A Stakeholder Perspective on Heritage Branding and Digital Communication

Adriaan De Man and Cristiana Oliveira

Abstract How does an archaeological museum understand its function in a digital environment? Consumer expectations are rapidly shifting, from what used to be a passive relationship with exhibition contents, towards a different one, in which interaction, individuality and proactivity define the visitor experience. This consumer paradigm is much studied in fast moving markets, where it provokes immediately measurable impacts. In other fields, such as tourism and regional development, the very heterogeneous nature of the product to be branded makes it near to impossible for only one player to engage successfully.

This systemic feature implies that museums, acting as major stakeholders, often anchor a regional brand around which SME tend to cluster, and thus assume responsibilities in constructing marketable identities. As such, the archaeological element becomes a very useful trademark. On the other hand, it also emerges erratically on the Internet, in personal blogs, commercial websites, and social networks. This forces museums to enter as a mediator, authenticating contents and providing credibility. What might be called the digital pull factor poses specific challenges to museum management: what is to be promoted, and how, in order to create and maintain a coherent presence in social media? The underlying issue this paper tries to address is how museums perceive their current and future role in digital communication.

Keywords Portugal • Museums • Archaeology • Social networks

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A. De Man (✉)
United Arab Emirates University, Al Ain, UAE
e-mail: adriaandeman@uaeu.ac.ae

C. Oliveira
Universidad Europea de Canarias, La Orotava, Spain

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1 Introduction

Local cultural systems, their particular forms of governance, and the cluster-specific factors they operate on, such as territorial proximity and actor linkages, are frequently supported by museums. A study on urban contexts (Lazzeretti & Cinti, 2009) points out that it is above all the state and local public bodies that provide the main management resources, an idea extendable to other geographies. This is even more so in rural contexts, where museums act as key stakeholders, using public monies yet providing distinctiveness and coherence to producers and entrepreneurs alike (De Man, 2014). Heritage-based branding and brand heritage itself (Hakala, Lätti, & Sandberg, 2011) are very much intertwined, which is why they are transversally used by companies as an "easy" marketing tool. But market response depends on a number of variables, not controlled by most producers, yet needed for successfully operating the image of a site, a historical city, or a cultural landscape (Deffner & Metaxas, 2010; Ryan & Silvanto, 2010). The creation of a territorial identity around such features forms a basis for socio-economic development and competitiveness (Anholt, 2007; Raszkowski, 2014). In other words, in order to benefit from an archaeological trademark, local players need a strong authenticator, a position frequently assumed, knowingly or not, by a museum.

A second encompassing notion to be considered is that of a steadily growing and transversal use of social media in archaeological site management, whether expressly museum-based or at other levels of administration. This can be seen as part of a much wider relationship between consumers and service providers, but the cultural sector poses different challenges to the latter. Museum services are perceived as authenticating (Howard, 2002), in a nowadays easily verifiable environment—a visitor with a smartphone may defy an entire exhibition in a matter of seconds. Additionally, archaeological site-based knowledge is intrinsically local and changes slowly, thus appearing to be of a different order than the dynamic and negotiated processes social media works with (Boast, Bravo, & Srinivasan, 2007). There are indeed many threats and challenges to the more traditional forms of cultural production (Throsby, 2010). Both approaches combined, that is, the economic and social dimensions, are to be seen in a functional continuity, which does not mean that culture is to become entirely submissive to capital, nor that many archaeological museums will ultimately become self-sufficient from a funding perspective.

2 Literature Review

The last decade has witnessed a widespread attention by academia towards the professional use of social media, including on the concept itself (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). In strict normative terms, it may be argued that they are not media at all (Drotner & Schrøder, 2013). In any case, social media differs greatly

form other computer-mediated forms of communication (Treem & Leonardi, 2012). This seems self-evident in a corporate setting, where consumers constantly provide input, and provoke organizational changes (Hutton & Fosdick, 2011). In the wider public sector as well, collaborative forms of e-government (Bertot, Jaeger, & Grimes, 2012) are gaining space over bidirectional channels. This clearly depends of the nature and purpose of the entities, even considering the range of state-operated public services. Some (Looseley & Roberto, 2009; Parry, 2010; Russo, Watkins, Kelly, & Chan, 2008) have addressed a number of questions about how a museum in particular can or should communicate digitally. Either one-to-many channels, such as webpages and blogs, or many-to-many (knowledge to knowledge, that is, wikis) are forms of transmitting and updating information, if one excludes the individual means such as emails. The new part museums play in the digital world is something curators and other professionals have been reflecting on for some time now (Graham & Cook, 2010; Kelly, 2010; Proctor, 2010), but do not always find appropriate ways to align clearly (Kidd, 2011). Trust and accuracy are an important part in this complex relationship (Parry, 2013), and these are uncontrollable in certain dimensions that escape consented delegation. One very clear function of an archaeological museum is to allow the visitor to construct his own narrative, in which social media plays an important role (Weilenmann, Hillmann, & Jungselius, 2013). The tourist experience has much more to do with an overall feeling of authenticity than with academic authenticity (Knudsen & Waaden, 2010; McKercher & du Cros, 2002; Morgan, Lugosi, & Ritchie, 2010). It is basically the former that is transmitted via Facebook and Twitter. Feedback through social media is proven to be paramount for museums to obtain new insights (Charitonos, Blake, Scanlon, & Jones, 2012). It is only based on responses that institutions may segment and quantify, and ultimately make calculated choices about communication.

From the museum's point of view, the impacts of well-managed social media are not only interesting regarding the number of visitors. They also penetrate the local economy, by providing direct employment, but especially by anchoring a brand. A very large commercially relevant features are attached to the image of an archaeological site, either in the countryside or in the city, where place branding often becomes harder to analyse due to a multiplicity of players and factors (Hankinson, 2015; Kaplan, Yurt, Guneri, & Kurtulus, 2010; Kavaratzis & Hatch, 2013; Medway, Swanson, Neirotti, Pasquinelli, & Zenker, 2015), as well as to lack of precision in measurement (Zenker & Martin, 2011).

3 Methodology and General Analysis

This paper seeks to identify how Portuguese archaeological museums look at their function and purpose in a digitally active society, and how they interact with social media. Data interpretation was realized by using interviews to obtain qualitative responses, as well as three variables, namely the existence or not of digital contents,

of control of social networks, and of the number of social media used for communication. Results are presented as a BCG matrix.

In order to infer whether different museums with archaeological collections have similar concerns about social networking, a number of interviews were carried out during April–May 2015, not only in the Lisbon area (Museu Arqueológico do Carmo, Museu Nacional de Arqueologia, Museu Calouste Gulbenkian, and Banco de Portugal), but also in low density areas such as Terras de Sicó, where Conimbriga is located, and Mértola, deep in the rural Alentejo. Based on these interviews, it is possible to recognize a strong interest in adhering to social networks, even with little or no strategy involved. From the different museums' standpoints, it is fundamentally important to be present simultaneously on several platforms to attract new publics, an effort being put into using a specific language for each one. One clear exception is the museum of the Bank of Portugal, which chooses not to commit to social networks, such as Facebook, because a more conservative image is openly preferred, by investing in a webpage. The museum space furthermore finds itself well integrated in tourist itineraries, and targets essentially foreign, as well as some domestic tourists. On the other hand, its exhibition has a strong digital component, with an effort to introduce technology to the advantage of the visitor.

The museums with greater technological perspectives, at the level of providing contents and also of social networks, are the Gulbenkian museum, with a very well known ancient art collection, and the Centre of Modern Art, both managed by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, in the same physical area. They are investing in multiple social networks, especially Facebook and Twitter. Although these two examples are not integrating any specific tourist itinerary, they are heavily capitalizing on digital platforms to reach out to tourists, in particular through multilanguage interfaces. With regard to national tourists, there is a perception that they are not the main users of these platforms, as Portuguese tourists prefer a direct interaction with the museum assistants who are present in the museum, that is, favouring a more personalized service. Social networks are already used as source of dissemination of exhibitions and events, mainly in the Centre of Modern Art, and there is a strong adherence to this information by the visitors, especially given the fact that they attract a younger audience.

Regarding the National Archaeological Museum, it seems to have a weaker position vis-à-vis technology, both at the level of digital interfaces and social networks. Although they are present in eight different networks—including Twitter, Facebook and a blog—the interview showed a planned control over these platforms appears to be lacking. The museum also claims that their main audience is composed of foreign tourists, who typically are not previously informed about the museum features, and that they visit essentially because of the setting, conveniently located in a tourist area. Technological means of exhibition are not present in the museum and there is no intention for making such an investment.

Looking at the BCG matrix, the National Archaeological Museum finds itself clearly placed as the weakest, in terms of self-perception about digital integration, whereas the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation museums are most positively placed.

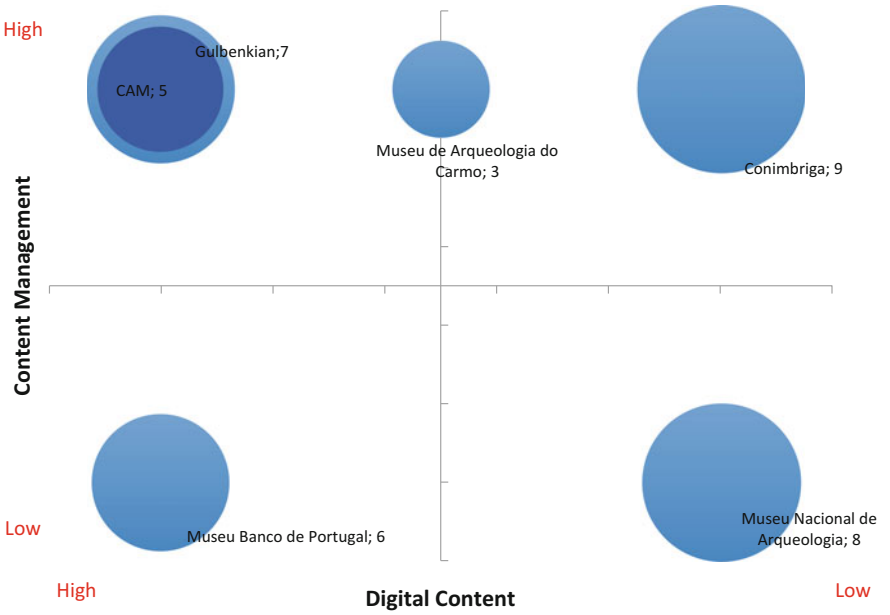

Fig. 1 Social network and content management analysis. Size reflects number of social networks

The circumstance of being very much present on multiple networks, whilst creating digital and interactive contents, positions these two museums favourably towards two rather different audiences, domestic and international alike (Fig. 1).

4 Results, Comments on a Case Study

One illustrative case study is that of the Conimbriga site museum, located in what is considered to be a low-density area in central Portugal. Here the museum acts as a key stakeholder in terms of employment, and of projection of a commercially significant distinctiveness; a number of SME indeed use elements related to local archaeological heritage for market positioning. Many of these have nothing at all to do with museology or heritage studies; they range from a local construction company to a photo studio, apart from the more obvious cases in the tourism industry. They all free-ride directly on the image of an archaeological site, which communicates not commercially but in its own terms and scope. The museum is comparatively very active in terms of digital communication, and extends its marketable capital to the entire region by acting as a cultural hub. In terms of differentiating communication strategies, there is a clear segmentation approach, meaning that not all information is produced and provided equally. This course of action seems logical and is present in other museums but with less effective outcomes. That is, when asked to define how social media is used, differentiation

is rarely mentioned as relevant, and media interaction is determined more by the features of the channel (e.g. character limit) than by the target. A directed interview with the PR responsible for Conimbriga was quite revealing on how this issue is perceived.

> Each programme and initiative Conimbriga promotes has a specific audience. As a norm, we try to adapt communication to each public. However, for it to be as wide as possible, all means of communication we can use are added. Communicate, communicate, communicate... it is never enough, being one of the goals of the museum.

And about social media in particular:

> Each digital channel has its own specificity. From the rather short Twitter messages to the promotional videos on Youtube, and to a more informal language on Facebook. In the museum newsletter and in the press, a more institutional, or even formal tone is used. There is a concern about adapting the language according to each communication channel, as those who follow us are very different audiences, with different expectations. Although we consider to be essential in the digital platforms to use an attractive, appealing and informal speech, we must bear in mind that this is an institution with a strong scientific legacy, and therefore language must be adapted.

Further thoughts on the meaning of digital visibility and interaction have to do with two vectors. On the one hand, there is a social function to museum policies, which is not achieved without adequate outreach, social media having become a natural extension of pre-digital means. On the other, attracting more visitors is an end in itself to a museum yearly positioned in a public national ranking, in which metrics regarding visitors turn out to be a primary variable. Since the museum manages a Facebook page instead of a profile, some quantification on digital visitors, and on their preferences, is also starting to become available, although still without statistical significance. 22% of their followers are between 25 and 44 years of age, but no more than 0.6% are 18 or younger. This relates directly to the nature of this very distinct cultural product, which in its current form does not appeal to a younger public in the same measure as it does to other age segments. This may be an opportunity to explore more carefully in the future.

Content is adapted not only formally but is also selected according to its nature. This means the museum is not channelling strict scientific production, but rather an occasional press release on a new book or an open meeting. Yet the daily feeds consist in small messages, curiosities about the site, cultural programmes, specifically avoiding extensive information. A very popular regular type of post is called "Did you know that...?", followed by a picture, often a black and white photo of the old excavations that took place during the early and mid-twentieth century.

But based on such a specific positioning, how does the museum transfer its identity to the wider region, and above all, why does it invest in it? There is a straightforward perception of market integration:

> To communicate means also that the local community—where Conimbriga's potential partners are active—remains conscious about the activities we carry out, and that it feels the weight of the trademark Conimbriga.

5 Conclusion

Social media can be used as a valuable extension for museum communication, and Portuguese archaeological museums have quite different perspectives on how to use them. Manipulating (i.e. authenticating) therefore requires a strategy that may deviate the capacity for effectively performing that same function. For instance, it is manageable for a museum PR service to maintain an official Facebook page and regularly screen its activity. But to control the vast majority of information circulating on the Internet is not. So the question arises of how much of the traditional functions of intermediation between a site or an exhibition, on the one hand, and the visitor, on the other, are museums willing or capable to authorize and delegate. There is a clear distinction with the controlled environment of the museum itself, where digital advances occur in a sort of closed circuit, either in service providing or content management, even if the collections are publicly accessible through a website (Bertacchini & Morando, 2013; Srinivasan, Boast, Becvar, & Furner, 2009; Yeh, Chang, & Oyang, 2000).

Comprehensive inferences are hampered by the fact that argumentation is built on a qualitative basis, namely the impressions of museum managers. Future research will require a strong quantitative input to consolidate the weight of digital communication, as archaeological museums currently perceive it. Working hypotheses need to tackle the correlations between a selective, differentiated use of social media and a multiplier effect to the benefit of regional economies.

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