

3 Digitally enhanced polyvocality and reflective spaces

Challenges in sustaining dialogue in museums through digital technologies

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Introduction

The idea of the exhibition as a form of metaphorical dialogue has been part of the discussion about the changing role of museums in past decades. In late 1990s, McLean (1999) pointed out how it was no longer clear who was talking and who was listening, as exhibitions were increasingly incorporating multiple voices and opportunities for expression and reflection. As some museums strive to become more socially accountable and to respond proactively to the concerns of modern society, the idea of the museum as a forum and a public sphere (Cameron, 1971; Ashley, 2005; Barrett, 2012) has progressively gained currency. This is particularly true for institutions of memory dealing with marginalised identities, difficult histories, migration or processes of democratisation. In this context, the term ‘dialogue’ has become part of a conventional institutional vocabulary used to describe the museum’s role as site of understanding of different cultures and historical contingencies. Unsurprisingly, the idea of dialogue often features in museum programmes in the format of both displays and public events.

Furthermore, since the 1980s, digital technologies have been used in museums to reinvent interpretation, to enable the creation of content by visitors, support the coexistence of multiple perspectives and contribute to new forms of storytelling (Wyman *et al.*, 2011; Kidd, 2012; Pujol *et al.*, 2012). By experimenting with online platforms and social media, some museums have also expanded their activities outside their institutional boundaries. This digitally supported drive towards increasing access, visitor-centredness and openness of narratives poses the question of what the role of digital technologies is in extending the opportunities for dialogue in relation to heritage issues. Yet it is still unclear whether museums are effectively exploring the potential of the digital to address the challenging task of sustaining dialogue within and outside their walls.

Dialogue as a communicative practice epitomises the shift from a dissemination model of communication (one-to-many) to a networked one (many-to-many) (Carpentier, 2011; Drotner and Schröder, 2014). In museum practice, it is also a particular feature of a broader culture of participation (Simon, 2008; Jewitt, 2012; Ridge, 2014). Furthermore, heritage institutions offer their audiences the opportunity to engage with socio-cultural and historical issues by increasingly making cultural content available through digitisation initiatives. In this respect, they form part of an ever-expanding ecology of knowledge sources and contribute to the abundance of information afforded by digital technologies. This expansion of information, argues Floridi (2014), challenges individuals to be more accountable and morally responsible towards society. Does this profusion of historical and personal memory accounts also impact dialogue? Do we have a better dialogue as a result of being exposed to more content, more points of view and more debates, or not? Issues of trust are also directly imbricated in these questions. Does the museum's reputation as a trusted institution (Fromm, Rekdal and Golding, 2014; Skorton, 2017), as opposed to other providers of information, particularly online sources and platforms, make it an especially suitable site for dialogue?

This chapter investigates these issues specifically in the context of the European Union (EU), where dialogue is often mobilised – for example, by policy makers as discussed by Galani *et al.* in Chapter 2 of this volume – as a means to negotiating diverse narratives related to the notion of ‘encountering the other’. The first of these narratives relates to the supranational character of the EU; in this context, the history of Europe, from its ancient origins to the present, is frequently framed as a history of cross-border mobility, migration and multiculturalism to promote a communitarian sense of belonging (Jensen and Richardson, 2004; Poehls, 2011). This affirms a transnational identity that incorporates all European countries and provides historical context for discussing the contemporary politics of integration aimed at accommodating the current influx of migrants and refugees. The second narrative centres on the shared memory of the Holocaust and the atrocities of the Second World War (Levy and Sznajder, 2002). The origins of the EU's communitarian project are commonly framed as a response to these dramatic historical events (Probst, 2003; De Jong, 2011). Consequently, Europeanisation is often associated with a set of values that are intended to guarantee the unrepeatability of war and genocide (Kaiser, Krankenhagen and Poehls, 2014, pp. 113–153). The third narrative supporting the articulation of the European sense of belonging is the idea of democracy. In relation to Europeanisation, democracy has many faces: the shared heritage of the ancient Greek and Roman republics as foundations to the Western civilisation, the opposition to all forms of totalitarianism, the defence of human rights and

a form of participatory and accountable governance (Chryssochoou, 2000; Follesdal and Koslowski, 2013). These narratives, we argue, are leading some museums in Europe to develop dialogic displays, and opportunities for dialogue, as an integral part of their curatorial strategy. Against this background, the idea of promoting dialogue through museums can be understood as important in the European context *precisely* because it promises a means of achieving the democratic process, so central to the EU project.

Throughout this chapter, we exemplify how dialogic approaches in museums are mobilised to support these narratives through engagement with digital technologies. We intimate how digital technologies are suitable not just to materialise the coexistence of different voices, but also to evoke a sense of transience and flow that can effectively represent the idea of Europe as a project in constant becoming (Rigney, 2012, p. 608), providing a sense of agency to those who participate in this process. The chapter initially reviews key ideas connected to dialogue-driven museology. This is followed by an explication of the methodological approach that underpins this research. Subsequently, we discuss three dimensions of dialogue emerging from the fieldwork connected to the themes of (a) polyvocality, (b) civic listening and (c) the tension between institutional and online spaces for dialogue. The chapter concludes with a reflection on the barriers and opportunities for digitally mediated dialogue in museums that deal with the European narratives outlined earlier. We argue that the limited digital experimentation on digital dialogues is rooted in a perceived distance between technology-mediated and human dialogic capacities. Furthermore, we discuss the dialogic potential of digital technologies to enhance listening and opportunities for reflection in the exhibition space, and we reflect on the role of multimedia and multisensory environments in shaping identity construction and representation processes in museums.

Digital practices for a dialogue-driven museology

The idea of a dialogue-driven museology was initially developed in relation to exhibiting history (Tchen, 1992) to support new forms of reciprocity between institutions and communities with a stake in the museum's activities (see also Clifford, 1997). A core objective of these dialogic practices was the re-balancing of power inequality between audiences and institutions resulting from long-established collecting and exhibiting practices connected to colonial ideals. In this context, dialogue was conceptualised as a collective, reciprocal thinking process, intended as a way of leading to deeper understandings of the other. It did not, however, necessarily lead to institutional change. Therefore, subsequent scholarly work criticised these initial attempts on dialogic museum practice as forms of

appropriation and normalisation, which lacked awareness of issues of oppositionality and maintained the dominant role of the institution (Bennett, 1998, p. 213; Boast, 2011; Harris, 2011). Responding to this critique, subsequent re-examinations of the notion of the ‘dialogic museum’ put an emphasis on alternative forms of reflexive museology intended as a process of institutional transformation, which would enable institutions to be more responsive and able to listen to and to answer back to society (Harris, 2011; Hernández Hernández, 2011; Brulon Soares, 2011). In these texts, museums are considered dialogic not for their capacity to host dialogue-based events with their communities, but primarily because they are situated at the intersection of cultures, individuals and experience.

Furthermore, with the advance of digital technologies, cultural institutions have identified an opportunity to experiment with museum experiences co-curated and co-created with their communities by increasingly appropriating techniques from the field of design. There is a natural affinity between the objectives of the two fields as design practices, particularly those from the traditions of participatory design (Schuler and Namioka, 1993) and co-design (Sanders and Stappers, 2008), see the process of designing technologies as a collective inquiry into people’s concerns and attitudes. Stuedahl *et al.* in this volume (Chapter 4) provide a focused exploration of this kind of practice. For example, the exhibition *Digital Natives* at the Aarhus Centre for Contemporary Art (Iversen and Smith, 2012) took full advantage of the potential of participatory design practices to explore young people’s everyday communication practices within the museum’s space. In this project, participants were perceived not as mere informants but were engaged in ‘a process of dialogic curation based on mutual engagement, trust and reciprocity’ (*ibid.*, p. 111) leading to the co-production of the exhibition installations. Smørdal, Stuedahl and Sem (2014) suggest that the interweaving of social media and museological practices in the co-design of museum displays creates what they call ‘experimental zones’. Within the frame of experimental zones, museums as dialogic institutions can support co-curation initiatives that aim to create and support multidirectional communication opportunities involving museum staff and audiences across both analogue and digital platforms.

While the *Digital Natives* exhibition exemplifies a specific dialogic approach to museum co-curation approaches through design, the most prominent application of digital technologies to support dialogue in exhibition spaces is through the incorporation of personal accounts and testimonies of ordinary people in the displays. Digital tools support the storage and retrieval of multimedia content and allow the presentation of oral history archives to the public through interactive and accessible interfaces. Additionally, they make possible the inclusion of contributions generated by

visitors during their visit, materialising, to some extent, the theorisations of the museum as participatory media and an embodiment of the public sphere (Noy, 2016). Several museums, for instance, have developed digital stations for visitors to record audio-visual messages that can subsequently be browsed, listened to and answered to in an asynchronous fashion. This strategy crafts possibilities of indirect and asynchronous encounters between visitors as well as the awareness that one's own voice can be discovered by others (National Museum of American Jewish History, n.d.; Henry, 2015). Through these practices, digital media have the capacity to enhance polyvocality while enabling what Witcomb (2003) calls a dialogic approach to interactivity (p. 163); Witcomb further argues that multimedia displays are 'suited to a notion of history as a set of fragments', encouraging more inquisitive attitudes in the visitor (*ibid.*, p. 161). This suggests that digital technologies in the museum space have the potential to break down monologic narratives and help visitors to more easily perceive the coexistence of multiple, parallel and, often, conflictual, meanings. This can also increase the visitors' perception that their perspectives cannot be expressed only within but also can shape the museum space.

Recent technological advances have also instigated more literal incorporations of digitally mediated dialogues in exhibition spaces – a topic that we revisit later in this chapter. In these cases, digital tools are used to orchestrate question-and-answer-based interactions between visitors and museum staff or between visitors and digitally generated characters. For instance, the *ASK* mobile app developed by the Brooklyn Museum in 2016 offers visitors the opportunity to ask direct questions about the displays to the 'experts' behind the scenes and receive responses during their visit. Similar dynamics can be found in a fast-emerging body of applications deploying chat-bots, often adopted as an alternative way of providing interpretative content (Boiano, Cuomo and Gaia, 2016; Vassos *et al.*, 2016). Regardless of whether chat-bots respond to questions from the visitors or solicit visitors' responses with a set of prompts, the dialogic interaction happens between a visitor interlocutor and a digital interface retrieving pre-packaged sentences from a database or synthesising new language on a keyword basis. This raises questions around the definition of a digitally mediated dialogic experience: can dialogue still take place if one of the interlocutors is a non-human actor? Although one might argue that the automated and predetermined nature of many digital museum installations is frequently perceived as antithetical to dialogue, the *liveness* of these technologies has the capacity to prompt the same reflective, emotional and critical response to the visitor as dialogue with another human being.

This selective summary of digitally enabled dialogic practices indicates that digital technologies for dialogue tend to be used by museums as part

of their institutional participatory and experiential strategies. In some cases, digital technologies are combined with design approaches to support co-curation practices and decision-making processes in the development of exhibits and displays. Dialogic digital interactions are facilitated through apps, self-contained installations and articulated multimedia environments where dialogue operates as a dynamic form of engagement and an instrument for museum interpretation. To understand the challenges and opportunities of extending digitally enabled dialogue within exhibition spaces beyond this participatory framework, the study presented in this chapter focuses on how digital technologies support dialogue in museums that address difficult and often contested European narratives; this context, we argue, allows us to formulate a more civic and politically oriented conceptualisation of digitally mediated dialogue in the exhibition floor.

Methodology

This chapter draws on fieldwork that examined the role of digital technologies in supporting dialogic practices in a small selection of European museums that address notions of otherness in historical, social and identitarian narratives in Europe. The fieldwork involved interviews with museum professionals and display analysis of exhibitions in ten museums during 2017–2018. In particular, the study involves the Galata, Museum of the Sea, in Genoa (specifically the *Memory and Migration* display); the Mudec, Museum of Cultures, in Milan; the Museum of European Cultures (MEK) in Berlin; and the recent Museum for Intercultural Dialogue (MID) in Kielce, all of which deal with cross-border mobility, interculturality and migration in Europe, with a focus on Italy, Germany and Poland, respectively. We also visited the National Holocaust Centre and Museum (NHCM) in Laxton, UK; the POLIN Museum of the History of Polish Jews in Warsaw; and the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB), all of which address the Central European narrative of the Holocaust and the history of Jewish people in Europe. The study also involves the European Solidarity Centre in Gdansk, Poland (ECS); the People's History Museum (PHM) in Manchester, UK; and the National Museums Liverpool, UK, all three of which address processes of democratisation and civic participation within European countries. These institutions were selected to be included in the study because they shared one or more of the following characteristics: (a) a focus on histories related to the process of Europeanisation or a particular emphasis on issues of identity and place-making in European context, and (b) the use of the term 'dialogue' in their mission statement or other public forms of self-representations, such as in the 'About' section on their website.

We conducted ten in-depth semi-structured interviews with senior managers affiliated to the curatorial, scientific and digital publishing departments of these museums¹ – we iteratively introduce our interviewees as we draw on our conversations with them in the following sections of this chapter. The interviews involved a set of questions common to all interviewees, for example, their definition of dialogue and how their institutions use digital tools to sustain heritage-related dialogues; they also included questions specifically tailored to each context. Alongside the interviews, display analysis fieldnotes were collected from the sites. We used thematic analysis to develop insights from the collected materials. The analysis pointed towards specific institutional narratives, functions and visions connected to the ideas of polyvocality, civic listening and an expanded on-site/online dialogic space, which we discuss in turn in the following sections.

Digitally enhanced polyvocality

The uncovering of marginalised narratives and the deconstruction of knowledge generation processes is at the heart of the dialogic museum's aspiration to reimagine how museums engage with social and public history. Drawing on the fieldwork, this section discusses how museums use digital exhibits to represent the public's involvement in the construction of history and collective memory (see also Mason, Whitehead and Graham, 2013) and to encourage visitors' responses. Whilst polyvocality resonates with the democratic subtext of the European project (Kohler-Koch, 2012), we also observed that the majority of the digital exhibits we looked at, which focused on providing access to the memories of ordinary people, were consistently framed in relation to a local or a global scale rather than a European one. Furthermore, the dialogic interactions put forward by these exhibits often presented the story of the 'other' as both distinct and often disconnected from a more consciously articulated transnational narrative of the respective region or country.

A common theme in the discussion with our interviewees concerned an institutional commitment to promote multiple perspectives and voices. For example, Joanna Fikus, head of exhibitions at POLIN, which resolutely focuses on the presentation of the history of Polish Jews, clearly indicated that 'multiperspectivity' is very important to showcase not only variety but also difference among perspectives included in an exhibition: 'we are showing different voices, from the period, but very different'. This makes particular sense in POLIN, because it aims to highlight that Jewish history occupies a broader chronological span that goes beyond the Holocaust. Others, such as Gianni Carosio, curator at Galata, and Joanna Król, head of

digital collections at POLIN, highlighted the role of digital technologies in terms of recording, archiving and making available a large number of contributions from ordinary people. Several digital displays in these institutions provided access to multiple personal stories, in the form of archive-like exhibits, multimedia environments and participatory interpretative tools. The displays in the Museum of Intercultural Dialogue (MID) in Kielce epitomise the archival format; its digital oral history archive contains recordings of inhabitants of the Świętokrzyskie province sharing experiences of the Second World War. According to the archivist at the time of the interview, these materials have value ‘because they are based on truth’ and will be made accessible to the public to deliver the ‘emotions’ of these histories. It appears, therefore, that the museum staff in MID see in the first-hand nature of this material an opportunity to support an encounter between the visitors and the witnesses of the local past that is free from other interventions. Furthermore, digital interfaces have been used in the majority of the museums we visited (ECS, Galata, PHM, JMB, POLIN, MID, MEK) to enable visitors to choose from a plethora of oral history resources incorporated in the exhibitions.

While it is rare to find exhibits allowing visitors to directly formulate a question or initiate a dialogic interaction, several installations exploit interactivity to allow the selection of particular questions or contributions, thus recreating, in part, the feeling of having a conversation. At POLIN, one of the interactive video installations presents different accounts on contemporary Jewish life in Poland. The public can select to listen to one or more questions, answered by one of 25 potential respondents. The curatorial challenge in this room is to introduce the nature of contemporary history as not yet written and open ended; this is addressed here by using a bare, minimal white space. Within this unembellished space, the interactive videos engender a sense of a direct encounter between visitors and Jewish individuals, providing insights into contemporary Jewish life and experiences in Poland.

Polyvocality is taken to an environmental dimension at the Galata, where the last section of the permanent exhibition *Memory and Migration* describes the transition of Italy from a country of migrants to one of immigration and addresses contemporary tensions by emphasising the benefits of a multicultural society (Figure 3.1).

This space adopts a graphic, minimalistic style with significant use of infographics – a common approach in exhibitions about migration (e.g. Little and Watson, 2015), including a timeline of immigration to Italy from 1973 to the present. Several multimedia displays in the exhibition counteract this emphasis on data by giving expression to individual stories of immigration. For instance, a set of audio-visual interactives allows visitors to select and listen to the stories of African immigrants now living in Genoa.



Figure 3.1 *Memory and Migration*, contemporary section, at Galata Museo del Mare.
Source: Photo: Gabi Arrigoni.

These are a small portion of a broader digital archive entirely accessible on the YouTube channel *Archive of the Migrant Memory*, an ongoing project initiated by Galata in 2015 (Galata Museo del Mare, 2018). Another exhibit shows an animation in which a cartoon-like character, in the style of didactic and promotional videos, introduces himself and, while addressing the viewers, advocates the positive aspects of immigration by providing statistics and factual information. Pseudo-dialogic features such as addressing the listener or telling one's own story are adopted to both deliver information and generate empathy and emotional engagement. Dialogue in this exhibition is embedded within a space characterised by multimodal and layered ways of delivering information and different styles of visitor experience, evoking the interweaving of histories and cultural influences shaping European identities.

Finally, some institutions implement polyvocality as part of the interpretation they provide for the individual museum objects in their exhibition. For instance, MuDEC, the Museum of Cultures in Milan that holds a collection mostly constituted by artefacts from cultures outside Europe, has

solicited the perspective of second-generation immigrants living in Milan to discuss artefacts and works of art associated with their country of origin, included in the permanent exhibition. Selected objects are explained by ‘didascalie partecipate’ (participatory labels) accessible through a QR code. As Giorgia Barzetti, conservator in Mudec, explained, these labels are the product of workshops in which children from migrant communities developed their own subjective interpretation of the objects in response to a guided visit to the exhibition.

The aforementioned examples illustrate how dialogue in museums can be identified as a feature of interpretative and interactive approaches oriented towards giving visibility to multiple points of view and orchestrating a perception of the museum as capable of letting go of its monologic voice (Adair, Filene and Koloski, 2011). The availability of a variety of testimonies and contributions by ordinary people is a feature that would not be easily achieved in a display without digital technologies and is pivotal in suggesting that no particular voices are prioritised over others. In the context of the European museums in the study, what we define as digitally enhanced polyvocality is associated with the topic of migration and cross-cultural encounters in mediating and representing the process of getting to know ‘the other’. However, while the dialogic mechanisms in place have the capacity to promote respect for difference and counter notions of racism by humanising ‘the other’, they show little interest in commenting on ideas and ideals of transnationalism that characterise the European project. As a matter of fact, we are not proposing an intrinsically positive judgement on transnationalism as opposed to national or local perspectives; neither have we advocated that European museums should promote transnationalism because of their country’s membership in the European Union (EU). However, in analysing dialogue within the context of European museums and the relevant policies, as discussed by Galani *et al.* in Chapter 2 of this volume, it is inevitable to consider how the EU vision is expressed within its heritage institutions. Despite the European dimension of the narratives at stake, the polyvocal displays appear to be focused on the regional or national perspective: Jews in Poland, migrants arriving to Genoa, migrant communities in Milan or memories of the local province. The dialogic structure itself, in a way, contributes to a clear separation between locals or museum visitors, cast in the role of listeners, and the newcomers telling their stories.

Beyond these limitations, however, European values can find poetic expression in digitally enhanced environments, featuring sensorial, emotional and informational inputs that set the scene for dialogue, best exemplified by Galata. The richness of content and the flow of voices and memories function as representations of a potential, ongoing conversation about what a transcultural and transnational identity could be. Dialogic approaches in

this respect can be identified not so much in reference to isolated exhibits and interactions, but as an underlying characteristic of the exhibition space as a whole. As such, these spaces embody a notion of Europeanisation as an evolving process in need of constant renegotiation and require the visitor to approach them with a sense of openness, which is also a condition for dialogic encounters.

Dialogic listening and civic reflexivity

As shown earlier, most digitally enabled dialogic interactions in museums are based on asymmetric relationships between speakers and listeners, frequently casting visitors in the listening role. This section correlates understandings of dialogue emerged from the interviews with an exploration of the value of listening as an active component of the dialogic process, crucial for the transformative, educational and civic aims of many heritage organisations. It demonstrates that digital technologies can most effectively express their dialogic potential by providing opportunities for visitors to engage in personal inquiry and self-questioning.

When asked about their own definitions of dialogue, interviewees frequently provided a set of key requisites, among which *openness* featured prominently, as a form of intellectual honesty and refusal of prejudice and preconceived truths. Jacek Koltan, deputy director of the European Solidarity Centre (ESC) in Gdansk, associated dialogue with the challenges of understanding difference. Indeed, ECS aims to address the history of the Solidarity movement in Poland within a broader perspective of democratic opposition ‘to share the achievements of a peaceful struggle for freedom, justice, democracy and human rights with those who are deprived of them’ (‘The Mission’, ECS website). Several interviewees connected *openness* to difference to notions of listening and attentiveness towards ‘the other’ as Joanna Fikus at POLIN clearly states: ‘[dialogue is] when you are open and when you listen. It’s a very simple answer’. This sense of being open to listening to the other person’s story allows visitors, according to Louise Stafford, education officer at the National Holocaust Centre and Museum (NHCM), to ‘consider the impact of individuals within their story and gives the chance to see the complexity of that and the importance of that’.

The *Forever Project*, currently in ongoing development in the NHCM, best epitomises the experience of digitally mediated listening within the museum. The piece used 3D film technology to simulate a live encounter with a Holocaust survivor, anticipating a future when Holocaust survivors will no longer be able to share their story. Different from a traditional video-recording, it enables visitors not only to listen to the story but also to ask questions to the ‘virtual’ survivor, and to receive an answer. The latter is

facilitated by a piece of software that queries over a thousand pre-recorded answers in the system's database. This means that questions outside the coverage of the recordings are skipped or replaced by pre-anticipated questions by the installation's facilitator. The system allows for a realistic and immersive simulation of dialogue, with the opportunity to feel closer to the (absent) survivor. While this is one of the most literal examples of digitally enabled dialogues in our study, the roles of the visitor and that of the survivor are profoundly asymmetric. Although visitors are offered the chance to ask a question, their role broadly remains that of a listener, and priority is given to what the survivor says.

Admittedly, several of our interviewees conceptualised the dialogic intentions of their exhibits as achieving more than listening to personal stories. One of the key outcomes of listening for them was the capacity of exhibits to encourage visitors to engage with contemporary issues. For example, Phil Lyons, CEO at NHCM, clearly pointed to the role of certain exhibits to highlight the significance of the past in the present (Smith, Wetherell and Campbell, 2018) in order to inspire visitors to reflect on current socio-political debates:

I want young people particularly to go away from here thinking not just how dreadful that was, but what caused it, what's happening today, what does it mean for me, what responsibility I've got to preventing a similar thing happening today.

Similarly, Gianni Carosio connected Galata's dialogic mission to the intention to engage visitors with the complexity of historical and contemporary issues by stimulating questions in visitors, often in relation to their own preconceptions:

There is the desire to show our visitors that we are facing very complex times and that nobody has a clear idea of how to deal with it. Messages need to be open, stimulate questions in the visitor, break his [*sic*] own certainties, which is sometimes uncomfortable. But this is life. If somebody leaves Galata with questions we have achieved our aim.

The intention of these museum professionals to mobilise listening within the museum towards a more active participation in current cultural and political life aligns with Annette's (2009) notion of 'civic listening'. Annette, writing on citizenship, suggests 'civic listening' as a necessary skill that should be the foundation of participatory democracy. Distinct and complementary to 'civic speaking', civic listening 'would include both levels of emotional literacy and intercultural understanding' (*ibid.*, p. 157),

supporting citizens in recognising differences and enabling a shared political identity (ibid., p. 156).

Within the museum space, creating spaces for civic listening and reflection might require some rudimentary intervention in terms of exhibition design, such as the provision of tables and chairs, alongside more tailored scenographic interventions and installations towards the creation of immersive and intimate spaces. Multimedia, experiential environments and particular spatial arrangement can support the preliminary conditions for dialogue by providing time and space for visitors to explore individual standpoints and question their assumptions. The MID metaphorically reconstructs this process through a three-room articulation in their exhibition space that evidences how multimedia are pivotal in materialising flow and openness. In this arrangement, the first room displays successful examples of multiculturalism from Poland, while the second room is conceived as a labyrinth, to represent the difficulties encountered when one deals with different cultures. This leads to the third room, called *The Diversity Triangle* (see Figure 3.2),



Figure 3.2 *The Diversity Triangle* at Museum for Intercultural Dialogue.

Source: Photo: Wojciech Cedro.

where multimedia technologies enable the visitors to access, negotiate and reflect on a range of resources on topics such as the Rwandan Genocide, Roma culture and Polish Armenians. Here, multimedia content is essential to the *liveness* and *immersion* of the experience as a means to increasing the audience's attentiveness to 'the other'. In the words of the archivist in MID, 'you do something very good, you try to communicate with someone'.

A more focused approach is observed at the Jewish Museum Berlin (JMB), where a room is dedicated to the pre-First World War debates around Jewish emancipation and the rights of Jewish people in Germany. Here, an interactive table with phone-like handsets (see Figure 3.3) allows visitors to listen to a range of historical media, mostly comprising political speeches.

By selecting questions such as 'Should Jews be granted the same rights as Christians?' or 'Can a Jew be a German?' visitors are exposed to the original arguments as presented in public debates by commentators of the past, instead of receiving a pre-digested summary through the institutional interpretative voice. With disembodied voices from official speeches, this display is not about encountering otherness, but rather about reflecting on different points of view and questioning one's own personal stance in the face of historical sources.



Figure 3.3 The emancipation of the Jews – historical debates 1801–1912 at the Jewish Museum Berlin.

Source: Picture credits: Jewish Museum Berlin, Photo: Volker Kreidler, Berlin.

Despite the potential of digital technologies in advancing active and civic forms of listening in the selection of examples outlined earlier, the link between the creation of digitally mediated reflective environments and the explicit promotion of dialogue in the museum space was never explicitly advanced by our interviewees. We argue that this was often rooted in a particular, non-digital conceptualisation of dialogue held by many of our interviewees, which we discuss in the following section.

Keeping it under control: digital vs. institutional spaces for heritage dialogue

Our analysis of the interviews suggests that, overall, the idea of digitally enabled dialogue has received limited attention by exhibition curators and designers in the European institutions in our fieldwork. Besides practical challenges associated with the implementation of digital technologies in museums, the interviews show that specific understandings of dialogue as a deeply human process, held by museum professionals, discourage the use of digital tools for this purpose. Several of the interviewees, Gianni Carosio at Galata; Barbara Thiele, head of digital at JMB; and Joanna Król at POLIN, shared the perception of dialogue as something that takes place face-to-face ‘between people’ as a two-way process allowing a circular dynamic of responses:

I believe that dialogue is between two people so I think that real dialogue is definitely happening during our educational activities and cultural activities when you can face different people and this is very direct, this is what I believe. And as for all of the things we have here, including websites, different exhibitions, core exhibition, I believe this is more about giving an opportunity to audience to reflect on history, memory.

(Joanna Król, POLIN)

This character of direct, human exchange was emphasised as antithetical to the idea of digitally mediated dialogue, in which digital technology is deemed incapable of effectively addressing the dialogic needs of the public. For instance, Gianni Carosio contends, ‘I am convinced that dialogue is something that takes place between people. It is not even fair to invest the multimedia of objectives that it will never be able to achieve’.

Conversely, Hogsden and Poulter (2012), researching the role of online institutional portals in supporting institutional collecting practices of ethnographic material alongside source communities, advance the concept of a ‘digital contact zone’ to suggest the potential of digital platforms to

support dialogue about heritage outside the actual institutional perimeters. Whilst the museum is a space of inequality and asymmetrical power, they argue, the online realm might allow more ambiguous and open articulations, unfettered by institutional interpretative frameworks. Our interviewees also talked about the attempts of their institutions to expand their role as public spheres online, but they also specifically reflected on the challenges they faced in deciding how to deal with potentially inappropriate online behaviours.

Social media, in particular, generate complex ethical challenges for museums that need to consider risks associated with the sensitive nature of their content while attempting to establish a deeper conversation with their audiences. Discussing the case of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, Wong (2011) explores how engaging with social media recasts and exacerbates traditional ‘questions raised about transparency, censorship, respect for constituencies’ (p. 102). The immediacy and public dimension of comments on platforms such as YouTube, Twitter or Facebook impose difficult choices for museums in terms of moderating users’ contributions. Especially in the case of the Jewish genocide, social media may offer an unintentional stage for anti-Semitic attacks and disrespectful comments. Institutions in these cases tend to prioritise their memorial function and the respect for victims and survivors over issues of free speech, transparency and openness (ibid. 2011, p. 105). In the interviews, this concern was voiced several times, indicating a common approach towards limiting or discouraging online comments. The following reflection by Joanna Król, head of digital collections at POLIN, in relation to her team’s approach to social media, is highly indicative:

I think in the last few weeks in my department with my colleagues we came to the conclusion that in fact first of all we don’t know if we really still relate to real dialogue and another issue is that we are very passive and we are not exactly open for this dialogue, and you can even see that in the way we post things, we don’t provoke people to comment because we had so many nasty unpleasant anti-Semitic comments that we don’t want to go [*sic*] into conversation with these anti-Semitic people. So we are more passive, we don’t exactly ask our visitors to be active and this is a paradox because in theory we would expect that thanks to these tools we could communicate with people but this is not in fact the thing we want to do.

Hence, the creation of bespoke web platforms is a preferred choice when museums seek to involve online communities. For instance, *Jewish Places* (Jewish Museum Berlin, 2018) is a participatory database bringing together

local information of sites relevant to Jewish life, previously found in independent blogs and archives. The museum acts as a point of convergence for disseminated, disconnected content, with the possibility for everyone to contribute or correct the data. POLIN has also developed websites documenting aspects of Jewish life through personal testimonies, photographs and archival material. *The Polish Righteous* (POLIN, 2016) gathers stories of Polish people who helped Jews during the Holocaust; the *Virtual Shtetl* (POLIN, 2017) documents the presence of Jewish heritage in Polish towns. One of the reasons the Internet is regarded as a useful space for heritage content by the interviewees is its capacity to ‘to keep equal rights to everyone else, every Jewish person, doesn’t matter from which country, to have equal rights to learn about their heritage’ (Joanna Król, POLIN). Nevertheless, the dialogic potential of these platforms does not feature as a priority in the case study museums; rather, they use them as an opportunity for broader circulation of content. So, while in the eyes of our interviewees Dana Muller, researcher on the *Jewish Places* project, and Joanna Król, these platforms are hardly perceived as dialogic, they are relevant insofar they expand the circulation of knowledge around the histories and heritages at stake, proliferating opportunities for the kind of transcultural encounter that is at the core of the museums’ dialogic missions and key to the European project.

Opportunities and challenges for digitally enhanced heritage dialogues

The cases examined exemplify representations of otherness and articulations of subjectivity in which ‘the other’ is a counterpart in dialogue. De Jong (2011) argues that the use of video testimonies in exhibitions dealing with European identity is pivotal to constructing a sense of shared history and modelling the European citizen. These affirmations of common history and values, however, collide with a rather undefined idea of Europe, whose main feature is to be an ongoing process of incorporation of national and regional entities (Krankenhausen, 2011). However, as digital dialogic exhibits tend to maintain a clear distinction between speaker and listener, their capacity to specifically engage with complex, transcultural and transnational perspectives on identity is limited. As a result, one is left with the impression of cultures and individuals facing each other, potentially able to achieve mutual understanding but far from negotiating forms of mixed identities or new and transformed ‘imagined communities’ (Anderson, 1983). The regional, local point of view appears as the primary lens to represent the encounter with the other, while the composite dimension of Europe as a transnational, or at least supranational, process does not emerge in these

displays. Despite the potential of the digital to cross borders, it is its repository nature that is mostly used by institutions, thus reinforcing the idea of Europe as an aggregate of multiple localities that do not suggest any feeling of being implicated in each other's culture.

Questions of institutional space and its inherent limitations in terms of encouraging conflict (Bennett, 2005; Lynch, 2014) are pivotal in this discussion and reinforce a general resistance to designing for dialogue in the core exhibition space. Hence, opportunities for dialogue are most commonly provided within educational programmes, as it was testified by many of our interviewees, which usually carries a hierarchical and predefined division of roles between facilitators and participants. However, the multisensoriality and multimodality of digital media allow visitors to encounter heterogeneous and layered environments delivering a sense of suspension and complexity that have the potential to stimulate processes of inquiry. The key digital features of archivability, multimodality and asynchronicity, which underpin the polyvocal and reflective character of many displays, serve the representation of Europe as an evolving entity engaged in a particularly transformative process. The richness of information and the dynamic flow of voices, stories and messages have the potential to deliver a sense of openness, uncertainty, suspension of judgement and transformation. Whereas polyvocality in itself does not constitute dialogue, it generates a diffused awareness that what is being said in museums can be questioned and contested, and that different truths may simultaneously coexist.

Going back to the key European narratives discussed earlier in this chapter, this sense of openness and uncertainty support the idea of a multiplicity of identities (interculturality), in which the encounter with the other is necessary and enriching (acceptance of difference) and in which everyone has the right and duty to have an informed opinion and to be listened to (democratic principle). Further, the emphasis on personal accounts helps to frame cultural difference as a difference of life experience, which can better respond to European appraisals of identity as a composite entity in which one is both foreign and domestic (Rigney, 2012, p. 609). We also infer from the analysis of the displays that digital media can potentially support certain preliminary conditions of dialogue such as awareness of the other and the other's feelings. Digital resources may generate temporary coming together among visitors, around the dissemination of a shared piece of knowledge or a conversational prompt, which can inspire our capacity to recognise different perspectives. In saying this, we are mindful of Witcomb's (2015) 'pedagogy of feeling,' which suggests a move forward, beyond the mere inclusion of different voices in the museum, and towards recognising the role of sensorial and affective exhibition strategies in supporting new forms of cross-cultural encounters characterised by reciprocity and mutual responsibility.

While digital tools as currently used do not seem to be suitable for facilitating extended dialogues within exhibition spaces, they can support the articulation of fragments, snapshots of dialogue, such as questions, answers and opinions that can contribute to broader asynchronous collective dialogues. Digital dialogues might be fragmentary; therefore, thinking about how to scaffold a dialogic experience through digital means could be a fruitful approach in beginning such a design process. Engaging more consciously in design experimentation around the aforementioned digital features, as discussed by Stuedahl *et al.* in Chapter 4 of this volume, presents a way forward to disentangling heritage dialogues from traditional mechanisms of intercultural juxtaposition towards emphasising, instead, opportunities for reflection and for the recognition of fluid and mutable processes of identity construction. Ultimately, to address this issue, one should consider the upstream argument of the role of digital technologies in shifting the perceptions around the mission of the museum itself and its transition from knowledge gatekeeper to site of experience, co-production and social interaction.

What emerges from our investigation is the irreducible tension between different institutional scales. As discussed in Chapter 2 in this volume, at the macro-institutional scale that links to policy discourse, dialogue is framed in very abstract terms as a tool to encourage social cohesion and multiculturalism. By contrast, when institutions translate their visions and missions into actions, initiatives and displays, dialogue tends to be reshaped through storytelling, interpretative and participatory techniques. In this context, dialogue remains an end in itself, with little potency in encouraging visitors to become active citizens as a result of their museum experience. This gap is the result of a complex ecology that cuts across different scales of governance and in which the relationship between individuals, institutions and their respective agencies requires further investigation. It is clear, however, that although digital technologies are not purposefully used to reimagine the dialogic potential of these institutions, they generate immersive, rich in content, dynamic, and intimate environments that influence dialogic practices in a variety of ways, most of which require further and urgent attention within the museum space and the museological discourse.

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Note

1 All affiliations reflect people's roles at the time of the interviews 2017–2018.

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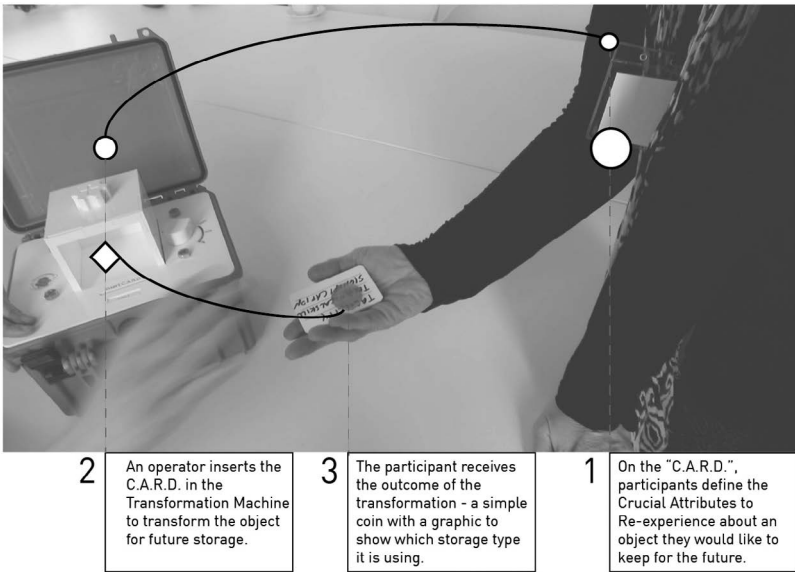
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Artefact vignette #1: *Transformation Machine*

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Gabi Arrigoni and Areti Galani*



The *Transformation Machine* is a speculative artefact that enables people to see how their perspective on European heritage might alter the holdings of vast museum databases. It was created as part of a ‘futurescaping’ workshop for museum professionals to explore the scenario of deleting a significant part of European museums’ collections to respond more closely to the evolving notion of ‘European-ness’ and its constantly changing values. The curators-participants in the workshop were assigned fictitious roles as members of a fictional *Deletion Bureau*. Subsequently, they were asked to feed an artificial intelligence (A.I.) a set of keywords associated with key features of artefacts selected from the collections in their own institutions.

Trained upon the keywords, the A.I. device would then learn how to discard collection items that were no longer relevant.

The *Transformation Machine* subverted the process of deletion, turning it into a transformative one. The machine gave the option to participants to reduce the discarded objects into a small token containing only a limited set of crucial attributes from the original (e.g. its texture or its association with a specific historical event). The transformation machine introduces a shift from the binary alternative between preservation and deletion by suggesting a mid-way solution as a means for preserving only the features deemed to be significant and contributing to the definition of the artefact as an expression of European-ness. This design experiment addresses the complexity of meanings, values and criteria for defining heritage. While abstract questions can be posed such as what a collection should represent or how it should place itself for a strategic vision of the future, the *Transformation Machine* required participants to physically enact such decision-making, to visualise and experience the impact of their decisions. In this intervention, suspension of disbelief and material engagement with a fictional object supports a process of negotiation and decision-making that generates dialogue and opportunities for collective thinking and sharing concerns, a space for openness and constant readjustment of vision and collective positioning. It proposes, therefore, that digital transformation should be treated as a site for productive dialogue and re-imagining of cultural heritage rather than a source of techno-determined utopian and dystopian heritage futures.

The context of the *Transformation Machine*: www.cohere-4.com/futurescaping/2018/3/5/futurescaping-workshop

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