**When the museum becomes the message for participating audiences1**

Pille Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt

University of Tartu, Institute of Journalism and Communication; Estonian National Museum, Estonia

Pille Runnel

Estonian National Museum; University of Tartu, Institute of Journalism and Communication, Estonia

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***Summary:*** *This article aims to analyse the notion of participation in the museum context using an audience studies perspective. Museums are increasingly competing for the attention of the public in the arenas of leisure and education, the process of which is part of the commercialisation of the museum institution. In addition, a turn towards interactivity is taking place in museums, and while that might serve well to revitalise the museum and bring it closer to its audiences, it does not sufficiently support realisation of the change of the museum institution into a laboratory-type museum (de Varine, 1988; van Mensch, 2005) – a concept defined through the communicative and democratic aspects of the museum. As is the case with many public institutions, the democratisation of society is increasing the need for transparency and accountability, which in turn has brought public engagement to the attention of the museum. According to Simon (2010), museums need to find a balance between the activities of the museum and audiences: the (potential) need to overcome the shyness of expertise combined with the need to organise the (potential) flood of amateurs.*

*These different evolutions – the ambiguity of expertise, the move towards interactiv­ity and the need for public engagement – increase the need to understand participation at museums. This paper discusses the ideas of what participation means in the museum context through Giddens’ framework of democratising democracy (1995) by looking at the museum through three key roles: as cultural, economic and public institutions, each of which has different reasons for and meanings of museum participation.*

***Keywords:*** *audience participation, museums, theories of participation*

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**1. Introduction**

The past twenty and more years have been characterised by several signifi­cant transitions in society. The ongoing democratic revolution (Mouffe, 2000), intensified by the end of the cold war, the collapse of the Soviet Union and the consequent re-shaping of Europe, the constant discoveries in the area of human biology (and especially genetics), the increased relevance of information and communication technologies such as computers, mobile telephones and the internet are just a few of the more remarkable ones. These processes have also brought a stronger dependency on technology and increased the perception of risk and uncertainty in society (Beck, 2005).

The development and spread of the many variations of the democratic worldview along with new technological facilities has also affected museums, influencing them to become more communicative. Two core processes in muse­ums, digitisation and democratisation, lead museums to focus on the dialogue with its audiences – providing more information is no longer considered suf­ficient.

The increase of communication and dialogue in museums has several con­sequences. On the one hand, the vast resources of cultural heritage can and are being made available through digital technologies. On the other hand, the dialogue at the museum level is much broader and has to be seen as part of the general democratisation of society. Democratising knowledge institutions such as museums helps society to come to grips with the pressures caused by general ambiguities in society by providing access to interpretations rather than ready-made solutions.

Museums, which have traditionally been institutions of knowledge and truth (albeit to varying degrees), are experiencing the need to open their collec­tions, exhibitions and educational work in order to better fulfil their role as a public institution within the democratic framework. One way of doing this is by increasing participatory activities within the museum environment, which will be the focus of this article.

Participation is often linked to the concept of interactivity in museums

(e.g. Barry, 1998). Indeed, being engaging and interactive, especially through new technologies, is becoming increasingly the focus of museum work (Ciolfi, Scott and Barbieri, 2011). However, this article takes a step further and argues that interaction and engagement are not enough in themselves. Although we discuss interactivity here in passing, we will not focus on this theme. Even if the concept is quite familiar for museums – especially in connection with new technologies – interactivity is generally not used to consciously facilitate demo­cratic participation in the museum context. Rather it is ‘just’ a potential tool for engagement, which in reality more often offers support to the educational framework according to which interactive elements in museums are approached as learning tools.

Thus, while within the museum world interaction has the concept of peda­gogy as its focus, participation is understood in the context of this article as mu­tually beneficial, respectful and to a certain extent aiming for balanced power relations, or at least acknowledging the worth of discussion partners. Through this emphasis on respect and partnership, social interaction and participation become located at another, more fundamental, level of democratic support. In this article, we shy away from the minimalist approach to democracy, which would limit it to institutionalised politics. Instead, we take a more maximalist approach and look at the democratisation of society at large, acknowledging the importance of a well-functioning civil society, thus extending the notion of citizenship beyond institutionalised politics.

The concept of ‘participation’ originally signified the cooperation of institu­tions and either the community or individuals, although as it has become used more widely, it has lost quite a lot of its meaning. Already in 1970, Carol Pate-man (1970: 1) notes that “any precise, meaningful content has almost disap­peared” from the term participation. The democratic-theoretical understanding of participation still has its dominance, but in this article our ambition is to extend this notion to museums, in order to understand participation in relation to the variety of roles outlined above. Peter Dahlgren (2006: 24) helps with the clarification of some key terms: “Engagement generally refers to subject states […] mobilised, focused attention.” He sees engagement as a prerequisite for participation, as the latter would be “connecting with practical, do-able situations, where citizens can feel empowered […] it involves in some sense ‘activity’”. For Dahlgren (2006), although both participation and engagement are anchored in the individual, they do have important collective dimension as they imply being connected to others via civic bonds.

In her book, *The Participatory Museum*, Simon (2010) argues that with mu­seum participation, the key is to find out what function participation supports. In contrast to many ladder-based approaches towards participation (Arnstein, 1969; OECD, 2001; IAP2, 2007; Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2010), Simon indi­cates that in the context of museums, the different approaches to participation are better understood as a matrix in which in some of these instances the role of the museum is greater, while in some other cases the role of the museum decreases and leaves more control with audiences. Simon (2010) stresses that it would be wrong to approach any of these participatory ideas as hierarchical, but rather these options are complementary and depend on museum’s aims and possibilities. As Mariana Salgado (2009) argues, this does not imply that the traditional museum institution has disappeared, despite the shift of museums from being collection-centred towards being visitor-centred. However, she also sees this shift as the key to museums becoming participation-friendly institu­tions. McLean (2007) argues that this shift occurred when participation was understood to be part of learning, which differentiated this phase from earlier initiatives in which people are involved in museum activities either through collecting, commenting or interpreting. Thus, in many instances, participation and engagement become seen as either prerequisites or additions to fulfilling various museum roles.

*Table 1: Different museum participation possibilities, adapted from Simon (2010)*

|  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | **Contributory**  | **Collaborative**  | **Co-creative**  | **Hosted**  |
| Control over the  | Museum  | Museum more than  | Equal/partici- | Participants (with  |
| agenda and over  |  | participants  | pants more than  | rules and some  |
| the outcome  |  |  | museum  | limitations from the institution)  |
| Number of participants and their commit­ment  | Potentially very many, but limited or no commitment  | Smaller numbers, some casual joiners, but most with inten­tion to participate, thus relatively small numbers  | Relatively small groups, commit­ted through the whole process  | Relatively small groups, who need ad­ditional support for their own project.  |
| Participants  | Individual  | Individual interacts  | Success presumes  | Success relies on good  |
| interaction  | interacts with the content of the museum and possibly with other partici­pants contribu­tions  | with content and in­stitution and possibly with other partici­pants contributions  | interaction with institu­tion and other participants and co-operation  | interaction with other participants forming a community or network  |
| Goals for how  | Visitors see  | Visitors see the  | Visitors see the  | The project will  |
| non-participating  | themselves  | institution as a place  | institution as  | attract new audi­ |
| visitors will per- | as potential  | dedicated to support- | a community­ | ences who might not  |
| ceive the project  | participants and see the institu­tion as interested in their active involvement.  | ing and connecting with community.  | driven place. It will also bring in new audiences connected to the participants.  | see the institution as a comfortable or appealing place for them.  |

In the following part, we will firstly give a short overview of museum his­tory and introduce different positions the museum can have towards its audi­ences from the historical perspective. This will help to ground the discussion of participation in the overall development of the museums as public institutions. This overview will provide insights into how the often-conflicting approaches towards museum work have evolved over time and are still in the process of change. Secondly, different perspectives towards audiences will be mirrored in the discussion of three intersecting fields (cultural, economic and political (public)) that museums operate in. In the third section, we will use core ques­tions from the classic communication transmission model (Lasswell, 1948; McQuail and Windahl, 1993), with a twist on participatory communication focusing on the dialogue between the museum and its audiences. We will dis­cuss the issues of museum participation through the lens of museums, by look­ing at which roles museums take in audience communication, why museums need to make people more aware of participation and what position is assigned to the participants and audiences in these participatory processes.

Our concern is not with audience motivations and what they gain from participating in public institutions. Rather, we take the normative position that institutions need to support participation. We assume that by looking at these different roles and areas where museums operate, we can better understand and support institutional motivations. Many of the discussions outlined here, centring on the museum institution, could be extended to other public institu­tions, which are opening themselves towards public participation. In doing so, this article will hopefully contribute to a larger debate on the changing roles of public knowledge institutions in contemporary society.

**2. A short and non-comprehensive history of museums**

The changing roles of the museum can be exemplified by briefly looking at museum history. As Hooper-Greenhill (1995) explains, the stories of the museum’s past are complex and illustrate many conflicting developments. Early museums were cabinets of curiosities with public access for the ‘respectable’ as early as 530 BCE (McDonald, 2006). In this kind of museum, the owner and his staff opened the doors and displayed the collection for the selected few. Audiences for this kind of institution were relatively closed groups and the communicative potential of this kind of museum was more related to influence and affluence than to knowledge and education. Museums became public insti­tutions only during the Renaissance. This brought the development of a variety of functions, including socialising and educational aspects, collecting and also preserving and displaying the collections. The functions in the public institu­tions evolved, resulting in increasing complexity within the museum institu­tions themselves. Different functionalities of the museum became separated in different departments and thus distanced from each other.

This changed again in the second half of the 20th century when contem­porary museums developed an increased coherence in relation to its various functionalities, represented by everyday cooperation at the organisational levels and by the overlapping and co-occurring of various processes. Museologist van Mensch (2005) justifies this change by suggesting that today’s museum needs to overcome these departmental differences in order to start thinking in terms of the visitors to whom the services of the museum are oriented.

This was not the only change, for museums have been investigating no­tions of “ecomuseum” or community museum (de Varine, 1998), “dialogic museum” (Tchen, 1992) and paid attention to the changing relations between museums and communities (Karp, 1992) for over forty years (Pollock, 2007). Thus, they became implicated in what Giddens (1998) labelled the responsibil­ity of public institutions to contribute to the democratisation of democracy. In this logic, public knowledge institutions, such as museums, need to become what van Mensch (2005) calls laboratories and meeting points for discussions and new initiatives. In other words the “sanctum-museum” needs to become a “laboratory-museum” (Mairesse, 2003), respectful of the expertise of the mu­seum staff and its experts, but at the same time open to a continuous dialogue with the outside worlds that sometimes come to visit it. More specifically, a 21st century democratic and reflexive society needs museums that encourage society’s publics to attribute meaning to the cultural objects that are on display (Hein, 2006).

At the same time, museums, together with many other institutions, face the challenge of competing for people’s time. Entertainment and leisure seem to be universally acknowledged ways of organising this. One common way to achieve attention from audiences is the celebrification of museum objects. Ro­jek (2001) defines celebrification as the attribution of glamorous or notorious status to an individual within the public sphere, a definition that can also be used for objects. Celebrification occurs in many arenas, and museums promote certain objects in their collection to the celebrity status in the hope of gaining more attention (and visitors). Van Mensch’s (idea of a) museum is an institu­tion that is very close to its audience; it can be said that the museum institu­tion, hoping to gain visibility and connection with its audiences through the celebrification process in fact distances itself from its audiences by making them consumers-worshipers of glorious collections.

These above-mentioned processes occur simultaneously in the contempo­rary museum: the organisational division of labour (which has become more porous), the celebration of partnerships, and the glorification of objects. This also implies that in different museums, the attention for the audiences and their ways of dealing with the visitor differs. These also impact on the ways that museum institutions allow or disallow participation. In order to capture these diverse and overlapping practices, three fields are introduced, within which these practices are embedded: the cultural field, the economic field and the public field.

**3. Museums in their contesting and intersecting fields**

The notion of fields is borrowed from Bourdieu’s idea (1998) that different fields carry different operational logics. The framework of fields helps to explain some of the contradictory and overlapping social processes museums seem to undergo. Museums operate on three key fields – cultural, economic and po­litical, fulfilling three key institutional roles: being simultaneously a cultural, economic and political (public) institution (see Figure 1). The related roles, responsibilities and needs are often conflicting. Some of these role changes are emerging alongside the changes outlined in museum history, but as outlined in the discussion about museum history, none of the previous roles have com­pletely disappeared. At the same time, the redefinition of the museum is on the agenda, and museum culture in general is seen in need of reorganisation (Im­minga, 2010: 9). Our concerns are then how these different aspects relate to public participation and how they provide reasoning, motivation and support for participation.

As a *cultural institution*, museum roles include preserving, collecting, in­terpreting and mediating heritage to publics. As a *public institution*, museums are socialising and democratising agents and thus share the role of educational institutions. The third role comes from the museum as an institution operating within the *economic field*, where museums need to compete in the open market for clients’ leisure and free time. Here museums need to collect revenues and at­tract visitors. Even if museums are publicly funded, there is an increasing pres­sure for additional revenue collecting. DiMaggio (1985) described – over 25 years ago and writing about the US – how museums face many contradictory demands and that they often operate in paradoxical situations in which they are publicly funded and expected to produce public good and be ‘non-profit’, while also being expected to compete on the free market. Falk (2009) also places all leisure activities at the same level and describes how for the people, museums are just another place to go. At the same time museums today are increasingly seen as vital parts of the creative economy and their roles and functions are be­ing acknowledged as actively negotiated and fluid. Lord (2007: 8) makes a simi­lar argument when he writes that in order to benefit from the creative economy, museums need to be dialogic and truly open to diversity and interdisciplinary approaches, which would allow them to become cultural accelerators, forums and sites for debates. Otherwise, they might benefit in the cultural economy only through cultural tourism.

*Figure 1: Key domains of the contemporary museum*





The roles stemming from different fields also have commonalities and over­laps with each other; often the goals and means are shared. At the same time, there are still plenty of other cases where the roles can be conflicting, causing tensions within the museum and between the museum and its communities. In many cases, the interpretations of these institutional roles depend on profes­sional museum workers as well as on their publics. Negotiation of the functions sometimes occurs in peaceful dialogue, whereas in other instances these roles can be sources of intense conflicts either within the museum or between muse­um and its many stakeholders. Elsewhere, we have discussed some of these con­flicts regarding the perception of the roles of the museum in the context of the Estonian National Museum, where the conflicting roles are the interconnected views of architects, museum professionals and the general public (Runnel, Tatsi and Pruulmann-Vengerfeldt, 2010). Enabling and increasing participation in museums can be one way of overcoming the differences of opinions, but many of the expectations are also there to hinder the possibilities of participation.

**4. Museum is a voice is a message is a medium**

In this article, we look at the museum as a site of participation for different audiences through the lens of the classical communication model of Who? Says What? To Whom? (Laswell, 1948; McQuail and Windahl, 1993). Using this basic communication model helps to structure the elements of participation in the museum context. The focus of the analysis will be framed by the fact that

– inspired by Bell (1976) and Bourdieu (1998) – museums are seen to oper­ate in three fields, namely the cultural, economic and political field. They thus carry three different but still co-existing and overlapping roles. The idea behind using these three fields (and they by no means cover all the activities of a con­temporary museum) is to distinguish between the different operational logics of the different areas. In many instances the different fields can be either more or less dominating for a particular museum. The three fields, combined with the three topical questions will be used to discuss how museums can deal with increased societal expectations and needs to organise more (maximalist forms of) participation.

4.1 The museum as a communicator – positioning ‘Who?’

If the museum looks at audience participation from the position of the *cul­tural institution*, then the role of the museum in inviting people to participate may very much depend on the types and identities of the museum. Although one can argue that museums and other knowledge institutions, like libraries and archives, have much more in common than often assumed, then in some of these instances distinguishing between an ethnographic museum, a history museum, an art museum, a children’s museum, science museums, etc. may also be justified. The issue here is that the museum as a cultural institution may have different possibilities and different reasons to invite people to participate. Potential reasons for this cultural institution perspective are the possibility to have visitors add artefacts or stories to the collections, the opportunity to make more engaging exhibitions that are enriched by visitor input, and to involve the visitor in a process of joint cultural production. There are also limits imposed upon participation, as museum workers sometimes define this process of cul­tural construction as the exclusive area of their expertise (Carpentier, 2011).

As an *economic institution*, the driving force for the museum would be mak­ing money/profit, and that would also be the key motivation for inviting people to participate, if museums decided to do so. Potentially, the cost of organising participation may be deemed too high. However, there might be different mechanisms by which participation would support the aim of money-making. It can be that participation helps to engage and attract visitors and make it more appealing to come to the museum and thus support marketing messages. It may be that with participatory activities, museums keep people longer on their premises and can profit from selling them refreshments. It can also be that participatory activities enable museums to add valuable items to the col­lections, making the museum generally more attractive. If carefully planned, participation and community involvement may also become important mon­etary resource through either helping to raise money for a common cause or by helping the museum to save money by outsourcing some of the activities to the community.

Museums as *public institutions* see their participatory role primarily through the need to empower people through participation. Here, civic engagement with the institution might mean that people leave the institution more knowl­edgeable, with a successful experience, with a sense of value and self-esteem (coming from the fact that a knowledge institution finds individual contribu­tions valuable). The added meanings of participation might come from the interaction with experts, whereas in other instances it is the message from the museum saying that people outside museums carry some kind of valuable expertise the museum needs. Again, this role could potentially work against participation, as museums might decide to stick to the more traditional infor­mational and educational definition of the public institution.

4.2 Participating in what?

In the introductory part of this article, we referred to the overarching aim of the museum to invite its visitors and users to participate within a changing societal context. The different roles of the museum also mean that different as­pects of participation are relevant to each of these roles.

The definition of participation as it is manifested in different fields is out­lined in the next schema (Figure 2). Each domain in which the museum oper­ates is described by its distinctive understanding of participation and user en­gagement. For each field, the meaning and aim of participation differs. In each particular field the notion and understanding of participation is brought into the museum using the concepts and reasoning of those particular fields. Thus in order to understand museum participation, we need to analyse the field-based logic and motivations behind the participation. Borrowing from the ladders of participation approach (whilst maintaining a critical distance), we can distin­guish more active and more passive relations to audiences.

*Figure 2: Participation and audience relationships in the different fields of museum operations*



We should be careful not to blindly copy the active/passive approach, as it is not without its problems. In the context of the *cultural institution*, Morrone in UNESCO’s “Guidelines for cultural participation” (2006: 6–7) claims that it is difficult and unwise to attempt to reduce cultural participation to an ac­tive/passive scale. He proposes a distinction of attending/receiving; performing/ producing by amateurs; and interaction. For Morrone (2006: 7) interaction is a process “defined by continuous feedback of flow communication between external source and a receiving subject.” With this kind of definition of interac­tion he attempts to quantify and explain the experiences enabled by new digital media, distinguishing interaction from attending, and defining receiving as a third and distinctly different way of cultural participation. Similarly to Simon (2010), Morrone does not see these activities as in any way hierarchical, but rather as a way to distinguish three different media through which participa­tion can happen. Here the element of control and power is not at all prominent in distinguishing the three levels of participation. However, Morrone (2006) clearly distinguishes the professional and amateur aspects of culture and limits the understanding of cultural participation to the amateur only. This implies that in the cultural field, Morrone takes the (debatable) stance that everyone is an active participant.

When moving to the next field, we can see that in *the economic discourse*, the term involvement is used, rather than participation. Participation here is more about attracting the public to be involved in the activities offered by the institution. This kind of relationship between the institution and its publics corresponds to the museum’s increasing demand to be interactive. In many cases, interactivity is seen as adding technological solutions or elements such as buttons, screens and multi-media to the exhibitions. The problem is that this can lead to deceptive interactivity, where a person is given the sense that he or she has control over the process, whereas the control in fact is pre-determined by others (by technological tools and the intentions behind them).

The understanding of participation in the *economic role* of the museum re­mains rather vague. While we can definitely see discussions of audience partici­pation in the debates on marketing and organisational communication, there is little evidence of the systematic classification of participation in the whole economic field. The discussion in marketing has for the past 20 years moved from product placement towards customer relations and dialogue (e.g. Chris­topher, Payne and Ballantyne, 1991), and the new web 2.0 technologies have only reinforced that trend (see for instance Godin, 2008). In Figure 2, we list a number of potential economic relations, which could be seen as co-existing and emerging depending on various external or internal factors. In the first instance, the institution does not care for the market other than for its purchas­ing power. In the second, some target groups are specified and production is organised for them. The focus on the relationship with people is illustrated by the idea of paying careful attention to customer or client needs, understanding the selected target groups carefully and almost co-producing with them as a re­sult. Lastly, economic relationships can evolve into the co-production through mutual cooperation and partnership in the production process. These stages are also distinguished by different levels of control. In a way, this hierarchy mimics the IAP2 (2007) participation model in the economic field. However, while in the public field relinquishing control can be seen as part of the motivation (empowering individuals, the citizens, to take control), the economic field has different operational logics; here giving up control is not often an option at all. In the economic field, the ultimate key seems to be in understanding the customer and proposing mutually beneficial partnerships in order to maintain economic dominance and gain profits.

At the same time, creative economy discussions envision the people in the active role of being engaged and interested, while museums become passive sites for their creative forces. Here, dialogue and participation takes place within the community and the museum’s role in these processes is yet to be understood.

When looking at *political-democratically motivated participation* in the museum, or the museum as a public institution, it makes sense to talk about stakeholder engagement or mobilisation where the aim is often to rally the visitor or users to some course of action. Here museums can become sites of public campaigns. The more subtle role of democratising democracy means that museums as public institutions also have a responsibility to educate people not only about museum contents, but also about participation as such. Hence, it might be relevant to discuss the distinctions of different ladder of participa­tion approaches (e.g. OECD, 2001) and stress that although informing is not necessarily participatory, museums can and often do see civic education as part of their public role; informing can become a prerequisite to mutually beneficial participation.

*Political participation* has probably been analysed and described the most thoroughly. In Figure 2, we have summarised the propositions of the Interna­tional Association of Public Participation (IAP2, 2007) in order to approach political participation as providing information, consultation, involvement, collaboration and empowerment. These levels have a clear hierarchical struc­ture. While each level is perceived as valuable, fulfilling specific goals, with its own specific instruments, the level of public impact is seen to be increasing with each subsequent stage. In the context of knowledge institutions, an ad­ditional level is described in this scheme: the expectation that the public will be informed. This layer contains an expectation of a public institution that although the role and responsibility of an institution is to serve the public, the responsibility of looking for this public service is solely that of the recipient. This corresponds well to the traditional role of museum as collecting and pre­serving, where the value and quality of the collections are seen as important for future (potential) researchers and viewers as today’s active citizens. This idea of maintaining collections for the future, as the paramount role of the museum, is in a way part of the museum that is seen as a public institution that excludes everyone – except professionals (and possibly the donators) – from its activities.

4.3 Naming thy partner – to whom does the message go?

In the museum context, audiences have a variety of names. While ‘audience’ comes from the field of communication studies, museums have also conceptu­alised the people on their premises. For instance, Peacock and Brownbill (2007) bring together concepts of ‘audiences’, ‘users’, ‘visitors’ and ‘customers’ (origi­nating from four different paradigms) in an attempt to understand the users of online and offline museum environments. The museums have been looking at their ‘people’ from the perspective of friends, visitors, clients, users, partici­pants, while new technologies and new economic relations also expand on the notion of prosumers (Toffler, 1980) and produsers (Burns, 2006).

As naming has its power, the naming of the people who come to the institu­tions can also empower or marginalise people. When museums looked at their visitors as ‘the respectable’ or as ‘friends’, and showing off items of curiosity was central to their communication, a fairly limited imbalance of power was inscribed in the interaction. The holder of the collections was superior to the viewers in many ways, although s/he was still dependant on the visitor’s ap­proval. In the original museums, superiority might have stemmed from interest, monetary value or societal position. When museums became institutions, supe­riority was tied to expertise on preservation or knowledge about the items (and their contexts). In the shift towards a more participatory museum, it should be acknowledged that participation will never be all-inclusive and equally em­powering. As discussed above, the variety of approaches enables different levels of audience participation. Nielsen (2006) has proposed a 1:9:90 rule, claiming that on average, in large scale multi-user communities, most participants do not participate at all. Participants can be divided into regular and active participants on the one hand, and into those who engage themselves from time to time on the other. In the museum context, this means that only some visitors can be potential participants in museum activities. When the modern laboratory-museum is looking for partners, they need to take into account the fact that, according to Simon (2010), participation has to be valuable for the institution, the participants, and also the ‘lurkers’. Thus when we discuss participants, the museum, the actively engaged group of people and others all need to be satisfied and supported.

Here, again, the different fields raise different expectations regarding par­ticipants. As discussed above, *cultural participation*, as defined by Morrone (2006), expects reception, participation through amateur production and in­teraction through new technologies. Moreover, the roles of the participants can also include those of informant, expert, contributor or creator of other kinds of content.

Operating in *the economic field* means that museum institutions have had to start understanding their audiences better. Through learning more about its target groups and customers for marketing purposes, museums also foster their participation in the other (cultural and political) fields. The economic field in most of the cases defines customers or consumers in a fairly passive way. Here the customers are seen as a source of knowledge in terms of ‘what they want’. When we look at the concept of creative industries, the understanding of mu­seums in the economic field changes again. Here museums are seen as the site for active, engaged and critical individuals who are inspired by the museum for their cultural work. However, there is less focus on the museum taking an active role in these dialogues.

The role of the museum as *public institution* offers more possibilities and also raises more expectations. This role implies that active engagement can be situated on many different levels. For museums, people who see the museum as a resource, people who act as quality contributors, or people who are partners in collaborative projects are all important. Of course, we should keep in mind that it is impossible to have all functions of the museum realised through co­creative or hosted activities, as this would be too resource-consuming for any institution.

Although contributing, and possibly also collaborating, can be individual, participation can also have a more social dimension when a group of individu­als works together with an institution. Arguably, only a group of people or a community with mutual awareness and an existing network can be a partner to the institution with the potential capacity to share power. Museums can look at the participation as a possibility to foster the birth of such community or network. Simon (2010) proposes five stages of participation,3 which range from ‘me’ (where an individual consumes content) to ‘we’ (where individuals engage with each other and the institution becomes a social place full of enrich­ing and challenging encounters). The stages in between help to link the visitor to the content, and through the content also to other visitors. Simon (2010) sees these stages as progressive and proposes that for the stage 5 experience, the groundwork of the other four stages is needed. While today’s museums focus mainly on stages 1 and 2, the incorporation of other stages makes the partici­pation more valuable for both the individuals and institution. When critically examining the IAP2 participation model (2007), one can see that more public involvement becomes possible only when audiences start working together rather than remaining in a one-on-one interaction with the institution. In those instances, the institution also has more control over the agenda and outcome of the participation. Organised or networked communities have more chances to co-create or to work with the museum in a partnership, as the interaction is less dependent on individual capabilities. Many of the more complex participatory initiatives demand more resources from the participants, and networks or com­munity groups are better able to fulfil these demands.

**5. By way of conclusion**

In this article, the classic model of communication of Who says What to Whom has been used in combination with three societal fields to map audience participation in the world of museums. It is important to see that the different fields of operation generate different demands for museums and the praxis of participation depends very much on the situatedness in these particular fields. The museum has always been a medium for many different messages and through the logics of participation the wider circles of people are included as communicators. Traditionally, museums narrate the stories of their owners – either private or public – although through the organisation of these participa­tory practices, museums can take a step towards diversifying these voices. The collections and exhibitions need to be sites of discussions in order to foster the civic skills of the audience, but also to fulfil the expectations of the cultural economy.

It is important to understand that participation in museums needs to be un­derstood through the diversity of approaches – often there are manifold choices

Simon terms this social participation, a term which does not receive too much prominence here in order to avoid confusion.

to be made, and the increased number of active participants or contributors can mean that the contributions become more superficial, whereas collaboration or partnership can only occur with limited numbers of individuals. Again, this is a reason to place more emphasis on the organised or networked audience. Whatever participatory structure is preferred, as long as the repertoires of the participation are diverse, the participatory aims of the museum can be seen to be fulfilled.

This article focused on museums as institutions in public ownership. We have not paid much explicit attention to privately owned museums and their particularities. However, it is clear that privately owned institutions face the same struggles and often their need for participation is even greater because of their necessity to raise funds and community support for their survival. The museums have been and will continue to be media for many messages and this article has hopefully contributed to understanding the many perspectives mu­seums can take towards participation.

It is vital that museums understand that unless they open many of their functions to the public, they are not able to fulfil the obligations/expecta­tions placed on them. We have spent little time on discussing the socialising functions of museums, although these can only be fulfilled if society sees the museum as a valuable resource and as part of its everyday activities. The experi­ences of participation improve when we look at the participants not as isolated individuals but as a collective, interrelated entity, and when we foster their in­teractions. Museums need to be sites for community building and networking.

In many ways, museums – as reflexive knowledge institutions – can play a leading role by introducing and socialising audiences to the ideas of participa­tion. This also means that the traditional understanding of museums as sanc­tums of truthful memories needs to be abandoned, as the more post-modern society needs reflexive citizens. Reflexivity comes only with practice, when existing knowledges are questioned and analysed. Instead of providing visitors with ready-made and perfect answers, museums can use participation as a way to entice and support critical thinking. In this fashion museums have increas­ingly played a role in introducing literacy skills to the citizens of today.

It would be wrong to state that we have to invent new kinds of audience relations for the museum. In a way it would suffice simply to return to the ini­tial understanding of museum audiences as friends, strengthened by the current understanding of audiences as partners in the experimental knowledge labora­tories in order to construct the approach that we need to bring to museums.

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