The Museum of All: Institutional Communication Practices in a Participatory Networked World

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ABSTRACT   In this paper we will maintain that cultural institutions are increasingly facing the inevitability of a profound revision in their traditional parameters of unidirectional communication. Given the increasing availability of tools for audio-visual production as well as the diversity of networked communication contexts, the roles of the user and the audience have come to assume a participatory potential

in the content they consume and attend; this will dictate their repositioning in relation to the universe of institutions' work.

In order to communicate new messages, media narratives, views or perspectives on the same reality are constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed. In this age of 'Consumer-Generated Media', identities and representations are constantly changing. The idea and the concept of a brand now extends far beyond its own limits, taking on important emotional values, and people enjoy being a part of that brand's mythology.

The Serralves Foundation, along with its Museum of Contemporary Art, in Porto, Portugal, was the subject of a first study of an empirical nature: a series of audio-visual objects were developed, in order to generate material for analysis and proposition.

In this subsequent stage, we aim at the identification of new procedures and practices that may be effectively implemented within the institutional universe. We intend to establish more efficient communication contexts, including the maximizing of a set of relationships between institutions and audiences regarding dimensions that are traditionally outside the institutional radar: identity, narrative and affection.

By referring to key examples, we will posit that in order to achieve more success in their missions, cultural institutions should focus on participatory education and communication processes regarding contemporary issues. By doing this, they will strengthen their engagement with their audiences and bring them into the institutions' projects.

This project is currently undertaking a wide inventory and taxonomy of the various institutional paradigms in regards to communication practices. We aim at producing a map of vocations and positions within the institutional world in regards to the aforementioned issues that require participatory communication.

Background: Research Project First Phase

+ This research project aims at giving depth and continuity to a prior, preliminary research phase, developed in 2008. The intention to develop an applied study on the creation of institutional identities was already present, through participatory media strategies and the current state of new digital and technological paradigms.

The choice of the cultural institution Serralves in Porto, Portugal, as the subject of study, was due to three key factors:

- the fact that the main researcher had a professional relationship with the institution, allowing for privileged access to research material;
- the national and international recognition of this cultural institution, and;
- the interest shown by the institution to evaluate their own strategies for audio-visual communication with their audience.

Serralves is a Portuguese cultural institution in Porto, and hosts the largest and most visible Museum of Contemporary Art in Portugal. It is included in the main European itinerary of the most important exhibitions of contemporary art. Having Serralves as the object of research, an empirical method was adopted, as it was found that so far the work that had been done in this research area involving Portuguese cultural institutions was residual. Subsequently we found the need to identify and manage sufficiently relevant cases to be analysed and studied. We thus conducted four exercises of collaborative creation: first, with the purpose of showing how the same reality (Serralves) can be presented by distinct perspectives and interpretations, through the use of digital manipulation tools, and second, with the purpose of understanding how institutional identity can be built from a participatory media experience.

These resulted in the following four audio-visual objects.

Phonetic value of the brand[1]

Through a ready-made assembly of television frames in which news presenters uttered the word 'Serralves', we attempted to understand the impact of this word when repeated a great number of times over a traditional medium (television). With this exercise, we intended not only to demonstrate and highlight the strong presence of the Serralves Foundation in television news, but also the importance and value that tone and phonetics have in the process of brand identity (Figure 1).

Visual memory[2]

We attempted to shape a universe of visual memory, using the image archive of Serralves as a source. The objective was the conveyance of an assembly, in which the overlapping of layers of moving images

Figure 1
Frame from the resulting
video of the exercise
'Phonetic value of the
brand'.

expresses the intersection of themes and temporal moments that
takes place in the spaces of the institution itself. The outcome is
one of the many possible image sequences, which, separated from
its original context, and therefore lost in space and time, when reor-
dered, can provide new narrative moments, rendering the portrayed
realities more emotionally charged, and thus potentially closer to a
viewer's emotional response (Figure 2).

Figure 2
Frame from the resulting
video of the exercise
'Visual memory'.

Touristic moments[3]

Figure 3
Frame from the resulting video of the exercise 'Touristic moments'.

We posited that video recordings could convey quite distinct natures according to four different types of visitors: in this case, a nine year old child, a post office employee, a DJ and an architect. This proposed to unravel the 'representation' of Serralves through the 'vision' of its visitors, in an attempt to understand how they see the institution. We worked with images captured by the aforementioned subjects while navigating through the spaces of the institution (Figure 3).

Instant visions
(Project in collaboration with the students of the Master in Image Design degree, University of Porto, edition 2007/9)

Figure 4
Composition of images referring to the project 'Instant visions'.

We asked a group of students to freely capture images, videos and sounds during a specific period of time. Subsequently, we created a Flickr account (Brandão, 2008d) for the participants to upload their pictures, and a YouTube channel (Brandão, 2008e) for them to upload their videos (Figure 4). We intended this experiment to work as a simulation of an event or 'happening' that could even take wider proportions in future versions. This experiment was regarded as a rehearsal.

The above four exercises were important, firstly in order to test the potential of digital technologies in the process of creating new messages through the appropriation of existing source material. And secondly, in order to rehearse the importance and advantages of participatory media when audiences contribute, with their own creative processes, to institutional communication.

At the end of this first phase of the project, we found out that there is great creative potential in the hands of the visitors of Serralves that could be explored by the institution.

This project confirmed the assertion that, considering the repositioning of the user who has started to assume a participatory role in the content he consumes, a cultural institution such as Serralves can no longer simply communicate: it has to be able to integrate a level of interaction in its communication processes as well.

Framework: Participatory Media

The processes of representation of reality have experienced radical changes over the last century. Traditional media such as photography, cinema, radio, television and print, characterized by one-way communication, recently gave rise to a new kind of media, participatory in essence. New media integrates or simulates traditional media technologies, and, through digital processes, allow the participation and interaction of the user, who is thus able to participate actively in the content he consumes.

In the case of motion pictures, the viewer, who had once marvelled at the advent of the moving image as the most faithful method of representation of reality, has been repositioning himself in relation to the audio-visual material, now having the opportunity to turn himself into a creator, and share his own perspective of that same reality.

We are now witnessing great changes in information paradigms. Time, truthfulness, authorship and quantity of information no longer *mean* the same. At a time when information is increasingly available to all, when we can all instantly act on this information, shape it, manipulate it, present our interpretation and perspectives over it, the representation of reality (and reality itself, as a consequence) is increasingly built by the former consumers of information.

Easy access to databases of audio-visual content and a seemingly ever-expanding multitude of digital tools dictates that the manipulation of images and sounds with the aim of producing new

meanings and narratives is increasingly common. This has rekindled the debate on the meaning of copyright, identity, ethics, aesthetics and rhetoric, as well as on the management of privacy, trade and human relations.

It is widely evident that media devices currently play a crucial role in our individual and collective experience, as well as in how we relate with the world. In recent years, the increase of forms of production and sharing of content contributed to the spread of languages related to participatory media, placing them among the most important agents of socialization.

This is a reality that is developed through groups and communities that form in open systems and platforms without the help of organizations, without leaders and in which power is distributed equally by all its members. In this kind of decentralized environment, it is natural that institutions lose their authority levels. Facing the imminent risk of increasing its fragility, we believe it is important to find and carefully plan strategies and actions, without completely rejecting the adoption of a more open attitude to participation.

Institutional Attitudes Concerning Participatory Platforms

Given this participatory ecosystem, this research project aims to study the impact that certain phenomena of semantic deconstruction of institutional identities and narratives can provoke in the institutional communication.

In order to conduct an analysis of the attitude of Serralves, we shall use the example of a key activity developed by this institution. Every year since 2004, Serralves hosts *Serralves em Festa*, a one-weekend festival with an overwhelming programme of activities, both in numbers and in scope, dedicated to a wide range of audiences. In 2010, the seventh edition of this event led once again to a massive presence of the public, registering more than 80,000 entries in the museum and adjacent spaces in just two days.

Despite this massive level of attendance, the question that arises every year is: 'what about the day after?' What happens in the remaining days of the year in Serralves? In fact, the number of visitors in Serralves in the remaining days of the year is tiny when compared with the numbers during the festival. It is understood that massive attendance numbers such as the ones that gather during *Serralves em Festa* would be unsustainable throughout the year, but could the *momentum* be sustained?

Upon completion (and partially as a consequence) of the first phase of the present study, the Communication team of the Serralves Foundation realized that there were advantages in becoming a member of online social networks. A YouTube (Fundação de Serralves, 2011a), Facebook page (Fundação de Serralves, 2011b) and Twitter account were therefore created. If we analyse the statistical data related to the presence of Serralves in these social networking

platforms, we can easily verify impressive numbers of 'friends', 'fans' and followers in each one of them.[4] But, despite the great adherence of the members of these communities, there has been no relevant interaction, there has been no feedback.

Serralves has exclusively adopted a one-way communication strategy, typically associated with traditional advertising and marketing procedures. On Facebook and Twitter we notice the regular publication of all information concerning the activities happening in Serralves, while on YouTube, all the videos that we find in the official channel were created by, and are the responsibility of, the institution (promotional and corporate videos). There are large numbers of videos, made by audiences and tagged with the word 'Serralves', yet none of these have been officially embraced or acknowledged by the institution.

> Community first and foremost, marketing second. If you make a commitment to the community and provide worthwhile content, marketing will follow naturally. If you are there just to advertise, you are not being a good community member. (Caruth and Bernstein, 2007)

The quote above stems from a case study on the Brooklyn Museum, led by Caruth and Bernstein in 2007. A series of actions were implemented in order to increase the participatory nature of this institution. In June 2006, in parallel with the main exhibition called *Graffiti*, and aiming at merging offline and online visitor experiences, the museum offered a graffiti mural inside the museum's exhibition rooms where visitors could leave their contributions. They could subsequently follow its evolution through photos regularly posted on Flickr (Brooklyn Museum, 2006a). The museum also provided an online graffiti tool to collect virtual drawings (Brooklyn Museum, 2006b) from online communities, and launched a podcast series with recordings from exhibiting artists and local street artists (Brooklyn Museum, 2006c). After this first experiment, the Brooklyn Museum has continued to explore a wealth of participatory possibilities offered by Web 2.0 tools, in order to give their audience different forms of interpreting each exhibition. A community area to the museum's website has been provided, where visitors can find various ways in which to engage.

Furthermore, in 2008, Shelley Bernstein (Manager of Information Systems at the Brooklyn Museum, originally responsible for the participatory experiments described above) organized *Click!*, a crowd-curated exhibition on photography (Brooklyn Museum, 2006d). Inspired by James Surowiecki's book on the wisdom of crowds (Surowiecki, 2004), this exhibition had three phases: an open call on photography works on the subject 'Changing Faces of Brooklyn', an online forum for anonymous, open evaluation of the works submitted, and the actual exhibition at the museum, that followed the evaluation criteria defined by the online jury.

This scenario, hereby summarized, is dramatically different from the one presented by Serralves at the time of writing. Cultural and social factors may partly account for this profound gap, but this is simply too wide to be explained via said factors. Although Serralves is represented in social networks, the institutional identity and its narratives remain the strict responsibility of the institution.

We can therefore conclude that the possible narratives created by the community are not being truly used to its potential to build ties with the institution. An enormous potential for creative production is currently underused. Metaphorically speaking, as Clay Shirky (2008a) mentions, it seems to be important to begin to introduce the 'computer mouse' (as one of the most universal symbols of interactivity) in the activities of this institution. The opportunity is there to begin introducing major symbolic and emotional value in the institution's online and offline activities, in order to attract users to contribute collectively and collaboratively on content.

An alternative, or a concurrent, approach might be the implementation of a transmedia communication strategy, as described by Jenkins (2006): this would call for a greater level of engagement by the audience. Relations between the various online platforms could first be established, and the information adapted and distributed differently in each one of them, avoiding the repeated posting of the same exact content in every platform. Second, a bridge between online contexts and the institution's physical spaces would be implemented.

In essence, it is no longer possible to continue regarding network communication and online communities as separate entities from the traditional institutional communication. They currently have no choice but to attempt to work together.

We realized that Serralves recognized the importance of these new communication paradigms, which are ruled by participatory models, because they took the initiative to join these online environments, such as YouTube, Facebook or Twitter. However, either it does not know how to approach these new strategic realms, or it fears that it will endanger its authority, as mediator in the relationship between the audience and the services it provides. This concern is understandable, and is actually shared by a great number of institutions: Serralves holds a strong status in contemporary culture, and its brand could become vulnerable in face of uncontrolled exposure in online communities.

According to Chris Anderson (2006), we can say that, before the globalization of information and the Internet, it was the agents (in this case, institutions) that had the power to set the variety of choices by which consumption was governed. As we know, this situation has changed radically. In recent decentralized economic systems, there are no limits for the selection of what we want to consume, and these agents have gradually been losing their mediating power.

Figure 5
The relationship between the institution, its audiences and the art.
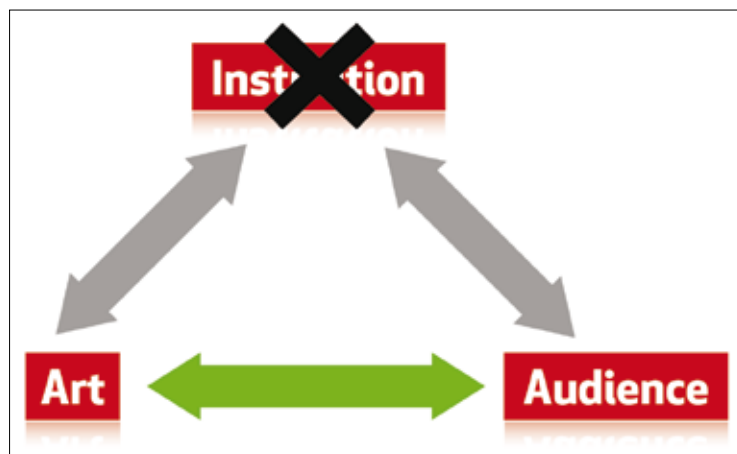
In order to become an effective member of online social networks, an institution such as Serralves needs to understand the essence of dealing with a community where communication is decentralized and occurs without content mediation. To pick up on Brafman and Beckstrom's allegory (2006), social network communities are like starfish that live without a main leader, and establish themselves in groups around common objectives without the help of organizations (Shirky, 2008b). In an environment of this kind, authoritarianism typically associated with these kinds of institutions is most likely deemed to fail: this scenario may bring down the institution's role as the unique possible intermediary in the relationship between what it has to offer and its own audience. The chart presented in Figure 5 explains how in these kinds of systems, the relationship between the three elements, institution, audiences and the art, will be developed: it tends to become a direct relationship between them.

It is therefore important to know how to deal with this new reality at an institutional level. More than realizing and acknowledging the importance of incorporating participatory media, it is imperative to know what do to do with them.

> The community's voice can be louder than the museum's, and that can be a good thing. Be prepared for both the good comments and the bad, and be open to constructive criticism. Listen to your audience. It's worth the effort – and the comments (good or bad) are more valuable than you could ever imagine. (Caruth and Bernstein, 2007)

Institutions cannot continue to ignore their audience in online communities, and, oddly enough, 'ignoring' may actually describe what takes place on the Facebook pages of institutions that have taken the initiative of creating them: it becomes increasingly difficult to continue using a media environment such as the Web 2.0 applying

a 'one-to-many' logic. A return path must be included in the model: the feedback. The communication model should be 'many-to-many'.

Nevertheless, we believe that a certain sense of authority can be maintained, but through reason and not through power. Authority, not authoritarianism. In online communities, the institution must be regarded as a catalyst and not as a controlling element; it should promote and provide greater audience participation in its environment. The shining example of this approach is described by Clay Shirky: the attitude of Obama's communication team. It is more important to bring together and stimulate your audience than try to control it (TED, 2009).

Future Work and Expectations

The recent phases of the present research project aim at establishing how participatory media can contribute to bringing audiences closer to institutions. In the current context of increasing access to media, we are seeing a strong stimulus of the consumers' creative capabilities. Given this, we will seek to establish how institutions can take advantage of its audiences' willingness to participate in the construction or reconstruction of its institutional identities and narratives and even in the redefinition of its missions.

Currently, the project is in a stage of re-evaluation of its universe of study. We are producing a broad inventory of national and international, public and independent cultural institutions, examining their distinct aptitudes and positions regarding the issues addressed by the project, namely participatory communication. Through the interpretation of all collected data and information, patterns of institutional communication will be observed and communicated. We will then filter the original inventory, outlining the institutions that will serve as key examples of comparable, convergent and contrasting paradigms of communication.

The project will evolve through the creation of a series of audiovisual communication exercises, whereby we will seek to confront the different institutional universes and modi operandi, producing readings of the consequences of a more open, flexible and permeable communication. The aim is to provide a final study that will most likely result in a set of recommendations that may be presented to specific cultural Portuguese and international institutions regarding their presence in participatory communication environments.

A dedication to digital media and participatory environments is important, not only to businesses related to the sale of products or services, but also to the success of institutions that deal with creating and transmitting knowledge, such as those related to development, education and research, and those related to culture.

We believe that the implementation of greater interaction, permeability and flexibility in communicating with audiences will make the institutions more attractive, dynamic and compelling. And, through participation, the audience will be involved in the construction

of institutional identity, providing a greater level of *authenticity*. Nevertheless, we believe that in the future, new media will only effectively help improve our world when cultural, educational and social institutions take a definite step inside this decentralized world.

However, we are aware that for these institutions to implement a positive role in the platforms of participatory culture, they will have to undertake significant operational adjustments. Most likely the existence of a role of authority will have to be maintained, in the sense of a reference model that fosters credibility while avoiding authoritarianism.

Conclusion

The first truly 'public' museum was opened in 1793, after the French Revolution: the Louvre. Its aim was to provide unrestricted viewing access to its art collection. We may argue this is where the concept of the 'museum for all' was born.

Nowadays, with participatory media and its increasing exploitation of new tools for producing and sharing content by everyone, as well as the further rooting of new media that many use to document fragments of their daily lives, we may be at the early stages of a kind of global museum built collectively. The question that arises is whether we can (and indeed, should) begin a discussion over a new concept of museum: the 'museum of all', where visitors can be part of its institutional practices not only as consumers but also, or even mainly, as producers.

If the paradigms of communication practices of cultural institutions are to change, as currently seems inevitable, the original utopia of a 'museum for all' may gradually give in to the 'museum of all'.

Notes

1. See Brandão, D. (2008a).
2. See Brandão, D. (2008b).
3. See Brandão, D. (2008c).
4. In June 2011, we could verify approximately 68,000 'likes' on the Serralves' Facebook page, more than 21,000 screenings of video content on the YouTube channel and 2,500 'followers' on Twitter.

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