

Myrczik, E. (2019). *Digital museum mediation in Denmark: A critical exploration of the development, practice, and perceived outcomes*. Department of Communication: University of Copenhagen. https://static-curis.ku.dk/portal/files/229375394/Ph.d._afhandling_2019_Myrczik.pdf

Abstract

This PhD project is triggered by the need for an exploration of the existing digital mediation practices in Danish museums to evaluate the outcomes and values of these practices as a contribution to museum mediation in general and the goals of knowledge sharing, visitor experience, and participation in particular. Following an explorative approach, this dissertation examines and presents the development, practice, and perceived outcomes of digital museum mediation in Denmark. The empirical collection steers away from tendencies in research that seem to focus on anecdotes, best-practice examples, or a normative framing of the 'oughts' of digital technologies. The main question is: In what ways does digital museum mediation support knowledge sharing, visitor experience, and participation? The dissertation presents a mixed methods research design that takes the institutional, museum practice, and technology perspectives into account through different methods, which are both qualitative and quantitative. The embedded research design consists of three main methods to collect the data. The interconnected steps consist of a mapping of 117 public funding reports and applications, cultural political documents, as well as a museum practice journal covering the development between 1996-2013. On that backdrop, semi-structured interviews with seven museum professionals, and a web questionnaire among sixty-six state-subsidized museums about the current state of digital museum mediation in Denmark were conducted. Due to the lack of empirical evidence, one of the main points of focus is to show the current state of what digital museum mediation means in Danish museums. This dissertation will also show how we got here, meaning how certain expectations by different actors have influenced each other along the way. The dissertation will illustrate that when cultural heritage institutions adopt new digital media and platforms, they have a particular understanding of 'digital', as it is seen as a means to an end in order to accomplish certain institutional goals. Further, the analysis will critically inspect such perceptions and practices, and present an exploration of how those have shaped the outcomes of mediating digitally. The four articles embedded in this dissertation discuss different steps in the analytical process of this research. Those articles build on each other, and reflect the crystallization process that stems from the data analyses of the collected materials. In combination, the articles illustrate a complex actor-network, which is framed by cultural political and socio-technological developments, that together shape the perceived outcomes of digital museum mediation. The evaluation of perceived outcomes and values of digital museum mediation is presented in the context of museum practice defined by its institutional embeddedness, personal competencies, and mindsets. After more than twenty years of digital museum practice, this research seeks to conclude on how technological affordances are understood by museum institutions and professionals and how that perception matches the paradigms and agenda-setting posed by the museum field and by cultural policy. The background chapters show how the research subject is defined by constant change. In many cases, 'digital' resembles a floating signifier, thus it very rarely means the same thing twice, while most research on 'digital' lacks clear definitions. The word 'digital' has through technical development and through human use and perception signified a broad range of ideas about, for instance, technology, connections, and communication. The findings from the web survey describe the current state of digital mediation practice, highlighting the museums' digital confidence related to communication- and audience- related outputs and outcomes. However, the current paradigms related to participation and citizen-empowerment are considered least supported by digital mediation activities, which contradicts the initial expectations towards digital technologies as facilitators of democratizing processes within the museum world.

The reasons for that might however not be directly related to digital mediation. Instead, the gap between expectations and practice points back to the museums' lack of resources in terms of funding and employees, as well as 'old' mindsets and insufficient skillsets. The research bases the presentation of contextual factors on a development of over twenty-five years and embeds the findings of the current practice within this perspective. What all the concepts of this dissertation have in common is that they are part of normative discussions since it is about complex, ever-changing phenomena such as practice, culture, and technology. These discussions are held in different arenas, and this research attempts to bring them together, to create one forum where positions are presented on the same level.