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abstrakt | abstract ▷

The research of which the results are presented in this paper is funded by a grant from the Research Council of Lithuania under the project **Research on increasing the attractivity and optimizing virtual access of Lithuanian national museums** (LitMus-Web), No. MIP-093./2013 / LSS-160000-1484. The main aim of the research project was to explore the differences in task completion time between Lithuanian museum websites – in particular of the National Museums – when the user is searching for important information that is relevant to him/her. The analysis of the results should lead to recommendations on improving and optimizing the websites of the four National Museums of Lithuania. As the user is one of the key parameters in this research, it was important to collect some data as to the general user perception of museum websites. The first findings of a survey among visitors of the National Museums of Lithuania are presented in the following paper.

Výzkum, jehož výsledky jsou prezentovány v tomto článku, je financován z grantu Výzkumné rady Litvy v rámci výzkumného projektu na zvýšení atraktivity a optimalizaci virtuálního přístupu litevských národních muzeí (LitMus-Web), číslo MIP-093./2013 / LSS-160000-1484. Hlavním cílem výzkumného projektu bylo prozkoumat rozdíly v čase dokončení úkolu mezi webovými stránkami litevských muzeí – zejména těch národních – když uživatel vyhledává důležité informace, které jsou pro něho relevantní. Analýza výsledků by měla vést k doporučením na zlepšení a optimalizaci webových stránek čtyř národních litevských muzeí. Vzhledem k tomu, že uživatel je jedním z klíčových parametrů toho výzkumu, bylo důležité shromažďovat některé údaje týkající se vnímání muzejních webových stránek průměrným uživatelem. První výsledky průzkumu mezi návštěvníky Národního muzea Litvy jsou uvedeny v tomto článku.

The professional discourse as context

Since the emergence of new, web based technologies the perspective of how museums implement their role as educational institutions has changed considerably. The new technologies provided tools that contributed to an advanced implementation of the principles of the New Museology idea. This idea, conceived in the 1970s, i.e. in a pre-internet era, asks for a more active social role of museums implying a more active involvement of communities of interest (Van Mensch & Meijer-van Mensch 2011).

An important part of aforementioned change concerns a paradigmatic shift from education to learning, emphasising a more active role of the visitor in organising his/her own learning process. As such the introduction of new technologies is very much connected with the introduction of the concept of the participatory museum, a museum concept that not just helps learners to get control over their learning process, but also facilitates a more fundamental involvement of visitor/users in decision making processes concerning all spheres of museum work. Following Tim O'Reilly's proposal to speak of Web 2.0 with regard to the paradigmatic shift in the relation between producer and user (O'Reilly 2005), the concept of Museum 2.0 has been adopted as synonym to the participatory museum but with a stronger focus on the role of web based technologies (Van Mensch & Meijer-van Mensch 2011).

In the Museum 2.0 paradigm the presence of a museum on the internet (website and social media) is an intrinsic part of how a museum wants to manifest itself – and is perceived – as institution with an advanced vision on how its wants to communicate with its audiences. This participation paradigm is a cornerstone of current professional rhetoric. It starts to be a normative concept: there is a strong pressure on museums to be participative (Meijer-van Mensch 2014). Critical voices are seldom heard. Major critics of the participation paradigm such as Markus Miessen are seldom quoted (Miessen 2010), while strong supporters such as Nina Simon are referred to in almost every publication on new tendencies in museum communication (Simon 2010).

Miessen speaks of "the innocence of participation". According to him, participation is often understood as a means of becoming part of something through proactive contribution and the occupation of a particular role. This role, holds Miessen, is rarely understood as a critical platform of engagement; rather, it is usually defined according to romantic conceptions of harmony and solidarity. Harmony and solidarity is what underlies Nina Simon's participatory museum. According to Simon visitors "expect the ability to discuss, share, and remix what they consume. When people can actively participate with cultural institutions, those places become central to cultural and community life" (Simon 2010: ii). And the visitors, do they care?

American promotors of the participative museum idea claim a broad support within the society (Simon & Bernstein 2009). What about Lithuania? Nationwide the web presence of Lithuanian museums shows some deficiencies (Kapleris 2013 and 2014; Šuminas & Armonaité 2013). At the same time (and because of this?) the average visitor doesn't seem to show a strong interest in the participative potential of museum websites and museum pages on Facebook. These outcomes from recent research by Ignas Kapleris seem to be confirmed by a the present visitor survey. The findings suggest some important limiting conditions in developing a vision on the web presence of museums as intrinsic part of the museum experience. This asks for a more detailed analysis of the outcomes of the survey.

Findings in detail

In the period of March-May, 2014 402 museum visitors were interviewed on the basis of a questionnaire. Research data were collected during all opening days of the museums, including weekend days. More or less in equal proportions on Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. The interviews took place at four Lithuanian museums: Lithuanian Art Museum, National Museum of Lithuania, M. K. Čiurlionis National Museum of Art, and the Palace of the Grand Dukes of Lithuania. The interviewees were randomly selected. There is a rather clear dominance of female visitors (67%) and the age group 18–35 years (49%). Most respondents are highly educated (68% at university level). The age group 55+ represents only 18 % of the respondents.

The respondents are rather frequent museum visitors: 85% visits museums 1–12 times per year with an average of 4.5 times. The probability that the interviewee has never before been in a museum might be low. Still, 9% of the respondents states to visit museums less than once a year. The remaining 6% claims to visit museums once a week or even nearly every day. Indeed, according to directors of the national museums there are persons, e.g. pensioners, who are visiting museums nearly daily.[1]

The general profile of the interviewees is a university-trained young-adult female visiting museums about four times a year.

The respondents get their information about museums, in particular about exhibitions and events, mainly from internet: 77% of the interviewees speak of frequently and very often, against 45% never or rarely. Traditional media hardly play a role. Among them television play a rather important role for some respondents (46% frequently and very often) but an equal number of respondents state that they get their information never or rarely from this medium. Concerning printed press twice as much respondents use it never or rarely (52%) than use it frequently or very often (15%). Posters in public spaces and radio do not play a relevant role. Important is the role of peers (friends and acquaintances): 54% of the interviewees speak of frequently and very often, against 20% never or rarely. When asked what medium the respondent would use if he/she is actively looking for information most respondents would prefer to use internet. The website of a museum is mentioned most, but since it cannot be expected that respondents are familiar with the URLs of these websites, they will first use Google (or any other search engine) to find the specific sites. Respondents also made mention of some other websites, such as the Lithuanian museums portal (www.muziejai.lt). In general, 92% of the answers are internet related. Traditional media do not play a relevant role, and "even" peers do not play a significant role. Obviously people tend to talk with their peers about museums, but when they are looking for more information they prefer to look on the internet.

Only a small minority (17%) follows a museum on Facebook. Websites play a more important role than social media: 53% of the respondents visit museum websites once in sex months to once a month. Still, 26% of the respondents visit museum websites less than once a year (or not at all). The 340 respondents that do visit museum websites – even when less than once a year – are asked how often they use specific functions of museum websites. It is obvious that first of all museum websites are used to find information about opening hours, location, entrance fees, current exhibitions and events. Nearly all respondents use museum websites for information about opening hours (84% frequently and very often, against 9% never and rarely). Respondents are looking much less for information about exhibitions (57% frequently and very often, against 20% never and rarely). Information about the collections and about the history of the museum are not used – or looked for. In general, respondents do not show interest in the commercial offerings of museums (gifts, publications). They are also not interested in information about employment, volunteering or membership.

Overall, respondents are quite satisfied with the content of the museum websites they have visited: 36% show complete satisfaction. 185 respondents mentioned a series of dissatisfactions. Most answers did concern the design (mentioned 219 times). Respondents would like to see websites to be more user-friendly, more attractive, with more pictures, and more interactive. Respondents show much less interest in content related information (mentioned 56 times). Most often mentioned is the wish for more (and timely) information about exhibitions (mentioned 19 times). A few respondents would like to see virtual exhibitions (6) and games (3). There is little interest in information about scientific research (6) and the collection (3).

The few respondents with experience concerning museum pages on Facebook as asked about their expectations. Most often mentioned is information about exhibitions and events (mentioned 52 times). Respondents also expect pictures and video clips (mentioned 34 times). They are not interested in feedback from museum visitors about their impressions (mentioned 2 times).

Discussion

The results are clearly defined by the demographic characteristics of the respondents. It is not surprising that the internet appears to be the primary source when they are looking for information about museums. A more advanced analysis of the answers should make clear whether there is a positive relation between the frequency of museum visits and the frequency of visits to museum websites. Spontaneously respondents mention museum websites as the most important (potential) source of information. Social media are hardly mentioned even though the respondents that follow museums on Facebook mention "information about exhibitions and events" as the most important information they expect to find.

The most important part of the survey concerns the sort of information the respondents are looking for on museum websites. Most of all respondents are looking for information on opening hours, location, ticket prices and current exhibitions. In this respect they seem to be rather satisfied with what is offered by existing websites. Complaints focus mainly on design, which, according to the respondents, should be more user-friendly and attractive.

Obviously the respondents are visiting museum websites in particular to prepare their visit, but, as Paul Marty has made clear, it is crucial to understand the differences between pre-visit and post-visit needs and expectations. Prior to a visit, for example, online visitors are more likely to need information such as hours of operation or driving directions, while after a visit they are more likely to want information about future exhibits and special events (Marty 2007: 357). Unfortunately, in the survey no distinction is made between visits and repeat visits, neither concerning museum visits nor concerning visits to websites. The expectations given for museum pages on Facebook may reflect a post-visit interest assuming that many of the respondents started to follow a museum on Facebook after one or more visits.

Worth mentioning is the lack of interest shown by respondents on the commercial offerings of museums, i.e. the museum shop. However, the most important outcome of the survey, in view of the international professional interest in the Museum 2.0 concept, is that

[1] Personal communication A. Šuminas.

at least the 400 respondents in this survey do hardly show any interest in information on the collections, the history of museums, and other content related issues. It is not mentioned as information they are looking for, neither as information that is missed. The present survey did not ask to what extend the visitors had an interest in sharing views with other visitors/users either on the websites or on the Facebook pages. Two respondents mentioned that they were not interested in feedback of museum visitors about their impressions, but that does not necessarily imply that the other respondents would be interested in this.

International perspective

In 2010 Letty Ranshuysen published an overall analysis of visitor surveys that are carried out on a yearly basis among Dutch museums since 2003 (Ranshuysen 2010). In 2009 9,243 visitors of 34 museums were interviewed. Despite the fact that the museums in the current survey are not representative for the Lithuanian museum field as a whole, it is interesting to compare the visitor profile to that of the Dutch museums to identify some particularities that may be of influence on the outcomes of the survey. In the Dutch surveys more than half of the visitors is female, less than in the Lithuanian survey. The educational level is slightly higher: 60% of the Dutch museum visitors has higher education against 64% of the respondents of the Lithuanian survey.

The most important difference between the demographic specifics of the visitors of the four Lithuanian museums and Dutch museum visitors is the age profile. The age groups are defined differently, but it is clear that the interviewed visitors to the Lithuanian museums are much younger than the average museum visitor in the Netherlands. Among the Dutch visitors the age group 19 – 26 represents only 7%, as compared to 24% of the age group 18 – 24 in the four Lithuanian national museums, whereas the > 65 represent 20% in the Dutch statistics against 10% in the Lithuanian survey.

Three quarter of the visitors to Dutch museums use internet for information on museums (in 2004 it was only half of the visitors). That is less than the respondents of the Lithuanian survey (85% occasionally, frequently and very often). About 20% of the Dutch visitors mention information on the internet as immediate cause for visiting a museum. Visitors to Dutch museums, like those interviewed in the Lithuanian survey, are primarily looking for practical information. There is a much lesser interest in information about the collection. The general use of internet as source of information depends on age. Older people are less inclined to use the internet but in general they show a higher interest in formation about the collection. Interestingly the 19–26 years old seem to be less internet oriented than the 27–49 years old. According to Ranshuysen the use of internet as source of information relates to frequency of museum visits: more experience museum visitors are inclined to use internet more often (Ranshuysen 2010: 11). Visitors with children are also inclined to use internet more often (loc.cit.: 28).

Ranshuysen's analysis shows that older and more experienced museum visitors are less influenced by their peers. This would explain the high influence of peers shown by Question 6 in the Lithuanian survey since there is a higher percentage of young people among the respondents. Printed media lose their importance, among young people more than among older people.

In 2005–2006 Paul Marty administered an exploratory survey among visitors of museum websites in Australia, USA and Great Britain (Marty 2007). According to his survey results, online museum visitors generally visit museum websites before they visit museums. They are more likely to use basic information, such as hours of operation, driving directions, or information about current exhibits, than they are to use online images of artifacts, online gallery tours, or online educational activities. This seems to be similar to the results of the Lithuanian survey. Even though it is not asked whether the respondents visit a museum website before visiting the museum, the answers suggest that they are looking for information to prepare their visit.

As stated above, both surveys show a high interest in practical information (opening hours, location, entrance fees, etc.). The main difference is in the importance given to information about the collection, virtual exhibitions, online tours and (online) educational activities. For example, the respondents in Marty's survey show a much higher interest in information about the collection (before they visit the museum) than the respondents in the Lithuanian survey: 69% (likely and very likely) versus 10% (frequently and very often). According to Marty's survey results, online museum visitors who are visiting a museum's website after visiting a museum are less likely to use basic information, such as hours of operation and admission fees, and more likely to use online images of artifacts, collections data, and research materials. The interest these categories of information, before and after the museum visit, shows a more developed role of the visit to a museum website as intrinsic component of the museum experience.[2]

Marty concludes that "online museum visitors understand the complicated relationship that exists between museums and museum websites, and have clear expectations of what they want museum websites to provide, both before and after visiting a museum. Online museum visitors are increasingly living in a world where the physical and virtual intersect and complement each other daily" (Marty 2007: 355). This awareness is not shown in the Lithuanian survey. Lithuanian respondents may have a clear expectation of what they want museum websites to provide (basic information about opening hours, etc.), but this expectation is very limited and, in general, not responding to what museum websites actually do offer.

The Lithuanian survey confirms Wersig's observation (already in 2001) that searching information on the Internet has become part of many people's patterns of preparing for actions (Schweibenz 2011). More and more users consider the Internet as a digital extension of their physical means of action. As a consequence, institutions that are not adequately represented on the Internet or hard to find because they are not participating in national or supranational cultural portals are facing the danger of being ignored or even being considered as non-existent as far as action planning is concerned. But being present on the Internet is not enough, museums have also to adapt to the changing online user behaviour that is part of Web 2.0. According to Schweibenz cultural institutions have to adapt to the Social Web as it is gaining more and more importance due to the rising number of people who grow up becoming so called "digital natives", i.e. the generation that grew up using computers, video games and the Internet, in this way learning the digital language of information technology like native speakers in contrast to the generations before that moved into the world of new technology step by step and later in their lives, the so called "digital immigrants". One may wonder to what extend the 18-35 year old visitors that are interviewed as part of the current research project already do belong to this category of "digital natives". They certainly do use museum websites in a Web 1.0 fashion, but their responses to the survey do not show uses that suggest a movement towards higher levels in the hierarchy of social participation.

[2] One can only speculate about a possible different outcome when, as in the Lithuanian survey, museum visitors had been interviewed instead of visitors to the museum websites.

Conclusion

The outcome of the survey shows an important discrepancy between the dominant professional rhetoric on the social role of museums and the actual interests – or at least the actual behaviour – of visitors as users of museum websites.

Comparison with some international surveys gives context to the outcomes. A Dutch survey shows a different uses and different expectations according to age. In the Netherlands older people are usually over-represented in museum statistics. They are inclined to visit museums frequently and although as internet users they might not always be as dedicated as younger generations, they have more profiled interests. Research by Marty shows the importance to make a distinction between the use of internet before or after a museum visit.

Since visitors increasingly seem to consider museum websites as their primary source of information, there is a potential to develop museum websites into more active instruments in strengthening the relation between museums and their most loyal supporters (ie. the frequent museum visitors) also in Lithuania. It requires an investment on two levels: convincing museum workers that websites can (should) more actively be used as sources of information, and convincing users that websites (and social media) can add to their museum experience in a relevant and modern way.

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