethnographic Museum Berat, Regional Directorate of National Culture, Shkodër, National Art Gallery, Tirana, Gjergj Katrioti Historical Museum, National History Museum, Tirana, Rozafat Castle Museum, Apollonia Archaeological Park and ICOM Albania representatives. The outcomes derived from their outputs served for critical analyses to better understand the museums challenges and staff efforts resilience toward the educational mission.

In the other side, for the purpose of this research were analyzed and stored digital content deriving from Facebook page platforms from 6 museums, national and local (National Historic Museum, House of Leaves, Museum of Medieval Art, Ethnographic Museum of Shkodra and Kruja. Despite the analyses offered here, yet the exhaustive digital content is under further research consideration. Their digital content starts from the official governmental announcement of total closure, until the date of official opening. The investigation and use of their digital content is being used as illustrative case study.

## 3 Discussion

### Also digital, but more creative

Activities began to be carried out at a distance, as well as in creative forms of museums such as guides, cooperation with schools, initiatives of museums or individuals, workshops and virtual visits offered for free by museums, or the creation of hashtags in order to benefit and provide culture which was impossible for someone earlier. The creative and inclusive museum communications can be seen from different perspectives, either from institutional, and either by individuals.

The hashtags [10], were included throughout their posting contents for creating a broader digital mentioning's each time of sharing heritage contents offered by different Albanian museums. This initiative was proposed as a specific content

dialogue offered to school pupils and as amusement for everyone.

Many museums offered virtual visits for free, putting the #hashtags in order to benefit and provide a wider spread of culture heritage. Until then free museums online were a paid service, which shifted in an opportunity, as a shared act of solidarity!

For the first time the museums had no barriers, to widely sharing their museum collections on the contrary, they stayed together even though in distance with audience and visitors.



Fig.2 ArtEpidemia (Self-quarantine)

Several museums in Albania joined also the international Covid-19 solidarity act. The National Museum in Albania, the House of Leaves, Historic Museum of Skanderbeg, and others; began posting in their social media Facebook from 20 March'20 the invitation for children to get engaged with archaeological and historical artifacts drawing through the possibility of downloading them.



Fig.3 Drawing archaeology

In this environment surrounded by online work, online learning, online culture and entertainment [11], the main focus remained communication and dialogue with the other side of telematic and

digital instruments in order to show that the physically absent dialogue had to take the path of normality, which now was free of charge in the comfort of your sofa. The digital has led to a simplification and loss of meaning of the live museum experience [14], that museums responded rapidly with efficiency.



Fig.4 The project Covid-19, from the House of Leaves Museum, educational project.



Fig.4 Distance art drawing activities, from the Historical Art Museum

In this "new normality"[13], for museums, where sometimes with hesitation, sometimes willingly and equipped by digital storage archives and collections, sometimes absenting to the mission for different reasons, was born the idea of creating a dialogue "with and for museums".

The unlimited dialogue with the audience [14], provokes the questioning whether the pandemic crisis worked as an accelerator for the digital transformation process in those public service of delivery sectors, giving impetus to the treatment of various issues, in the circles of professionals and museum specialists. The interaction on socials while maintaining the educational role during crisis has been a moment of reflection for museums whether to develop digital strategies and

online experiences, programming monetary investments to support an inclusiveness vision of digital resources.

#### 4 Conclusion

Through webinars which served as communication bridges, the focus of professionals in Albania was to share new experiences in an environment unexplored before, without digital tools and understaffed, circumstances that all museums everywhere encountered and adapted. It proved to be a model of sharing different experiences of crises management, giving impetus to the discussing new important professional struggles and practices being used and adopted.

Experience showed that museums are inherent and such an important element for the psychological

well-being of the members of society, who find inspiration and pleasure in objects and collections, this fact was proved during the Covid-19 pandemic. On the other hand, the crisis allowed us to understand that dialogue is just as essential for the continuity and sharing of experiences, openness to new mindsets, museum modernization to reach the digital visitor today and physical in the future within the doors of this cultural institution

The role of museums of being creative, democratic and opened to digital should encourage taking advantages from Covid-19, experience and invest in digital software storages and new creative professional's staff as facilitators in the digital dialogue.

#### Acknowledgments

In emails sent to the other museums, individuals from the respective institutions kindly responded to our call. I would like to thank them for their participation and support.

Amila Gjyzezi, Oso Kuka Ethnographic Museum, Antigoni Gjergji, Durrës Museum Center, Aurela Lametro, Vlora Independence Museum Edvin Lamçe, Gjirokastra Foundation, Erilda Selaj, Kadare Studio House, Tirana, Gladiola Caka Ethnographic Museum Berat, Silva Belegu, Elbasan Ethnographic Museum

Helidon Sokoli, Regional Directorate of National Culture, Shkodër, Inesa Sulaj, National Art Gallery, Tirana, Klodian Loka, Gjergj Katrioti Historical Museum, Ledio Xhoxhi, National History Museum, Tirana, Ndrëçim Mlika, Rozafat Castle Museum, Shkodër, Orneta Durmishaj, Apollonia Archaeological Park, Representatives from ICOM Albania (Sabina Veseli, Eda Andoni),

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