Museums Web Strategy
at the Covid-19 Emergency Times

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Abstract

In these past months of emergency and closure, as highlighted by a recent survey by Network of European Museum Organization (NEMO), the digital contents published by museums on the web have multiplied. Museums demonstrate great resilience with proposals aimed at maintaining contacts, reaching publics and finding new ways of enhancing culture, or consolidating relationships on the web. Museums will have to outlive some restrictions and limitations. The web will represent a fundamental relationship channel. But quality and strategy must be analyzed in order to act with a clear strategy and not only driven by the impulse of urgency.

What criteria can museums utilize to implement a quick efficient analysis of their choices and their strategies in the web environment? How is it possible to define, measure and evaluate their effectiveness on the web? Can we improve participation? The research group Digital Cultural Heritage ICOM Italia outlined a web Strategy Scheme (WSS) with a set of 17 parameters to enable a more in-depth observation, to provide museums and cultural institutions with a practical tool for the analysis and monitoring of their strategic online orientation; to design a tool that precedes and supports the implementation of a web strategy. In a newly published book we explain in detail the provided web Strategy Scheme (WSS) and deepen the specifics of the web environment and the theoretical reference context.

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Museums Facing the Covid-19 Emergency

During complex months, the Covid-19 pandemic has forced most of the European population at home and museums in all the interested areas have been closed in the measure of 92% as highlighted by Network European Museum Organisation (NEMO) report NEMO Corona Survey results.[1] Such forced closure has modified the approach of museums towards the web, with the publication of new contents. NEMO has carried out a quick survey among European museums and, the first in April 2020, published the results of a survey on the impact of the COVID-19 situation reflecting on museums all over Europe which shows the increasing effect of the forced closures and the early assessment results. Museums try to keep the relationships with their audiences alive with the help of the web. The list of museums' initiatives in each country is quite amazing. Institutions have highlighted the extent of the phenomenon and the enormous effort applied in order to find new narrative approaches (e.g. the list created by the Italian Ministry of Cultural Heritage).[2] The complete and thorough closure foreseen by the Covid emergency orders and the limitation effects that such regulations will produce in the upcoming months have pushed many museums forward, demonstrating their strong resilient approach.

What Has Changed

The data collected during the forced closures period reports: "Most museums are closed (92%), with some exemptions in Sweden, Albania and Austria" (NEMO 2020, 2) the survey investigates on how museums are reacting against the crisis and the consequent economic losses. Museums are demonstrating their capacity to change and adapt at Staff and Budget level: "The good news is that the majority of museums have not yet had to dismiss staff members. Around 70% of the museums report that they have shifted staff tasks so as to accommodate current situation needs" (NEMO 2020, 3), the increase was instead less significant at Budget level 13.4% (NEMO 2020, 5). "More than 60% of the museums have increased their online presence since they were forced to close doors due to social distancing measures" (NEMO 2020, 5). Museums are actively looking for responsiveness and redirection. The study also analyzes the type of online initiatives reported by museums themselves that participated in the survey. The proposals are interesting: online learning programs, an increase in online exhibitions and virtual tours and the implementation of podcasts and thematic dedicated newsletters or specifically designed YouTube programs. Many museums have also made an effort to add new images to their online collections. How much has the museums' online presence developed? More than 10% of museums have increased it by 100%, and more than 40% of museums have increased their online active presence by one third.

What Has Not Changed

Many of the shared ones are one-way content: from the museum to the public. The publication of images, virtual tours, videos and posts or podcasts shows in most of the cases a one-way approach. Contents that are still replicating the museum monologue are being proposed in a more modern and digital form. How does the addressed audience rework the experience? How are audiences and publics involved in the designing of contents? The considered analysis on museums contents fruition and the audiences' reactions and appreciation of mentioned implemented actions remain poorly evaluated. The mere publication of contents does not mean that such subjects are actually shared nor it leaves the chance to reuse and actively participate in its cultural narrative. The web as a tool can create two-way interaction opportunities particularly thanks to the reuse of contents and to the cultural narration carried out when the public and the audiences are involved.

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[1] https://www.ne-mo.org/fileadmin/Dateien/public/NEMO_documents/ NEMO_Corona_Survey_Results_6_4_20.pdf

[2]   https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Eventi/visualizza_asset.html_535911882.html

How to Assess Your Web Strategy?

For a long time to come, museums will experience restrictions on access to their spaces and proposed cultural activities. For museums, the one ahead, is a long-term crisis period during which the web can definitely play a crucial role in maintaining the relationships with the public. It is a time when it becomes fundamental to reason on the quality of the offer of the cultural narration of the online strategy is wished to follow.

Could the web become useful and functionally serve such new outlined functions? Could it supply effective action and monitoring tools? It seems important to try and create an effective tool for the community of museums consistent with the project and work that ICOM Italia has been carrying on for several years in Italy. The research group Digital Cultural Heritage (Gianfranco Calandra, Vincenza Ferrara, Anna Maria Marras, Sara Radice and me as coordinator) has proposed a practical tool called: WSS Web Strategy scheme – presenting 17 research parameters particularly focusing on communication strategies, which allow the museum self-monitoring process, offering evaluation tools for the assessment and monitoring of the online strategy.

The web is nevertheless overrated but still underutilized, as some results of a national survey carried out in 2017 using the WSS Scheme show, some reasons are to be found in the lack of knowledge regarding the structure of the web itself. No day goes by without hearing someone talking about it and its possibilities. Everyone uses it, everybody talks about it. What if I ask you who Tim Berners-Lee is? He is the actual inventor of the World Wide Web and is, shamefully enough, very little known and his only book *Weaving the Web. The past, present and future of the World Wide web by its Inventor* published in 1999 (Berners-Lee and Fischetti 1999) is no longer printed and difficult to find, yet this text explains the functioning in a very clear way together with the visionary philosophy that inspires it. He has actually created a language where any hypertext is an open system that can connect to any other hypertext page and by applying a URL (Uniform Resource Locator)[3] any page has become independent from the others allowing any page to be virtually connected to any other page in the web. He has created the connection system among the pages and in the meantime, he has allowed the absolute independence of the same pages. A beautiful complexity. A never-before experienced utopia which allows us to access every document, to publish whichever content we wish and to integrate any content published by others. An unprecedented opportunity. Yet, even though the web is much discussed, very little is known about its technical structure and actual possibilities. Often, we simply limit our actions to publishing single info on social media or on specific sites without linking them to other pages showing an old editorial approach. The web is the largest cooperation machine ever conceived by humankind, but is not a place where mere lists of information are published, it requires a complex and technically correct designing.

A vision and opportunity is well described in (Tapscott and Williams 2006): "Billions of connected individuals can now actively participate in innovation, wealth creation, and social development in ways we once only dreamed of (...) And when the masses of people collaborate they collectively can advance the arts, culture, science, education, government, and the economy in surprising but ultimately profitable ways. […] based on new competitive principles such as openness, peering, sharing, and global acting". Web is overestimated in words but essentially underutilized.

Before taking new steps, it is worth analyzing your web strategy in detail and improving all possible actions with a short-term program, considering what is immediately feasible, optimizing and improving existing contents, and then implementing a long-term program with new proposals. In order to provide a tool we have made the WSS scheme available in different formats and downloadable in open access format. The scheme version of the survey is today available in Italian and English. In 2017 using the mentioned scheme we carried out a survey in Italy and have published the results in (Orlandi et al. 2018). In 2019 we released an extended version (Orlandi et al. 2019), available in Italian in Open access.[4] The book discusses some theoretical aspects and presents in detail the proposed 17 parameters of analysis.

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[3] https://it.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uniform_Resource_Locator
[4] Downloadable at https://zenodo.org/record/3547149#.Xp2l0FMzZLA

Figure 1. Book Cover of (Orlandi et al. 2019).

Book Theoretical Issues

In the book we have dealt with some theoretical issues: Daniele Jalla, in his *Communicating and preserving data at the time of the web (Comunicare e conservare al tempo del web)*, reflects on the nature of digital heritage, and on the problems connected to security, keeping and archiving data available to all humanity; in the chapter *web strategy as a system (La web strategy come sistema)*, I explain the nature of the web in the way its creator Tim Berners-Lee conceived it by utilizing a mixture of technical skills and a brilliant philosophical utopia; Valentino Nizzo, in his *Granting effective knowledge experiences of public enjoyment (Garantire effettive esperienze di conoscenza e di pubblico godimento)*, highlights the importance of the web as a strategic tool for the enhancement and use of heritage also for the Italian ministry of Cultural Heritage; Anna Maria Marras, in her *Accessibility and digital experience (Accessibilità e Digitale)*, explains by illustrating the reference legislation, how accessibility can be declined in different meanings and how digital accessibility is a fundamental element in the museum strategy; Sara Radice, in her *Strategies for effective web designing or Search Engine Optimization (Strategie per una progettazione web efficace in ottica SEO)*, provides the most crucial elements and aspects for optimization of the SEO strategy of contents another technical yet fundamental aspect to focus while playing on the web, without which we may miss a number of interesting opportunities; Vincenza Ferrara, in her *Reuse and Educational Mission (Riuso e Missione Educativa)*, explains the priority of a free release of cultural images and how this could be a great opportunity also in the educational field and which project are promoting this approach; Gianfranco Calandra, in his *Beyond the "grammar" (Oltre la "grammatica")* deals with all the fundamentals that need to be primarily checked, the actual basic "grammar" to be assessed first in order to be then in a position to concentrate on the strategic objectives of cultural narrative; Enrico Bertacchini, in *The value of quantitative surveys on museums and the web (Il valore delle indagini quantitative sui musei e il web)*, highlights the importance of relying on analyzes and surveys, as we did in 2017, to obtain feedback and data to make effective assessments and choices.

Progressive parameters

The WSS web Strategy Scheme has been conceived as a practical tool to identify the elements which define the online presence of a cultural hub as an integrated use of website, social media and web platforms. The suggested scheme proposes an improving path proceeding from simple to complex, from practices that are already in place and functioning for the suggestion of a possible evolution in terms of public participation in the near future.

1. Information Architecture
      1.1. Menu And Contents
      1.2. External And Internal Links
      1.3. Writing For The Web

2. Contents Strategy
      2.1. Contents Quality
      2.2. Contents for Diversified Audiences
      2.3. Information
      2.4. Internationalization

3. Interface Design
      3.1. Operability
      3.2. Responsive Design
      3.3. Visual Identity

4. Creating Communities
      4.1. Sharing Tools
      4.2. Museum - Public Dialogue
      4.3. Online Catalogues
      4.4. Monitoring Tools

5. Creative Reuse of Contents
      5.1. Management and Reuse of Contents
      5.2. Licenses for the (Re)Use of Contents
      5.3. Users Generated Contents

We will highlight some parameters and results. The first three levels are simple and technical, and concern the concept of usability and accessibility; and results on the survey are generally positive. Entire level *4. Creating Communities* analyzes the interaction among users and between users and the cultural institution investigating: the use of social media for content sharing; the possibility to create or consolidate a virtual community through direct dialogue with institutions; the presence of contents on regional, national and international sharing platforms. In particular parameter 4.2 *Museum-public Dialogue* draws attention to the possibility of a dialogue between public and museum. The results of the survey we carried out in Italy in 2017 are critical: 7% of the cases shows absence of contact details (e.g. Online form, email contact) that would allow the users to contact the Museum staff in order to ask for information; 52% of analyzed situations presents contact forms or Museum staff email contacts, but answers are rarely received on time, causing user dissatisfaction; in 24% of cases the response time is faster but only in 17% of them, social activities foreseeing specific projects in which the public can actively participate are periodically planned (e.g., "Ask a curator").

Parameter 4.4. Monitoring Tools highlights the useful social analysis tools, but only in 16% the analytics tracking features are used and the collected data is analysed and used to improve the web strategy. Level *5. Creative reuse of contents* considers the interaction tools which allow the user to create and share contents via the use of external platforms or through a designated

section of the website itself. These are the three questions belonging to the fifth level of investigation: the presence of tools for the interaction of users and the contents' sharing and management; the typology of user's licenses and copyrights, finalized to the re-use of content; the possibility to edit contents. In the survey, it emerged that regarding parameter 5.2 (Licenses for the Reuse of contents) in 63% of cases under the section "Terms of use" in the Museum's website there are no Licenses and copyright information about the reuse of content; in 26% they are unclear, and only in 11% there are Creative Commons (CC)[5] licenses so it is possible to save contents and actually reuse them.

Conclusions

One way communication or participation? The active involvement of the public is of the fundamental elements of the social function of a museum. The complexity of the challenges requires museums to have a new listening ability and relationship capability. In addition to the production of contents from the museum to the public, which bear the characteristics of a one-directional monologue; museums should also involve and implement a real intention to listening and dialogue with its public, since the projects that make the public active and participatory are the same allowing the museum to understand the public's needs, considerations and thoughts. It is crucial to remember that with 'participation' we do not mean museum projects *for* the public, but projects realized in cooperation *with* the public or *done by* the public.

Digital contents published by museums on the web during Covid-19 emergency have been multiplied and museums demonstrated great resilience but there is a lack of long-term editorial strategy and the contents rarely activate a dialogue, aspects as we had already found in the 2017 Italian survey carried out with the WSS as we reported in Museum International article (2018) providing information on the lack of strategy on level 4 (Creating Communities focused on dialogue and monitoring) and on level 5 (Reuse of Contents and Licenses).

A change of parameter is urgent. The coming months with Covid access restrictions to museums and their very small face-to-face activities require to activate a quality relationship also via the web, and quality is in the increase of dialogue and active participation of the public. The monitoring scheme WSS can be a useful tool for self-assessment and for identifying relational strategies.

If the Museum releases images and contents with free licenses, it authorizes, allows and hopes that people rework them, make them their own, share them and therefore participate in new narratives, and create new points of view on what we value as heritage. And heritage becomes alive when it is reinterpreted right here, right now, and, sure is, the museum can be stimulated by ideas coming from the public. The active involvement of the public is at the base of one the founding documents of new museology: in the wonderful *Resolution of Santiago* of 1972 (Fernández Guido 1973), it has been highlighted that "the museum should have a technical and psychological impact on the visitor. It should not merely give him an aesthetic pleasure, but also stimulate the development of his inner potentialities", and stated that "in the case of museums, as with most communication media, the communication process was one-way, without any possibility of feedback" (Fernández Guido 1973, 33). On the web to "development of his inner potentialities" is for example the opportunity for the public to reuse and creatively rework contents on the web allows us to observe the expression of the latent possibilities of the public itself and to monitor its reactions. It also welcomes a multi-voiced cultural narrative, which directly involves the public. Such a level of investigation helps setting long-term objectives on involvement and active participation. DCH research group intends to insist on their strategic relevance, even if such procedures are not yet systematically widespread. The possibility in the web to look forward, modify and elaborate can be a great incentive for cultural participation. Public can become part of the process of re-signification of the cultural narration, helping museums with the new need very clearly expressed in the text by Roberto Verganti: defining not how (new proposals or services) but why (new meanings) certain steps need to be taken, "since this is the new challenge: not innovation of solution, but innovation of meaning". Innovation driven by meaning is the way to create value in our current world, where ideas are abundant but new visions are rare (Verganti 2016, 3).

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[5] https://creativecommons.org/use-remix/cc-licenses/

Yet, the global process of content sharing and accessibility has to be compatible with the observance of law: the steps to find agreements and the right methods are many and very interesting: on the European Union website there is an interesting *Timeline of digitisation and online accessibility of cultural heritage*[6] which guides you through every European digitalisation step since 2015. A change in mentality is therefore necessary so to allow the adherence to the European Commission *Recommendation of 27 October 2011 on the digitization and online accessibility of cultural material and digital preservation* (European Commission 2011) for the use and re-use of digital cultural heritage contents for different purposes, such as education, tourism, etc. in order to improve the involvement of different audiences. We hope the adoption of exceptions already foreseen by Directive 2001/29/EC at a national level.

We are living in a polarized dimension in which most museums under-utilize the opportunities the web offers (the results of the Italian survey show it) and some powerful museums dare to release the images of their collections with open access: the Metropolitan Museum of Art,[7] the Smithsonian,[8] the Rijksmuseum to give just some recent examples. Even the Cleveland Museum of Art has just made the same choice and the Director, William Griswold in a presentation of the project for the release of images in the public domain highlighted the main goal behind such a decision: "for the benefit of all the people, forever".[9] The goal for the release in the public domain or with free licenses of images and contents goes beyond the online publication of the catalog of works, it, in fact, offers a greater opportunity: the possibility for people to use them to create new contents, and for this reason the Smithsonian dedicates a whole section of its site to the practices called Remixes with Smithsonian Open Access Content[10] (many have used 3D models, also those released in CC0). Public domain licenses (CC0) or Creative Commons licenses indicate what it is possible to do with images and contents. A recent GLAM open access policy and practice survey (McCarthy and Wallace, 2018-to present) seeks to map institutions that share with free licenses or in the public domain images and contents. In such survey the Italian institutions that issue with CC are only the Egyptian Museum of Turin and the and European Library of Information and Culture (BEIC). In fact, more information is needed in order to be able to act correctly on the web as well as political choices at national and European level which allow or foresee exceptions that would simplify the opportunities of European cultural institutions to open up to dialogue and active participation of the public.

Without clarity and simplicity on release opportunities, museums do not take risks and at an international level Italy definitely risks a setback. That's why the Digital Cultural Heritage research group of ICOM Italy is now focused on a new research on *Copyright and Open Licenses in relation to the reproduction and publication of cultural heritage images and contents on the web*. The first step will be the creation of a FAQ document, easy to understand and ready to use, for Museums, Libraries and Archives. A board of experts (Anna Maria Marras, Deborah De Angelis, Pierfrancesco Fasano, Cristina Manasse, Mirco Modolo) will try to identify and answer the legal questions that many cultural heritage professionals have to face almost daily to take strategic decisions about increasing open interaction on the web.

We wish this scheme WSS could be adopted by a larger research community. We would appreciate the opportunity to hold comparative studies with other museum realities with the aim of achieving a deeper view and more complete knowledge of the possibilities of the web. We shall be more than happy to answer your questions and receive your suggestions and comments at our email address: digital.cultural.icomitalia@gmail.com.

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[6]   https://ec.europa.eu/digital-single-market/en/news/timeline-digitisation-and-online-accessibility-cultural-heritage

[7]   Open access policy, https://www.metmuseum.org/about-the-met/policies-and-documents/image-resources

[8] Open Access Remix, https://www.si.edu/openaccess

[9] https://youtu.be/Vkk2G2QglNc

[10] https://www.si.edu/openaccess/remix

Figure 2. *Schema della Web Strategy WSS 2019 (Sintetic web Strategy Scheme WSS 2019, italian version)*. Available at http://www.icom-italia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Schema-web-Strategy-ICOM-ITALIA-WSS-2019-ITALIANO.pdf
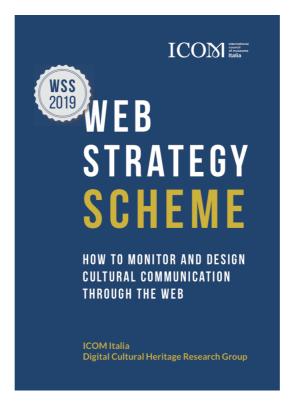

Figure 3. *Sintetic Web Strategy Scheme WSS 2019*, english version. Available at http://www.icom-italia.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/web-Strategy-Scheme-WSS-2019-ICOM-ITALIA-ENGLISH.pdf

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