

## American Museums versus Italian Museums online: are they so dissimilar?

What is the Smithsonian? Ask most people and their answer will be 'Isn't it where they shot that movie...?', and by that movie, they would mean *Night at the Museum 2*. It is even in the title: *Battle of the Smithsonian*. Art, nature, science and history lovers (whom, by the way, have all watched the Ben Stiller movie) will more accurately tell you that the Smithsonian is the largest cultural institution in the world, with its 19 museums, 12 research centers and a zoo. Culture professionals, on the other hand, look at the Smithsonian as the emblem of museological avant-garde on many levels, including the digital one.

For the two members of the #svegliamuseo team who had the opportunity to have a closer look at it, the Smithsonian Institution appeared as such. Valeria worked at the Institution for the past year, covering different roles. She started as researcher at the Smithsonian Mobile Strategy and Initiatives Department, and continued as Project Coordinator for the Education and Outreach Department at the National Museum of Natural History. Francesca joined her in Washington D.C. last June, taking on the role of Social Media Visiting Professional for three months at the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service. Her research project consisted in investigating workflows, best practices and any possible issue encountered by those in charge of social media at each single museum relating to the Institution.

What have been our major takeaways?

Primarily, that social media, web sites, mobile apps and digital technologies are subjected to continuous changes. Which translates into a necessity, for those who work in the field, to be constantly up to date, and an obligation to create autonomous ways to track down any new development, since these are not available through any form of traditional professional training. We could summarize the key elements of this job as follow: research, dialogue, curiosity. And here is where the different approach toward work, and the flexibility of the American job market comes in handy.

Becoming a professional in the digital sector is an ongoing learning process that has its best asset in the community of practices, which is to be regarded as a resource, not an opportunity for competition. And here is where the first difference between Italy and the United States emerges. Digital reality has turned static boundaries into fluid and bendable lines. The know-it-all expert of the past must leave way to a new open-minded professional, willing to interact and learn from other institutions. Flexibility must come to permeate every aspect of the work, especially toward a better exploitation of the staff already available. This is true for any small institution in Italy as much as for the largest museum in the world.

Because even the largest museum in the world has its Mozarts and its Salieris. On one hand, there are the true 'rock stars' of the digital cultural sector; on the other, a fair higher number of curators and educators who have found themselves unexpectedly loaded with the content management of a web site, the social media communication of a museum or the development of an app. All things they knew little if nothing about. However, this is how it is going to roll from now on: digital instruments will become integral parts of any new museum project and activity, and it is up to each museum professional to step out of the niche of traditional thinking and start experimenting, make mistakes, try again and finally – hopefully – succeed.

Not unlike Italy, the cultural institutions of the United States are part of a prism returning different shades

of quality in managing new digital tools. Let us take social media as an example for all: when asked to specify the issues they most frequently encountered in managing online communication, the American professionals gave answers amazingly similar to those of their Italian counterparts. What they pointed out were lack of time – often deriving from chronic budget deficits to hire new staff, and low to non-existent digital awareness in their colleagues, making it difficult to manage the workflow efficiently in order to achieve better quality content. As it often happens in Italy, at the Smithsonian as well it is frequently just one person doing the work of many and running solo a considerable number of digital tools, while the others struggle to understand the meaning of ‘hashtag’.

And if there exist ‘enlightened’ managements willing to understand and learn how to use these new tools, they are opposed by many others that show no interest in knowing even the outcomes of their online efforts. In their opinion, social media or mobile apps are ‘a nice thing to have’ but they would never consider incorporating them into the global strategy of their institution.

Turning to web sites, the static html pages of more than one institution belonging to the Smithsonian are in no way different to the websites of many Italian museums, where scarcity of resources and expertise does not always allow for more dynamic solutions. And of the 40 apps and mobile websites the Smithsonian has released, only a minuscule percentage is duly and continuously exploited by the Institution.

Ultimately, the largest cultural institution in the world and the smallest museum in Italy turned out to be very similar in the field of online communication, proving that the secret of a successful outcome lies in the attitude rather than the budget. If Italian museums have something to learn from their American counterparts, it is precisely the tendency to consider online communication as an essential part of the museum-system. Whether it is only thanks to a curator tweeting occasionally, or there is fully functioning digital department instead, the museum must be online. It is online that it can take care of that part of its audience that – 24 hours a day, seven days per week – roams through its galleries from all over the world.

In Italy, where ‘museum’ is synonym of silent corridors, dusty cases and lengthy labels, this approach is still far from becoming standard. An episode of Doctor Who – the tv series depicting the adventures of a British time traveler – explained it better than we could ever do: we accompany the protagonist while he visits a museum of the future displaying alien artifacts and armor, but despite the futuristic setting the galleries look very traditional. Museums are old, even in the future – or so many people seem to think.

And yet, change is permeating this sector through the emergence of new technologies and ground-breaking approaches, as much as a switch of mind-set in many institutions. At the opening ceremony of Museums and the Web 2014, Nancy Proctor, its co-chair and Deputy Director for Digital Experience and Communications at the Baltimore Museum of Art, stated that *Digital is not in the IT ghetto anymore, it sits at the same table as Education, Collection, Communication*. Inter-departmental boundaries have become less definite, and the revolutionary advent of more accessible platforms and devices means that learning is no longer limited to controlled educational contexts but has become more transversal.

In such a context, you do not need to be an ‘expert’ to be involved with social media as much as you do not have to be a professional photographer to make a good shot. Museums are institutions devoted to communication and interpretation – as their mission usually states – and therefore the expertise of their staff must embrace larger scopes than those of their (often very specific) fields of study, and become more flexible.

At the Smithsonian, the change is taking place mostly from the inside: museums are creating learning

opportunities for their staff in order to stimulate awareness and build the necessary digital skills. The traditional approach of many museum figures – such as curators or researchers – appears now unsustainable for institutions that are learning to endure change approaching at a fast pace. The authoritarian voice of the past is becoming obsolete for the museum of the future.

What we learned overseas about museums lies precisely in this: independently from geographical location, economic resources and size, the museum of the future is rooted into its people's lives. And the people willing to build and work in the museum of the future will have to adapt to the innovations in the field of communication, and be curious towards its continuous changes and its tools, which are such an essential part of our contemporary society.

*\* Translation by Aurora Raimondi Cominesi*



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