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PARTICIPATORY PRACTICES IN CONTEMPORARY CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS

Abstract. Examining of the participation paradigm in the paper “Participatory practices in modern institutions of culture” is focused on the understanding of these practices in the context of information society, on the creative participation of citizens in the field of culture, and on the potential of digital technologies for the users’ creative engagement. The paper pays particular attention to the web and the Internet technologies as the foundation of participation and to the concept of participatory practices in culture. In the technological environment that enables participation, cooperation, and interactivity, the audiences’ positions, desires, and possibilities are radically and rapidly changing. These behavior patterns are a result of changes in expectations and habits of a large number of people, which emerged, among other things, as a consequence of the widespread ICT and their significant influence.

Keywords. participatory practices, culture, information society, web 2.0, contemporary cultural institution, users.

Participation is neither a new nor unambiguous concept. In literature, participation, i.e. taking part in and contributing to certain activities, events or products, is a term used in various contexts - political, social, cultural, medial, etc. Participatory aspects have been discussed from different points of view, both theoretically and practically, well before the rise of the Internet and the development of the Web 2.0 technologies. However, it was the global network and the development of online platforms for social networking that have radically changed the participatory paradigm in the modern world. Whereas the essence of the concept of Web 2.0 is based on the contribution and participation of users, on interactive relationships that users establish online with a potentially unlimited number of other users, and on the creation, sharing, and exchanging contents without any time or geographical limitations – we can talk about participation today in a global context. By virtue of modern and more accessible technology, we are able today, for example, to participate from our living room in a discussion or lecture that is taking place at the other side of the globe, to communicate in real time with numerous participants from around the world, and to ask questions or participate in other creative ways. Digital communication systems enable the integration of different types of data (images, videos, audio recordings, etc.) and distribution of generated content at online platforms, thus distributing the news on important events in which we have initiated a dialogue and/or participated. Before the advent of the Internet, anything like this was not possible.

Due to the development of participatory software applications and Web 2.0 tools, “participation in acts that genuinely blur the line between production and consumption are now an established part of the everyday lives of millions of people” [1]. What makes the participation radically different nowadays is the fact that social media on the Internet make participation more accessible than ever before. As Nina Simon observes, “the growth of social Web technologies in the mid-2000s transformed

participation from something limited and infrequent to something possible anytime, for anyone, anywhere.” [2]

In this paper, the notion of “participatory practices in culture” is used in the sense related to participation in the production of cultural artifacts, promotion of cultural heritage, participation in design (creation) and implementation (realization) of programs in this area, and participation in the preservation, presentation and promotion of contents in the field of culture. Participatory culture is a culture of active participation in different areas: art, politics, culture, education, society, etc. Participatory culture is understood as a term that describes a culture characterized by the development of user participation in different spheres of modern life or as the culture that is open, that encourages dialogue, creativity and critical thinking, as the culture of cooperation and joint work to achieve certain objectives. Henry Jenkins discusses the concept of participatory culture as follows: “The term, **participatory culture**, is intended to contrast with older notions of media spectatorship. In this emerging media system, what might traditionally be understood as media producers and consumers are transformed into participants who are expected to interact with each other according to a new set of rules which none of us fully understands.”[3] Jenkins defines participatory culture as “a culture with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations, and some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.”[4]

Certainly, the idea of audience that has a more active role (the concept of “active audience”) in communication processes is not new, but the implementation of information and communication technologies and the use of global computer network have had a significant influence on the more active role of the audience and the ways we understand and observe contemporary audience. “Far from simply being consumers, today’s Web users actively add content, personalize Web spaces, and create structures that make finding information easier than ever before.”[5] In determining the place and the role of modern audience, of great importance is the concept of “creative audience” as interpreted by Manuel Castells.[6] He believes that people have the capacity to modify the signifiers in the messages they receive, to interpret them according to their cultural patterns and to combine messages with other communication practices. He also points out that the potential of audience to take responsibility for communicative practice has greatly increased with the development of culture of autonomy through the expansion of the Internet and wireless communication, which support and strengthen the autonomy, including the content produced and uploaded to a global computer network by the users.

The question arises of what differs between the possibilities and activities of the audience in Web 2.0 environments and those of the traditional media audience in the past. First of all, they differ by nature, scope, diversity, and availability. As Lawrence Lessig puts it: “...unlike any technology for simply capturing images, the Internet allows these creations to be shared with an extraordinary number of people, practically instantaneously. This is something new in our tradition—not just that culture can be captured mechanically, and obviously not just that events are commented upon critically, but that this mix of captured images, sound, and commentary can be widely spread practically instantaneously.”[7] User activities take place in an interactive and two-way communication or, as Jack M. Mannes writes, “Web 2.0, essentially, is not a web of textual publication, but a web of multi-sensory communication. It is a matrix of

dialogues, not a collection of monologues. It is a user-centered Web in ways it has not been thus far.”[8]

Hence, Web 2.0 and mobile technologies now provide an average user with: a great scope of connectivity (networking), access to online dialogue and discussion, live chats (group or individual), multiuser communication and specific collaborative relationships, and creation and sharing of diverse contents. Mobile phones with a camera and internet connection enable the user to become a reporter from a concert for instance - recorded material can be archived and distributed through a number of online platforms, websites, and networks in a personalized Web space.

Thus, there are more opportunities and options for more active, simpler and more comprehensive audience engagement today than in the era before the Internet, but this potential remains under-exploited if we do not approach the users’ participation in a well planned strategic and analytical way. Data required to for realization of participatory projects in cultural institutions and for encouraging the audience to get involved are, above all, detailed information about the audiences’ habits, abilities, and attitudes that can impact their contribution and engagement. Audience research (surveys, in-depth interviews, focus groups, quantitative and qualitative research, etc.), evaluation and implementation of specific innovations are the key factors of audience development, its active and more creative engagement, which are, therefore, very important for the position and operation of cultural institutions. The growth of users’ impact also increases the potential of this impact on the cultural institution in the 21st century and includes the users’ involvement in various cultural practices, their contribution to culture, and their own and creative experience. The digital space makes these aspects of audience participation more long-lasting and, at the same time, it makes the cultural institutions “stronger”.

Participation in the field of culture in the digital age means much more than simply an opportunity of online access to information and cultural heritage, content, and applications. Participatory practices today imply the possibility to participate in various creative activities (e.g. to read, write, upload video and audio recordings about a show we saw, to participate in debates on cultural programs or cultural policy with a potentially very large number of users) in the cultural life of local as well as global communities through a global computer network in an easier, cheaper and more accessible way than it was ever possible before the Internet era. “The Internet has unleashed an extraordinary possibility for many to participate in the process of building and cultivating a culture that reaches far beyond local boundaries. That power has changed the marketplace for making and cultivating culture generally... Digital technologies, tied to the Internet, could produce a vastly more competitive and vibrant market for building and cultivating culture.”[9]

The concept of participatory institutions of culture is based on belief that the audience has a significant creative potential for creation and distribution of cultural content. The notion of participation is inherent not only to the digital world, nor we observe the technological aspect of participatory practices as the most important, but the cooperation with the audience along with the use of digital technologies are seen as a relatively new (and still underutilized) opportunities for the users’ participation in the operations of institutions, both in the digital and physical space.

As a concept, audience participation in the work of cultural institutions is not related only to the practice of contemporary cultural institutions and the age of the Internet. In different historical periods and in different forms, audience participation was present in more traditional institutional frameworks: gallery visitors have participated in artistic performances since the 1960's, library members have participated in public readings that have been organized in libraries from ancient times; the audience participate in the work of different institutional committees, but these forms of participation, although significant, are reserved for only a limited number of participants. A noticeably important characteristic of communication processes of traditional institutions is that they are generally based on a relatively passive participation of users and a unidirectional information transfer. Their attention is primarily directed to content, manner, and quality of presentation. As an example, which is illustrative for this approach, we can take the setting up of video equipment in an institution of culture that enables all visitors to record something that is related to the content presented in this institution (an exhibition, for example). Without clear instructions, it would result in generating large amounts of low-quality content, which is almost useless if we wanted to use it to find out more about our audience or collect material that could be used for a variety of institutional programs. Unlike thusly conceptualized collaboration, communication in the participatory institutions should be multidirectional, and the audience should at the same time be a consumer, creator, distributor, and a critic of cultural content.

Tom Fleming also analyzes the processes of participation in this context and considers it necessary that cultural institutions, in order to remain relevant to the public, find new ways of involving the public - both as their collaborators and participants. [10] He argues that cultural institutions no longer have audience but participants, which brings him to a conclusion that the public today is much more critical, more liberal, and more open to participate and collaborate.

A survey involving 12 cultural institutions (museums and galleries) in the UK, however, revealed that the audience still remains passive, that the community perceives itself as completely separated from processes within these institutions,[11] and that for most institutions the audience engagement is reduced to consultations instead of cooperation. One of the conclusions of this study is that despite the plans and investments, participation and involvement of the public in the work of these institutions remains marginal. The causes for this are found in the absence of a strong and dedicated leadership and strategic plan, practices which are based on concepts that do not encourage audience involvement and do not consider the audience as an active participant, and so on. The authors suggest a number of very good solutions, such as urgently solving the deficiencies in the sector, creating clusters as a step towards institutional strengthening, transforming the institutional roles and directing their focus towards support and development of the audience potentials, investing in organizational changes, etc.

A very illustrative example of realization of participatory practice is the example of the campaign "Visitors curators: my Yugoslavia", which was organized at the Museum of Yugoslav History in 2013.[12] With expert guidance and discussion, the visitors had the chance to participate as curators by enclosing personal items dated from 1918 to 2003 as exhibits. Participants donated various items (toys, product packaging, photographs, napkins, etc.) and the project was appraised as a very successful example of creative collaboration with the audience. Another good example of cultural

institutions in Serbia that often organize a variety of initiatives to involve the audience is the Library of Sabac. It encourages and initiates creative collaboration with the audience: users can post texts on the Library's website or Facebook page under a pseudonym, they also write comments, and the communication often develops into very good discussions that represent a valuable and unique cultural contribution. The users can also send their poems and stories on the website for young people "Knjigožderi"[13] (Bookgutters) hosted by the Library, they can join discussions about the books read and get involved in other topics, thus taking a very active part in the work of this institution of culture.

As an example of good practice for the presented theoretical assumptions, we can take "Library 10" and the "Meetingpoint." [14] The Library has about 50,000 visitors monthly, and nearly 60 % of the visitors are young men aged between 20 and 30, which is an age / gender population that otherwise rarely visits libraries in Finland. Less than half of the visitors borrow books, so the interesting question arises of what other visitors do in the library. Besides reading the newspaper and using the Internet, more and more visitors come to create music, edit photos or videos, listen to music or watch an exhibition prepared by other visitors. Most of the concerts, discussions and events are recorded and published on the library website. The most important target group of this cultural institution is the elderly citizens. The library's employees try to attract the audience to participate in cultural production. During 2011, 150 events were organized, but an important fact is that 80% of these events were organized by users and partners of the "Library 10."

Therefore, Michael Stevens is right in claiming that "Technology extends human reach but participation requires engaged participants who feel welcome, comfortable and valued... Participation occurs when someone welcomed as a guest feels as though they have become a host. " [15] Given the fact that technology is a powerful tool but it is not itself a driver of participatory practices in culture, one of the key questions that should be answered by contemporary cultural institutions is: How should we invite everyone to go in and participate?

If we look at the topic of social media from an institutional perspective and see which possibilities exist for cultural institutions to become leaders in management of online platforms for social networking, we recognize that it is particularly important to continually invite users to participate in various ways, to point out the possibilities for user interaction and participation, to set the rules of behavior, to store and use the content created by users, to promote content they find useful, etc. However, even though there are no geographical and time constraints for global computer network, there are many others, such as the lack of adequate education and proficiency in different skills, the significant differences in the economic and social status leading to differences in degree of computerization and digitalization of some countries, and the supervision and control of content on the Internet.

The question "how can cultural institutions reconnect with the public and demonstrate their value and relevance in contemporary life?" [16] is addressed by Nina Simon through a brief response: "I believe they can do this by inviting people to actively engage as cultural participants, not passive consumers." [16] In her opinion, the visitors expect to get an opportunity to discuss, share, and remix what they consume. In other words, if they can actively participate and cooperate with cultural institutions, then these places become crucial in the cultural life of a community.

In the concluding remarks, we point out the key components necessary for successful participatory projects: a good knowledge of the institutional and users' needs and their continuous balancing; a clear idea of what we want to achieve with a project; a good plan; a credible promise that will give the visitors a personal reason to return; effective tools; reliable budget; and an adequate agreement with the participants. It is, therefore, necessary to provide continuous opportunities for bringing the staff and the public closer. As many researchers propose, a good way to start would be an information desk, which a majority of cultural institutions already have. Every member of the staff can spend a few hours a month there and answer the visitors' questions, talk to them and thus get to know them better.

Also, we believe that we should emphasize the importance of education and the necessity to include educational programs in preparations of participatory projects, because both the staff and the public need new skills and knowledge for implementation of these projects, as they differ from traditional institutional projects. It is also important to note that the planning of participatory projects should be in accordance with the existing models and modes of operation of an institution. It should start from the staff because, just like the audience, the staff and volunteers in cultural institutions need motivation and encouragement to engage in something completely new for their practice. The first step on this path is their education and active involvement in the planning and development of participative practices, as along with creating and maintaining good relationships and networking with different stakeholders from local and / or global community. Additionally, the realization of participative practices in culture is accompanied by many challenges, such as financing, management, lack of qualitative evaluations and initiatives for strategic changes through which the institutions would get closer to the engagement and involvement of the community, i.e. closer to becoming its social center.

Finally, it is certainly important to point out the skills needed by contemporary user today for achieving creative potentials. Therefore, we also emphasize the educational potential of participatory practices in culture, which helps visitors to develop specific skills often referred to as the skills of the 21st century: cooperation and interaction with people from different backgrounds and generating of creative ideas; access, evaluation and interpretation of various information sources; analysis, adaptation and creation of media products, adaptation to different work roles, situations and places, responsible behavior in which we keep in mind the interests of the wider community, and so on. The institutions that primarily perceive the act of participation as a valuable learning and cognitive experience initiate educational / collaborative projects, and the chances are that the number of such projects will grow with the number of institutions that emphasize participatory learning skills and digital literacy.

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