

Doctoral Dissertation Theses

MUSEUM WITHOUT WALLS

**The Effects of the COVID 19 Pandemic on the Online
Presence of Hungarian Museums**

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Objectives, thesis description

The declaration of the COVID 19 coronavirus disease as a global pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO) on March 11 2020 had an unprecedented effect on the world's museums:

- Museums world-wide were forced to fully or partially close for extended periods of time.
- Museums everywhere were forced to face the same set of economic and societal challenges at a global level: loss of revenue from closure, lay-offs and dismissals, online work, online public relations, and increased demand for online content.
- In 2020, museums—regardless of the relationship they had formerly had with digitisation and communication—were forced to rethink both their digital content creation practices, and their strategies for maintaining an online presence.
- As all museum events took place via net devices and thus essentially in public, they became viewable from any point on the planet.

- Geographical distances ceased to have meaning; in some cases, tiny institutions that were formerly only familiar to locals suddenly became points of global focus.
- General interest in museums grew and consumer habits that affected online cultural content were changed in fundamental ways. New demands, including those from the sphere of public education, had a formative effect on institutional offerings.
- Various institutions influenced each other more heavily; innovations spread like wildfire and as they did were transformed, thus reinforcing the similarities between responses to the crisis situation.
- Given the rapidly developing digital competencies of professionals in the sector, it became perpetually easier to conduct online surveys in the state museums of all five continents, the results of which could be evaluated and published immediately. This gave rise to a larger quantity of

fresh, mutually-corroborating, mutually reviewed information on the world's museums than had ever been available at any other time in history.

The present dissertation discusses one particular node within the simultaneously closed and open, constricted and expanded world of the coronavirus pandemic that, however brief, made a lasting impact—a meeting point where processes short and long not only intersected, but also highlighted each other's distinguishing characteristics, rendering them tangible, putting them under a microscope. Conducted in 2021 with a view to gaining an international perspective, my exploratory research has attempted to examine the pathways into, through, and beyond this node with the overt intention of providing ammunition to digital projects associated with the post-pandemic societal relaunch.

With the spread of the Internet and digital technologies, actors in the museum world have understood that they cannot dismiss the rapidly growing and continually restructuring opportunities afforded by virtual spaces. Rather, the response has involved the launch of numerous

programmes in the areas of not only communication, but also acquisitions strategy and record-keeping. As their collections have been increasingly digitised and their databases have grown, starting in the 2000s, they have faced the burning question of how to make the information currently available both in-house, and online—in some cases on national, international, or themed aggregate sites—useful/usable to users. Games and applications were developed that, unlike campaigns propagated by social media, rarely succeeded in breaking through users’ stimulus thresholds. Though audiences and museum professionals alike found them interesting and useful, these digital solutions could not compete with physical museum spaces, exhibitions, real-life artefacts, and community programmes.

When in the first quarter of 2020, museum hours world-wide were restricted due to the spread of the coronavirus, institutions left without visitors found themselves facing an uncertain future. The desire of upholding their mission and continuing to serve their classic functions despite uncertain prospects prompted museums to find

ways for people everywhere to experience their work and curatorial efforts within the only remaining space available—the World Wide Web. To do so, they began by updating previous digital content and re-organising the duties they performed, an endeavour that in most cases witnessed employees who, because of the quarantine, had to work from home, in isolation from their colleagues, without the necessary technical expertise, experience, or IC technology digging into a strategy that held out the promise of survival and attempting to hold their own.

This dissertation seeks not only to explore—through research conducted using, among other things, the methods of digital anthropology—both the extraordinarily rapid process that enabled this transition, and its antecedents, but also to document how the set of initially rudimentary solutions used to do so, in time, grew more professional in nature.

The project aims to show:

- how institutional relationships with digital information, digitisation, the use of online space, and social media were transformed;
- how related institutional practice in Hungarian museums changed as a result of the coronavirus pandemic;
- how institutional communities and visitorships responded to the developments;
- how the newly arisen virtual interplay in turn affected the attitudes and motivations of museum staff.

It is not, however, the aim of this project, despite its focus on digital and online museum practice, to delve into matters of technological or Internet history or net development, even where such topics form an integral part of the area studied or of the World Wide Web itself, and despite the necessity of, in the context of certain phenomena, citing the professional literature on them.

It is my claim that as a result of the pandemic, not only did the quantity and quality indicators associated with

expanding online content turn positive, but also the content itself came to be incorporated into the global digital space more intensively—i.e. grew stronger in its hypertextual character, more open, more interactive, and more playful, offering perpetually greater opportunity for interaction—across a rising number of points. The forms of the very earliest online programmes to take root (i.e. of programmes originally intended for offline, frontal knowledge transfer) were those which facilitated assimilation into the hypermedial realm of the World Wide Web. Over time, the digital competencies of museum staff working in this area improved, and a certain change in general attitude was observed. At the same time, interest on the part of the public grew stronger, the number of target groups for online content grew and differentiated, and a wide circle of users learned to use the innovative new solutions.

Thesis structure

The dissertation is constructed around three fundamental units:

1.) In the first unit—after discussing the conceptual structure of the dissertation as a whole and outlining the scientific-historical context—I examine in detail, on the basis of current professional literature, which changes, trends, and progressive methods defined the professional discourse within the museum world prior to the pandemic, creating the practices upon which museums, forced to keep their doors closed, would construct their online practices in the time to come. The objective of this unit is to explore the analogue and digital context that enabled a significant proportion of Hungarian museums to relocate their activities into virtual space in an extraordinarily short time. At the same time, the unit hopes to reveal which deficiencies caused the content of many museums to lack coherency.

2.) The objective of the second unit, which is constructed on quantitative methods, is two-fold. First, this unit hopes to document the pandemic-related strategies of

Hungarian museums developed during the period of forced closure. Second, it seeks to explore—numerically and in detail—the differences, disparities, inconsistencies, deficiencies, and strengths on the basis of which the online activities pursued by institutions in response to the crisis situation can be submitted to analysis.

The research to this end comprises three separate lines of inquiry:

- The first examines museums as institutions through comparison and analysis of domestic and international surveys recording the impact of the COVID 19 pandemic.
- The second entails an online survey targeting museum workers conducted by me personally in 2021. With more than three hundred participants, this line of inquiry maps out institutions of various sizes, categories, and locations, noting in each case both the differences between professional knowledge and digital competencies,

and the practices and methodologies applied to museums' online and digital activities.

- The third entails another survey, also conducted by me in 2021, of a sample of 1000 people. The aim in this case was to analyse the online content published by museums during the pandemic from the standpoint of visitors/users.

Each of these projects of varying focus reflects continually on each of the others. Responses to similar groups of questions enable the studies to track not only museums' significantly expanded content creation activities, but also the broader social processes related to quarantine, the overarching crisis situation, home office work, increased demand for digital content, and the global and domestic impact of Internet consumption.

3.) The intent of the final, six-part unit—the qualitative part of the project—is to perform a critical analysis of the changed practices, processes, and tendencies that emerged from museums' utilisation of online space as a result of the coronavirus pandemic. Building on the exploratory research of the previous two units, these

topical areas are examined in a thematic breakdown with a primary focus on whether the increased content creation constituted merely a transfer of existing offline practice to the Internet in virtual simulation of analogue public interaction, or rather there emerged from this period some quantity of true hypertextual, hypermedial, interactive content, as well. After discussing certain concrete institutional practices, the unit turns its focus to the topics of virtual exhibitions, museum social media platforms, online community, participative, and social projects, the changed situation of museum education, online professional forums, collections campaigns, and scientific events.

An outline of the methodology used

1.) In introducing my research topic and outlining the context, I analysed curatorial, media theory, and communications theory literature in the Hungarian, English, and German languages (published by the end of August 2021).

2.) In performing the quantitative research involved, I initiated two national online surveys, analysing the

results using statistical methods and comparing them with other domestic and international statistical data sets and research reports.

3.) In addition to the textual analyses, I also displayed my findings on 86 graphs, tables, and diagrams for use in comparative lines of inquiry.

4.) In performing the qualitative research, I conducted numerous individual and group interviews with representatives of each specialised area.

5.) Using the method of document and content analysis, I reviewed various manifestations of museums' various online activities and studies related to them. The most heavily used sources in this regard were domestic and international research projects that examined the impact of the pandemic from the cultural, societal, and institutional perspectives.

6.) In designing individual research efforts, I additionally drew on the methods of digital anthropology and virtual ethnography: beyond investigating the well-delineated topic of digital culture—in which I regarded the

museums' online spaces as a setting for 'fieldwork'—I exploited the opportunities afforded by web 2.0, social media, and other technologies (analytics, data management systems, cloud-based services, video conferencing, survey dissemination systems, virtual libraries, virtual databases, webinars, etc.). In the course of conducting my research (planning, implementation, and publication), I encouraged interactivity on the part of my data managers, including them in the work processes and projects involved. I published the results of my surveys immediately, as they were collected, motivating my network of connections to discuss them themselves and in doing so, reaching added numbers of informants and sources. The large number of 2021 publications on the topic shared to my social media profiles prompted discourse within professional circles, as well, and I received numerous relevant observations and criticisms that not only influenced my work, but also expanded my investigative horizons.

7.) Empirical knowledge that builds on everyday work experience forms an integral part of the dissertation. As

head of the Communications and Education Directorate of the Hungarian National Museum through August 2021 of the pandemic, I was personally responsible for the museum's public activities, including the development and publication of online content. As editor of the periodical *MúzeumCafé* and editor-in-chief of *Magyar Múzeumok OnLine* [*Hungarian Museums OnLine*], and as a participant in and organiser of several other Hungarian and international online councils and projects, I was able to pilot numerous new methods and gain personal experiences with the work of other institutions.

List of findings

During the first wave of the pandemic, the 4 April 2020 communication of UNESCO predicted that 90 percent of museums would be fully, partially, or periodically closed. According to a report a year later, 83 percent of the world's 104 thousand museums had been closed for an average of 150 days each, a circumstance resulting in an unprecedented reduction in visitorship and, therefore, revenues. International assessments showed that institutions, because they understood the roles they

played in society, strove to support a population in crisis by their own means via the World Wide Web. Their virtual exhibitions, livestreamed events, online museum education solutions, and creative uses of social media received attention from the press and gradually became part of the virtual public conversation.

In this dissertation, my surveys conducted among museum staff and visitors, all of them based on significant sample sizes, as well as—as context for the foregoing—my comparative analysis of pandemic-related international and Hungarian assessments and examination and methodological analysis of museum-created virtual content have clearly and unambiguously verified—in a manner unique even at the international level, relative to one another and according to consistent criteria—the following:

- Beyond museums' ability to provide continuous innovation during the period in which they were closed, the quality of the digital materials they created continually improved and grew more varied.

- Hungarian museums, though they did not receive appreciable attention at the global level, adequately surmounted all obstacles in line with European trends.
- The tone of online content at publication changed, grew more direct, and departed from the distanced language indicative of speaking from a position of power that often characterises museums, so that frontal instruction and an autocratic lecture style were increasingly avoided.
- The themes museums covered changed as well: in addition to the presentation of sensational, high-value curiosities and masterworks of the global artistic canon, the focus turned increasingly to humorous story-telling and subject matter not covered in permanent exhibitions, such as minorities, hot topics, and hard/difficult history.
- Museum staff drew inspiration from present times on a more regular basis, demonstrating that experience, positive and negative, with the

contemporary world can be interwoven with the material of any museum collection.

- Virtual spaces, which previously strove to make only a visual impression, were filled with hypermedial and hypertextual references; became more interactive and more visually interesting; and produced both solutions spanning various areas of the sciences and various collection and museum types, and intertwining innovations representing an entirely new quality.
- The work invested was not autotelic; the content in question found its function in online programmes aimed at a variety of adult, student, and educator groups.
- The change was also perceptible from another perspective: initiatives prompted in many cases by considerations of mere survival shifted public thinking on the topic of museums in general and altered the ways in which people interacted with them.

- Demand for museum content on social media grew significantly within every age category, such that in some cases, virtual spaces and exhibitions accessible online drew crowds that were quite massive.
- The methods of museum knowledge transfer underwent a type of online transformation, in the course of which museum staff discovered the solutions that permitted them to interpret digitised artefacts in the virtual environment amidst virtual circumstances in a manner appropriate to the dynamics of the participating groups.
- Museums fulfilled their function as ‘public servants’: beyond programmes of recreational value, they also provided quality support for public education during the time it was forced to operate within the virtual space. For teachers, museum interfaces proved an authentic, reliable source of scientifically verified content within the endless labyrinth of the World Wide Web. This mutual cooperation between educators and

museums bred numerous positive practices that benefitted both parties. For museums, the key questions were whether they would be able to sustain the interest of the various institutions of education in their online content; and whether they should translocate the responses they had given to—what appeared at the time of the pandemic to constitute—unusually high demand in the normality of daily life—that is, whether those responses should be incorporated into the perpetually self-reinventing world of digital education.

- For museum staff, many of whom had been traditionally suspicious of the achievements of the digital revolution, digital technologies proved their worth in the time of the pandemic. Under the pressure of the situation, museum society not only gained a new understanding of the importance of digitisation, but also acquired some skill with numerous applications and tools. Experience in online spaces accelerated the

renovation of classic practices such as scientific conferencing and the organisation of professional workshops. Additionally, the use of digital technology led staff to view curatorial, exhibition-related, participative/community, and collection acquisitions projects in an entirely new light, while also altering perspectives on social media.

- With the development of museum workers' digital competencies, the prevalence of solutions that can be interpreted as not merely transplanting methods customarily seen in the physical realm into the online environment but representing digital content that met the needs of Internet users grew appreciably.
- Museums managed to supersede the individual attitude and isolated learning methods typical of Internet users and to break through the wall—often believed to be impenetrable—between the analogue institution and the digital one: numerous solutions were found for building

online communities and for connecting otherwise isolated individuals within the virtual space.

- Museums also gradually realised that various social media platforms could be used not only as communications and marketing channels, but also as means for strengthening their ties both to the community, and to each other, and for engendering real dialogue. By contrast, numerous studies showed that a significant proportion of museums in various locations across the globe continued to build upon the old practice of ‘broadcasting,’ that is of communicating content without striving for interaction or dialogue and without spurring their communities to action.

Application of research findings

At the international level, the completed research enabled the examination and comparison of the reactions to a single crisis of Hungarian museums of various categories, geographical situations, and sizes in a given period of time (2020), thus permitting their application to later projects.

Given its examination of the theoretical preparedness of museum workers vis-a-vis the concepts of hypertextuality and the virtual exhibition, the project also holds out the opportunity of future refinement of the conceptual structures built on their practical experiences.

Also worth highlighting in this context is the large-sample survey that recorded the habits of consumers interested in Hungarian cultural subject matter in relation to virtual museum content, again for a fixed interval of time.

Another result that could potentially be useful in the development of virtual institutional practice is the project's description of various contemporary solutions,

including their successes and deficiencies, in the form of case studies and methodological/critical analyses that, with regard to content preferred by museums and visitors alike, selected on the basis of quantitative research findings, drew on 1) the international context, 2) museums' own work experiences and institutional practices, and 3) interviews representing the thinking of other museums.

Despite museums' generally successful response to the crisis, my research demonstrated that there was also a downside to the situation, one that involved a number of identifiable difficulties. Although the palpably creative presence of numerous museums on the World Wide Web gave unprecedented rise to access both to public collections, and to the amassed knowledge they represent, the view from another perspective is less rosy: there exist, it turns out, enormous disparities in the matter of access—whether to Internet connections or to devices capable of downloading museum content—and these differences are even more glaring where women are concerned. Twenty-four-hour access to museum content

and the elimination of geographical confines translated into a salient global opportunity for relatively few institutions.

The analyses involved in this dissertation suggest that while a few smaller institutions did receive accolades on an unprecedented scale, typically it was the institutions that were already well-known players in the tourist industry whose content was the focus of attention. Examination of the Hungarian population, too, indicated that while rural dwellers tended to explore the content of museums in Budapest and elsewhere in the world, residents of the Hungarian capital preferred to browse the content of foreign museums over those of rural Hungarian institutions.

Around the globe, it will have to be understood that at some institutions, the digital innovations born of recent necessity will largely have brief lives—that is, will necessarily be viewed as short-term or temporary measures. Still, with the right motivation, experiences gained during the first three waves of the pandemic can nevertheless speed the process of digital transformation

that had begun in the years prior. Among reasons to take this observation seriously is the finding that the positive shift in regards to digital tools has by no means accelerated the digitisation of museum collections. In fact, in Hungary, as elsewhere, no substantial increase in collections databases with accessible descriptive information was noted, nor were additional IT staff hired or investments made into ICT equipment.

Indeed, the problem here is not limited to the digitisation of physical holdings. Despite the presence of a few progressive solutions, the question of the placement, tracking, and safeguarding of born-digital materials in the collections of most Hungarian institutions remains unresolved. Archiving difficulties jeopardise the texts, images, and videos submitted in response to split-second acquisitions campaigns launched by various museums hoping to document the effects of the pandemic. The rise of this new challenge is, however, a sign of progress. The fact that museum research, acquisitions campaigns, and collections have been opened up to originally digital materials indicates that the institutions involved have

broken with a focus limited to the material environment, physical objects, and tangible documents alone.

My research has demonstrated that online museums can be important extensions of and supplements to their physical counterparts. During the pandemic, a certain correspondence of interests developed between institutions on the one hand, and that section of the public with an interest in culture on the other: for the former, it was important that they become visible, that they show how indispensable they were even without physical visitorships; the latter, on the other hand, people with various motivations and backgrounds, all found in the former something of substance to occupy their time. This momentary overlap was, however, fleeting, and museums now find they must define the target groups they wish to serve online as part of institutional practice—must seek out those with whom they wish to plan collaborative efforts at higher levels or on a regular basis.

The pandemic can be expected to have as lasting an impact on museums as it will on the cultural sector as a

whole, for which reason institutions must reformulate more than just their relationships to digital and analogue spaces and related strategies. Re-examination of the definition of a museum has been a topic of discussion at ICOM international conferences for years. Most recently it was in September of 2019—immediately before the pandemic—that a vote to accept a new definition failed in Kyoto. The task that stands before the 26th ICOM conference—entitled *The Power of Museums*—to be held in Prague in 2022 is even more complicated, as the changes launched in response to the experiences and challenges of the pandemic and the continued growth of arborescent online spaces have rendered the already complex set of meanings we currently call ‘a museum’ even more labyrinthine—within walls, or beyond.



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List of publications related to the dissertation

Hungarian books (1)

1. **Berényi, M.:** Hogyan értékelik a magyar látogatók a múzeumok koronavírus alatt folytatott online tevékenységét?: Jelentés a 2021 januárjában 1006 főt megszólító lakossági kutatás eredményeiről. Szabadtéri Néprajzi Múzeum : Szentendre, 64 p., 2021.

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32. **Berényi, M.:** This is how we work during the pandemic. Part 3: Work planning, monitoring.
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