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HOW TO PROMOTE AND COMMUNICATE COLLECTIONS IN ONLINE ENVIRONMENT: CROATIAN MUSEUMS' PRACTICE

Abstract: Although digitization has become part of heritage institutions' daily work over the past two decades, archives, libraries and museums, as cultural, educational and informational institutions, are faced with major challenges of creating, managing, giving access to and promoting their digital collections.

Digital environment, and information and communication technology, especially Web 2.0, have enabled heritage institutions to open their collections to the public and become stakeholders in creating the European cultural heritage online.

This paper will examine the role of Croatian museums in presentation, marketing and communication of the museum digitized collections on the websites and social networks, museum participation in creation of the national digital museum landscape, and the integration of museum content into the *European Digital Library - Europeana*.

Keywords: heritage, museums, museum collection, marketing, communication, digitization, Croatia, Europeana

Introduction

Influenced by the rapid development of the information and communication technologies and Web 2.0, the activity of heritage institutions, which includes processing, permanent safekeeping, and providing access to the materials, is increasingly becoming focused on the digital environment. Users of archives, libraries and museums today expect a growing number of e-services and access to information, meaning access to the materials stored by such institutions at any given time and place. Thus the digitization of valuable materials stored in the holdings of archives, libraries, museums and other cultural institutions becomes one of the basic tasks, i.e. a prerequisite for providing access to cultural heritage. Except for providing faster and simpler access, the process of digitization of cultural heritage contributes to the development of digital collections and thereby of the overall online digital landscape. Nowadays, the holdings of heritage institutions worldwide are becoming more visible and accessible, while “e-libraries”, “e-museums” and “e-archives” are the essential stakeholders in the Internet environment and are available to everyone.

At a time when European heritage institutions are taking part in the process of digitization of their materials, a number of publishers, disseminators of digitized materials and commercial companies have started to provide access to heritage so as to ensure, by rendering these services, their own relevance and visibility in the digital environment. In this way *Google* with its project of digitization of the world written and museum heritage entitled *Google Books* [6] and *Google Art* [5] inspired the European professional community. The challenge posed by *Google* resulted in, among other things, the incentive to create a comprehensive digitized collection of European cultural heritage *Europeana* [4]. All European heritage institutions were invited to take part in the new “digital renaissance” to provide access to 30 million digitized items in the holdings of European heritage and other institutions by 2015.

Aside from providing access to the materials, activities of heritage institutions in the digital environment imposed, through the development of Web 2.0, additional tasks and also allowed them to

foster new values in promoting and communicating their contents on social networks and other networking tools, including their users in the process.

Future activity will show in which way Croatian museums, as stakeholders of national heritage, through their digitization projects will contribute to providing access and, by using the advantages of Web 2.0, promoting and communicating the heritage stored in their holdings online, and thus preserve the collective memory and identity of the nation they represent, as well as to the development of European culture and European digital landscape.

In addition, a more detailed analysis and comparison will be made of the ways in which the information about Croatian cultural heritage is disseminated and promoted, and the level of its visibility in the digital environment with a view to its being communicated, researched, learned, used and reused.

1. The right to culture and tasks of museums

Numerous documents are available in the field of information sciences which underline the need to disseminate and promote the information about the national cultural heritage in the digital environment with the aim of communicating, research, learning, use and further development of cultural heritage. The promotion of various contents kept in the holdings of heritage institutions, raising the awareness of heritage preservation and promoting its development and use, represent only part of the advantages which contribute to extending the knowledge about the preserved cultural heritage.

The museum community, in the *Museum Act* of 1998, had already provided for the promotion of cultural goods emphasising “direct and indirect presentation [of cultural goods] to the public through permanent and periodical exhibitions, and publishing information and new facts about museum materials and museum documents through expert, scientific and other means of reporting“ [13].

It is up to the museums and other heritage institutions to choose how to face the challenges imposed by the users, time and technology and how to fulfil their tasks which are clearly stated in their recommendations and development strategies. In which manner could the priceless and abundant, although often hidden holdings be made available to the public, that is, how to make them visible and up-to-date in the vast and ever growing information landscape so that the professional community and the public in general can benefit from it? In which way, based on the project of digitization, will the message be transmitted and heritage communicated – through websites and social networks and, finally, contribute to its preservation and development? An attempt will be made to answer these questions through the analysis of the Croatian museums’ online environment, a comparative analysis of the websites of Croatian museums and a survey on the promotion of digitised museum and their online presentation.

2. Marketing and communicating Croatian museums’ heritage in the online environment

2.1 Museum landscape in Croatia

When one observes the museum landscape in Croatia, several nodes can be singled out which consolidate the information and contents regarding the Croatian museums, museum materials and their collections. Internet portals are the result of the collaborative projects between Croatian museums and other cultural institutions.

Approximately 225 museums are listed in the *Register of Museums, Galleries and Collections in the Republic of Croatia* kept by the Museum Documentation Centre [8], a public institution

established in 1955 as the documentation, information and communication node of the Croatian museum network, its collections and professional community. The total number concerned is approximately 7 million items. The Museum Documentation Centre keeps the Register as “a unique and specific database of museums, their collections and professional staff”, so it is in fact “a record of the "musealised heritage" and contains information about all museum institutions in Croatia regardless of their legal and administrative status” [11]. The main criterion for listing in the Register is the existence of holdings that form a collection.

The bilingual portal of the Museum Documentation Centre is the central documentation, information and communication node of the Croatian museum community and, apart from said Register, it brings the news from Croatian museums, the calendar of museum events, addresses and web addresses of Croatian museums, the list of museum regulations and guidelines, and it provides the search option of Croatian collections and access to several digital collections. A wide range of different types of museums in Croatia varies from large to small institutions focusing on a certain subject, site or person – from the national and regional to local museums and collections, and from the general to specialised museums and permanent exhibitions, says the website the Museum Documentation Centre.

The Museum Documentation Centre launched a project entitled *Museums of Croatia on the Internet* (MCI) [9] in 1996, which was completed in 2008. 33 museum institutions, 50 museums in total, were presented under the project together with their regional collections and sites. Presentation of museums is envisaged as a guided tour through the museums, their collections and the most exemplary materials, and it is organised in these main sections: general information, museum history, collections, selected collection objects, museum activities and permanent exhibition.

Croatian Cultural Heritage [2], the portal presenting Croatian heritage created in 2008, collects and presents the information about various collections of digitized museum, library and archival materials in Croatia, and it also provides links to some digital collections. The aim of the portal was to “encourage the creation of new digital contents, improve their availability and visibility and to promote a systematic and unified approach to digitisation of materials in cultural institutions.” [2]

Apart from the listed portals, to date almost two thirds of Croatian museums have created their presence in the digital environment – by creating websites, digitizing their collections and uploading them online, by communicating and promoting their materials on their social network profiles and as part of other Web 2.0 tools and applications.

3. Methodology and sample of research: Research of the museum Internet landscape in Croatia

By analysing the museum Internet landscape in Croatia and comparative analysis of 50 accessible websites of Croatian museums, which comprise a representative sample, an attempt will be made to establish in which manner Croatian museums provide access to and information about their collections and the extent of their visibility in the digital environment. The evaluation will be carried out in compliance with the best European and international practices. Earlier research on the subject of websites of museums in Croatia is presented in the dissertation entitled *Models of Presentation and Evaluation of Content of Online Museums in Croatia* [12].

The contents to be examined in the analysis comprise:

1. Representation of information about museums in Croatia on the Internet
2. Promotion of Croatian museums on cultural heritage portals
3. Existence of digitized/born-digital content presenting museum heritage online
4. Promotion and communication of museum materials using the Internet and Web 2.0 tools

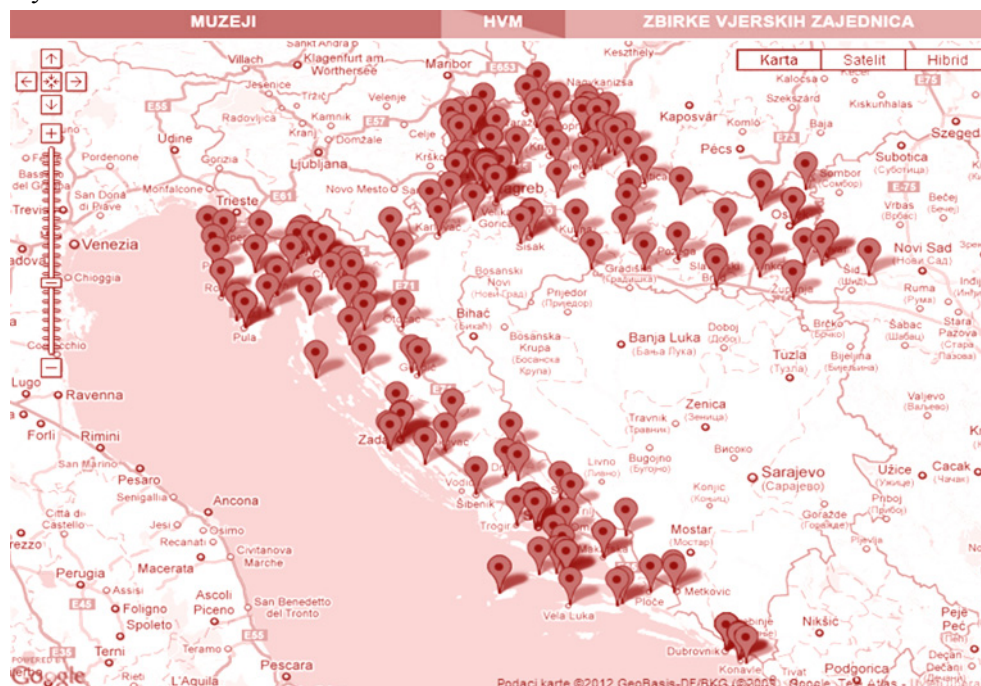
5. Participation of Croatian museums in creating the largest European digital collection of cultural heritage *Europeana*

Apart from these analyses, the overview of the promotion of museums in Croatia will be supplemented by the replies to the questionnaire, which was sent by e-mail to heads of digitization projects in Croatian museums and to the persons responsible for the promotion of Croatian museums' heritage from 35 museums in Croatia.

4. Survey of results

4.1 Representation of information about Croatian museums on the Internet

The central and currently most up-to-date place which collects and gives exhaustive information about Croatian museums is the *Croatian Virtual Museum*¹ (Picture 1), a project of the Museum Documentation Centre which constitutes an online guide with the information about Croatian museums, their activities, permanent exhibitions, collections, expositions and latest events. The interactive map gives access to 225 museums and 148 collections of religious communities listed in the *Register of Museums, Galleries and Collections in the Republic of Croatia*. It contains informative texts about Croatian museums, while adding of photographs and supplementary contents is under way, as well as drawing up of the *Catalogue of museum objects in the collections of museums in Croatia* is also under way.



Picture 1: Croatian virtual museum

An older project entitled *Museums of Croatia on the Internet* which was in fact a “move into the global virtual world [which] contributed to museums being more open and communicative, and conversely its aim was to bring more real visitors into the museum.”², and it lasted in the period from 1996 to 2008. It was one of the first initiatives to bring the collections of museums in Croatia closer to

¹ Croatian Virtual Museum. The Museum Documentation Centre. [Quoted on: 2012-01-08]. Available at: <http://www.mdc.hr/hr/muzeji-u-hrvatskoj/hvm-pregled-muzeja/>

² Muzeji Hrvatske na internetu. [Quoted on: 2012-01-08]. Available at: <http://www.mdc.hr/hr/muzeji-u-hrvatskoj/muzeji-hrvatske-na-internetu/>

the public. The project presented 50 collections from 33 museums in Croatia through informative text and Pictures.

The portal of the Museum Documentation Centre is the most extensive and comprehensive point of the museum community in Croatia, i.e. its information and communication node. Apart from descriptive text and general information about museums in Croatia, their activity, news, the events calendar, addresses of museums in Croatia, regulations and guidelines, the portal provides the search option of Croatian collections and there are several digital collections containing Pictures accompanied by textual information.

The portal *Euromuse.net* [3] is the exhibition portal for Europe, a single point of access to information on major exhibitions in European museums. Among 475 museums information on 13 museums in Croatia is available, in both the local language and in English.

The above portals may be considered to be the central points of access to museums in Croatia. For the most part, these portals publish texts with extensive information on every Croatian museum or collection, their activities and links to the museums' websites, so they are a useful source of information to any user and future visitor of museums in Croatia, as well as to members of the professional museum community.

4.2 Promotion of Croatian museums on cultural heritage portals

The portal *Croatian Cultural Heritage* is the portal for Croatian heritage, launched in 2008 for the purpose of presenting the collections of the Croatian cultural institutions. It was developed under the national project for digitization of archival, library and museum materials entitled *Croatian Cultural Heritage* with the aim to "encourage the creation of new digital contents, improve their availability and visibility and to promote a systematic and unified approach to digitisation of materials in cultural institutions."³ The *Croatian Cultural Heritage* portal comprises descriptions of various collections of digitized materials in the museums, libraries and archives in Croatia. The collections may be searched and browsed by theme, chronologically, relative to the type of material, place and some other criteria. Some collections are linked through the portal to their online digitized versions. The portal also gives digitization guidelines and instructions, and other similar professional contents that are useful for preparing and managing digitization projects.

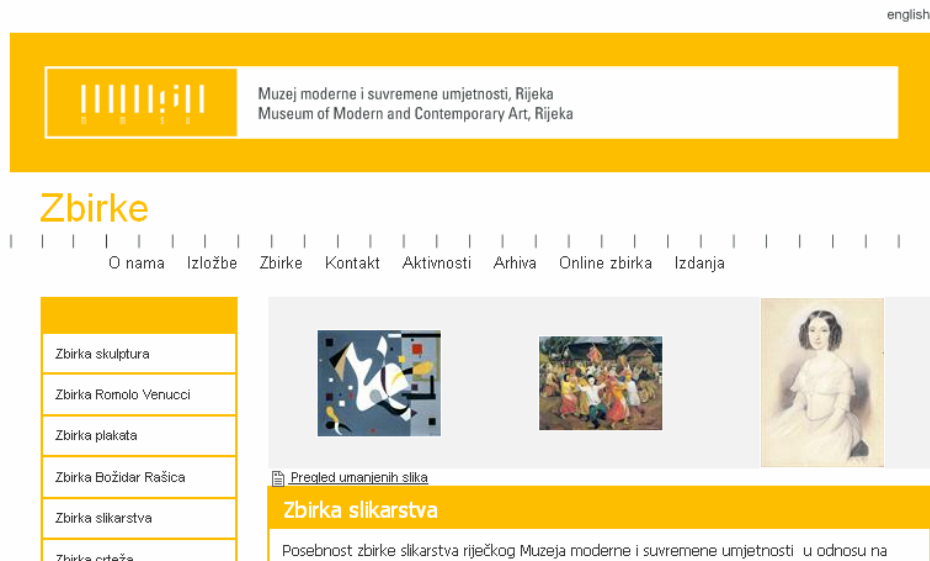
4.3 Existence of digitized/born-digital content for presenting museum heritage online

The portal *Croatian Cultural Heritage* contains descriptions of 141 collections of museums in Croatia, and gives links to some 60 digital collections on the websites of their parent institutions, where the virtual collection implies a group of several objects that are collectively published in the virtual environment.

Some virtual collections include collections from the following Croatian museums:

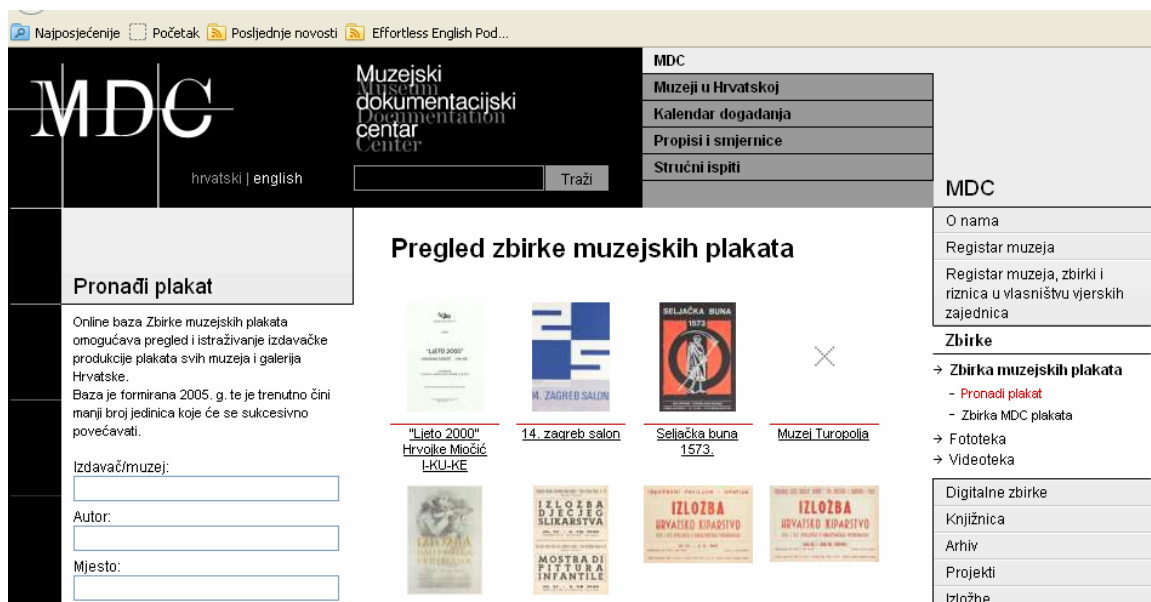
The Museum of Casts of the Croatian Academy of Sciences and Arts, the Maritime and History Museum of the Croatian Littoral Rijeka, the Croatian History Museum, Polytechnic Velika Gorica – Gallery Galženica and the Natural History Museum Rijeka.

³ Croatian Cultural Heritage. About us. [Quoted on: 2012-01-08]. Available at: <http://kultura.hr/O-nama/Projekt-HKB>



Picture 2: Example of an online collection of the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Rijeka

Some online collections of Croatian museums are also available on the portal of the Museum Documentation Centre. In addition, the portal provides access to the Collection of posters of the Museum Documentation Centre [10], as shown in Picture 3, which is also the online database of the Collection of Museum Posters. This database, created in 2005, allows retrieval and research of published posters from all museums and galleries in Croatia. Other online collections of museums in Croatia that are also available on the portal of the Museum Documentation Centre include Digital Collection Bauer and Donations to the city of Zagreb online.



Picture 3: MDC's online collection of museum posters

The analysis of websites of museums in Croatia and their collections available online shows that they are designed so as to resemble their authentic versions available in the museums. In most instances, they are presented through Pictures accompanied by the metadata, and occasionally by additional contents which give the selected museum objects a wider context. The collections are oftentimes organised as databases and their elements are ordered in sequence as the lists of exhibits. However,

certain shifts toward the original online museum forms are noticeable among online collections in Croatia – such as the presentation and giving the impression of walking around the museum collection, providing the context for the museum objects and virtual tour applications, which seek to give the impression, in an online environment, of the genuine and tangible museum or gallery.

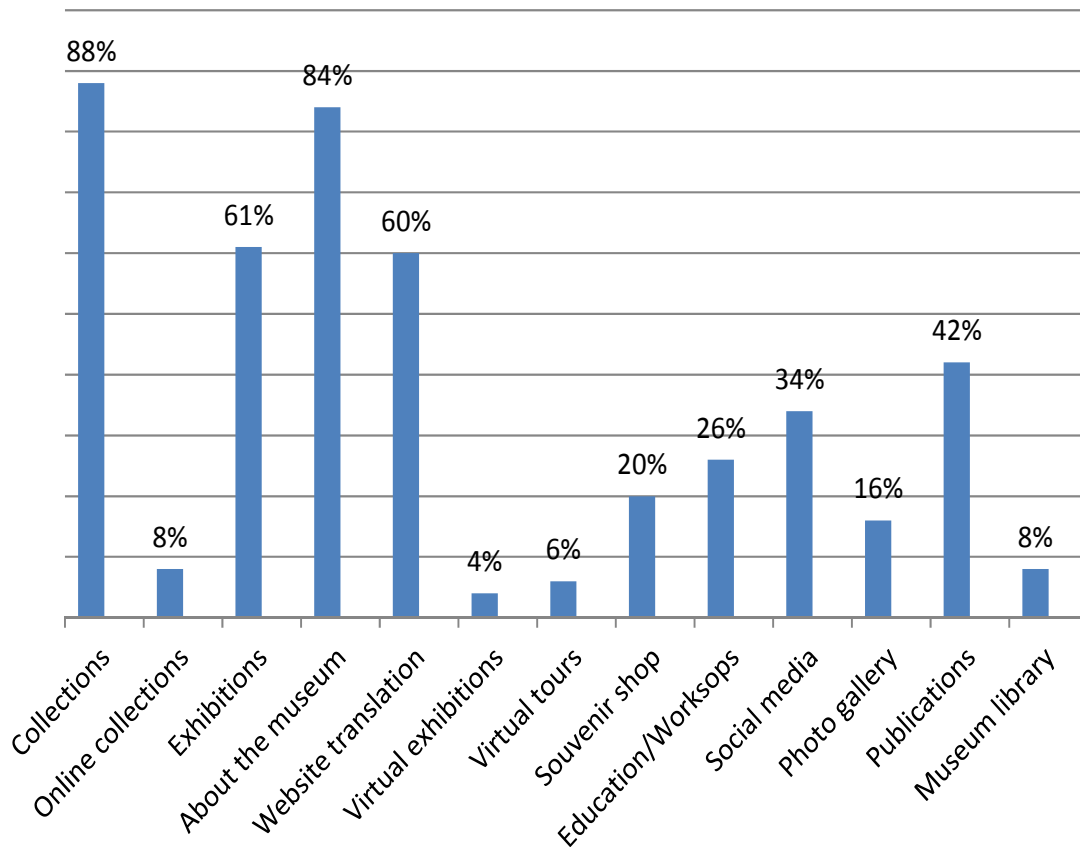
4.4 Promotion and communication of museum materials on the Internet and Web 2.0 tools

So far, 82% of museums in Croatia have created their presence in the online environment – by developing and managing museum websites, through digitization of their collections, and by communicating valuable museum objects on their profiles on social networks and Web 2.0 tools.

The aim of the comparative analysis of 50 websites of museums in Croatia, which includes all types of museums in the country, was to establish which contents are present on the websites of Croatian museums. The analysis found that the majority of contents coincide and comprise the following information:

- Information about the museum
- Information about the museum collection/collections
- Information about exhibition/exhibitions
- Online collection/collections
- Virtual exhibitions
- Virtual tours
- Museum profiles on social networks
- Website translation
- Education/workshops held in the museum
- Souvenir shop
- Museum photo gallery
- Museum publications
- Information about the museum library or its holdings

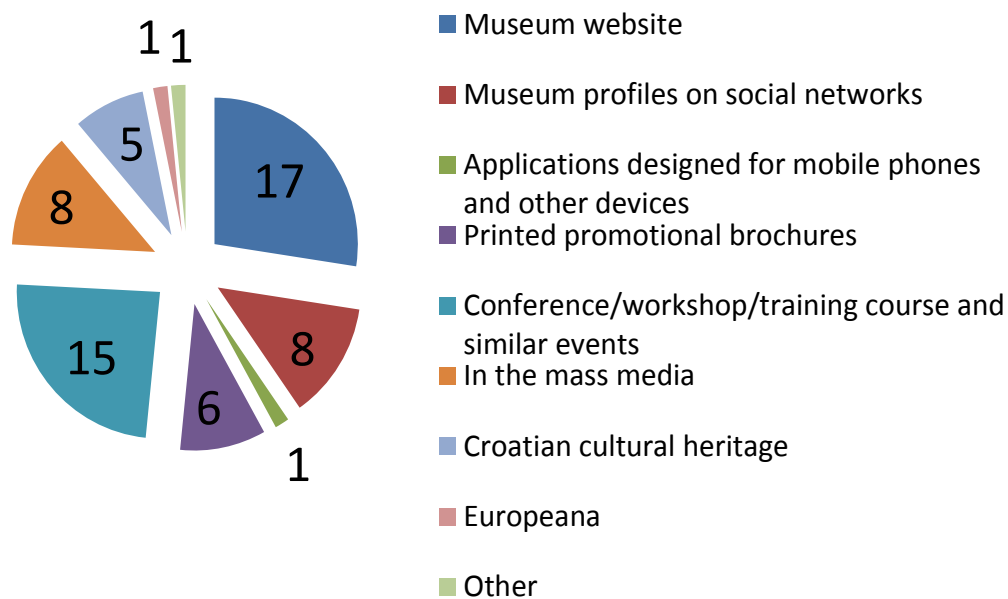
The most frequent content found on all analysed websites of museums in Croatia includes descriptions of museum collections, information about the museum and its history, information about the permanent or periodic museum exhibitions, and almost half of all websites list museum publications. A little over one-third of museums have profiles on the social networks, while almost one-third of museums organise education and workshops open to the public in their buildings. The contents following in the order of their prevalence are: the souvenir shop, where a minor number of museums allow online orders or buying, museum's photo gallery and information about the museum library and its holdings. Online museum collections are accessible in only few museums as is the virtual tour of the museum or virtual museum exhibition.



Picture 4: Comparative analysis of the most frequent contents on the websites of museums in Croatia

The results obtained in the comparative analysis of the websites of museums in Croatia are also corroborated by the replies to the questionnaire sent by e-mail to the responsible persons participating in the digitisation processes and to the persons in Croatian museums responsible for the promotion and communication of the museum materials they keep.

35 replies were received to the following question sent by e-mail – How do you promote museum materials stored in the digital environment? The majority of museums promote their contents, collections and valuable objects in their holdings on their websites. Half of these museums state that they have and manage profiles on social networks, in most cases these are the profiles on the currently most popular networks, *Facebook* and *Twitter*. An almost equal number of museums that responded they relied on the promotion on their Internet pages; they also promote their activity and materials at different conferences, workshops and similar events, while half of them also advertise in the mass media.



Picture 5: Promotion of museum materials

Printed media are still desirable for the promotion of museum contents, as confirmed by one-fifth of the participants in the survey. An equal number of museums believe that promotion on the central portal of Croatian heritage – *Croatian Cultural Heritage* – is the best choice for the promotion of their contents. Just one museum in Croatia replied that their contents were integrated in the central portal of the European cultural heritage *Europeana*. In addition, one museum distinguished itself by stating that, due to a growing number of mobile visitors and users of the museum’s services over the mobile phone, it created a mobile application for promoting the museum’s contents.

The results based on the replies obtained by e-mail concerning the promotion of museums in Croatia are shown in the charts in Picture 5.

The analysis of the websites of museums in Croatia shows that in the majority of cases the aim of Croatian museums is to relate their activity and holdings, which means that the website is just a copy of the organisational structure of the parent institution. Furthermore, the content comprises chiefly texts supplemented by Pictures and only rarely these contents have an added value by means of special applications. A foray into the original virtual museum comprises few virtual exhibitions or virtual tours. Generally speaking, these are static, not dynamic contents that require active participation of users and virtual visitors. Invitations to cooperation and creation in the museum environment are related mainly to the notifications and invitations to workshops and education taking place in the museum building, while there are no contents using special applications allowing the virtual user to participate in the creation or to actively use online museum contents.

The challenge taken on by numerous cultural institutions across the world, museums included, resulted in more active communication in the virtual environment using the Web 2.0 tools and profiles on social networks, as demonstrated by some Croatian examples, although few and far between.

The promotion of museums' contents is still predominantly directed to the conventional environment and printed media.

5. Conclusion

The development of information and Web technologies, of Web 2.0 tools and digital networked information society, imposed new challenges as regards more efficient promotion of heritage institutions, including museums, in an online environment. Communicating cultural heritage online does not mean simply imparting the significance of stored heritage to the people today and for the future generations by providing access to a growing number of information about museums, their activity and holdings, but also, and increasingly so, access to their digital collections and virtual exhibitions. On the other hand, this also attracts greater attention of *traditional* users in the *traditional* museum environment.

Such a diversified world, poised between the analogue and the digital, is highly present internationally, including Croatia.

With a view to increasing their visibility in the digital environment, museums in Croatia, by promoting their content online, evince the abundant and diversified national museum heritage as equal stakeholders in the creation of the overall European and thereby international cultural and scientific heritage, which is largely integrated into the *Europeana* portal.

The conducted research shows that progress was made in the last years concerning the promotion of museums and museum materials on the websites of museums in Croatia, although, for now, Croatian museums in the digital environment are still museums online but not online or virtual museums.

Websites of museums in Croatia exhibit the opulence of the exquisite and representative cultural heritage, regardless of the fact the museum object in the digital environment and on the website is missing its authentic character and excellence.

It remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, in the course of time and with technological development, progress can be made or whether the unique character of artwork will remain permanently in the traditional museum environment.

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