

The Networking Strategies of the Romanian Museums

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Abstract. *Being part of a network gives museums and other cultural organizations many advantages, both in relation to internal stakeholders and external ones. The interviews conducted with several leading persons from various Romanian museums have revealed that access to additional resources is one of the main drivers both in the case of social and bureaucratic networks. Another important benefit is access to information/knowledge sharing in a professional environment.*

Keywords: *museums; networking; knowledge transfer; Romania.*

Introduction

A network refers to a group of organizations that are connected and cooperate with each other. Networks could be formal or informal. The relationships established between the member organizations determine the impact of the network both on each organization, as well as on other entities, individuals or on society. For many organizations, being part of an active and effective network might be an important strategic factor, determinant for organizational efficiency and influencing its mission's accomplishment.

Museums, in general, are facing many challenges, such as insufficient resources or a low profile in the eyes of the general public and economic actors, to mention only a few. Therefore, networking might be a way to increase access to resources, to gain visibility, to benefit from the expertise of the other partners involved in the network. Networking increases both the effectiveness of a museum, as well as its relevance for the public and society.

The main aim of the present research is to understand how networking is approached by Romanian museums. Qualitative research has been undertaken, allowing the identification of the drivers and processes associated with networking.

Networking in museums/cultural sector

The aims a museum/cultural organization has in mind when being part of a network might cover a wide range, but three main aspects are mostly considered: economic efficiency, process explanation and availability of complementary resources (Bagdadli, 2003). The study developed by Bagdadli (2003) on some of the Italian museum networks (formal associations of museums) shows that economic efficiency is an important factor for networking, sharing of common values and similarity among member museums are also relevant, while resources complementarity is not so evident.

Considering the global evolutions and the various development pressures, participation in formal cultural/museum networks seems to be a necessity (Scrofani, & Ruggiero, 2013). The development of the internet and new technologies pushes cooperation, determining more inclusiveness and accessibility. Increased cultural competitiveness is another stimulating factor for museums and art organizations (Guintcheva & Passebois-Ducros, 2012). Borin (2015) mentions the role of leaders, key sponsors or other important stakeholders in stimulating cross-cultural cooperation and networking.

The aims of networking are very diverse. Borin (2015) identified nine outcomes specified by various members of cultural networks: Positive spillover effects on local socio-economic development; Creating social capital for the territory also through citizens' participation; Better knowledge flow mechanisms in the area; Better communication between the subjects of the region, including citizens; Enhancing the innovation potential of the area through networking; Development of better relations among the different subjects of the area; Reinforcing the tendency to cross-sectorial perspectives; Joint Management of HR; Better knowledge management between the members. Luonila and Johansson (2016) have analyzed the reasons for networking for music organizations. They identified also the need to create value for both internal and external stakeholders. Co-creation would be an important outcome of the networking activities.

Another important reason for networking is the opportunity to share knowledge – both from the network to the museum and from the museum to the other partners. Knowledge transfer is a relevant aspect when considering the networking benefits of museums, and nonprofit organizations in general (Zbucnea, Petropoulos, & Partyka, 2017). Access to knowledge is an important concern of cultural organizations, which try to take advantage of knowledge transfer within networks (Zbucnea & Leon, 2015, p.1725). Knowledge sharing in nonprofit organizations is facilitated both by tangible and intangible factors (Jo & Joo, 2012), depending on personal elements, organizational culture, as well as on infrastructure and administrative factors (Zbucnea & Leon, 2015, p.1719).

Networking is beneficial not only for museums involved but also for the other members of the network, even for the wider outside community. There are some examples in which museums embedded in local and global networks might lead to increased local dynamics and even to urban regeneration (Plaza & Haarich, 2015; Lazzarotti & Capone, 2015). Museums could become, in a networked environment, a social catalyst (Ferilli, Sacco, Tavano Blessi, & Forbici, 2017), as well as an actor for social equity and development (Sandell, 2003; Janes & Sandell, 2019). This process might, therefore, influence not only a museum's sustainability but also wider place sustainability, wellbeing, and development of the society.

The shifting roles of museums within societies and places lead not only to more diverse and complex public programs (Bast, Carayannis, & Campbell, 2018), but also to new operational approaches (Tufts, & Milne, 1999). This new framework also determines museums to develop partnerships with increasingly more and diverse organizations and stakeholders.

Bagdadli (2003) presents three types of networks in the cultural sector: social, bureaucratic and proprietary networks. This typology is based on the extent of formalization, the degree of centralization and the processes of cooperation (Donaldson & O'Toole, 2007). The social one is an informal form of networking, based on interpersonal cooperation. The bureaucratic ones are formal networks, aiming to better manage complex information. The focus of cultural networks might be set on administrative aspects and/or on cultural ones. The proprietary networks are those in which there are rules referring to the ownership of various assets. Alliances are also a form of cooperation, very market-oriented (Donaldson & O'Toole, 2007).

Although there are many advantages offered to a cultural organization by networking, there are also difficulties that should be overcome. Borin (2015) identified nine aspects, as follows: Diverse administrative and bureaucratic domains and sectors; Mistrust between potential members of the ecosystem; Technical and administrative problems related to knowledge flow between different institutions; Subjects are not used to identifying common goals and to engaging community and citizens; Lack of managerial tools (including financial management tools) for the network; Lack of entrepreneurial and innovative mindset; Technical and administrative problems related to knowledge flow between different institutions; Lack of human resources and professional profiles apt to work at a meso network level, or of facilitators; Incomplete presence of communication tools and infrastructure to facilitate the management of the network.

Methodology

Structured interviews & thematic analysis

As a part of a larger research into the process of knowledge transfer within museums, we conducted a series of 7 structured interviews. All the participants were people holding the top and upper-middle management positions in various museums across the country. All our respondents were working in public museums (local, regional, national). The total number of employees our respondents had within their respective institutions goes from around 200 hundred to 20. Also, their professional experience as museum managers varies from nearly 15 years to 3. It is important to point out that amongst the participants there were no „recent“ managers (all of them had at least 2 years in function) nor persons coming from different areas of expertise outside the museum world.

The interviews were conducted in September 2019 and they were registered using a phone or a recorder. Their length varies between 21 and 42 minutes. When transcribing the interviews, we opted for a verbatim transcription, in order to catch all the nuances, but also because, during the registration, we noticed that specific idiosyncrasies or run-on sentences might have a meaning for the overall analysis.

We used thematic analysis in order to identify, analyze and interpret the themes and, therefore, our findings were first organized according to the structural themes. As previously mentioned, the main topic of the interviews revolved around the knowledge transfer within museums, in terms of process, instruments, benefits, and barriers. Therefore, three structural themes were envisaged: partnership, networking and the relation between institutional involvement and personal investment as an important feature of the knowledge transfer process. When processing the text, we observed that in the context of the imposed themes, several other emerging themes – became obvious. Examining the differences and relationships between them, we finally grouped those emergent themes into clusters, and, therefore, our findings will be thus organized.

Context - The museum and its network: public authorities & audiences

Public authorities

Providing context information is always essential when doing qualitative research; therefore, in the following lines, we will sketch the current socio-economic environment in which museums in Romania are functioning. In the following lines, we will address the relationship between museums and local or national authorities through the lens of financing, as well as the relationship between museums and their general audience, via the number of visitors. Considering the relation between museums and their most significant stakeholders only from a narrow point of view, in this case, the financial one, will, for sure, provide a limited explanation to the overall situation. However, the financial argument was so frequently mentioned within the interviews that a brief overview of museum funding and functioning is needed.

The proliferation of „private museums“ and collections is a growing phenomenon in Romania also, and letting aside all the discussions related to whether or not those establishments might be considered museums as defined by ICOM – they do respond to a need within the Romanian society. Nevertheless, the vast majority of museums are public owned museums and they are regulated by multiple laws (e.g. The Museum Law (311/2003) and The Law for the mobile national cultural heritage at a national level), other national regulations (such as executive orders issued by the Minister of Culture) and local regulations (applied for those institutions that are subordinated the local administration, county councils or town councils). Besides the legal requirements regarding the use of the national heritage (conservation, protection, etc.), the museums' activity depends upon the national or the local administration in terms of human resources and financial resources. The museums are able to apply for national grants (one of the most accessed national funding programs is run by the Ministry of Culture, through the Administration of the National Cultural Fund) or to international grants (research, conservation, etc.) or to become a beneficiary of various European funds. Private grants and sponsorships seem to be an exception within the museum sector. Local sponsorships seem to be tight to interpersonal relationships. Each of those specific

funding options has its own rules and requires a different approach in terms of fulfilling all the criteria needed to become an eligible main applicant or a partner in a consortium. It is therefore important to point out that good, long-term relations with the local and or national authority as well as with other public institutions are mandatory for the good work of the museum activity.

As public-owned institutions, museums (as well as other cultural institutions) are managed by a general manager whose selection, activity and evaluation are regulated by the Executive Order (189/2008 and subsequent modifications). Ideally, a manager contract lasts for 4 years. The best management project is selected by a commission formed by representatives of the public authority and independent experts. In practice, the initial project counts very little if the financial resources are not there to meet the expected needs. Every year, a minimal activity plan is proposed by the manager and approved by the public authority. In times of severe financial shortage, this provision might be used by the public authority in order to downsize the funds allocated to the museum.

Museum audiences

According to the most recent available data (The Cultural Consumption Barometer, 2018, p. 90), the average museum visitor has the following characteristics: 18-29 years old or 50-64 years old, medium or higher education, an annual income above the national average income, residing in Bucharest and its surroundings or in the northeastern part of the country (the NUTS North-East development region). The same study reveals that, at the national level, during the last year, the majority of respondents have never visited cultural venues outside their residence-town or village. Only 8% of respondents visited a museum outside their home town as opposed to churches (15%) and palaces and fortresses (10%). When it comes to Bucharest, the overall situation is better (67% of respondents visited a cultural venue outside their city), but the museums don't score better, on the contrary: 7% of the respondents residing in Bucharest declared that they visited a museum in another town (p. 89).

Usually, the cost of a ticket is considered to be moderate (excepting famous palaces, blockbuster exhibitions, and some recently refurbished/redesigned museums, which are „expensive”). Museums do not rely solely on their selling tickets in order to boost their own revenues, although the public authority is increasingly encouraging them to organize activities that rather bring money than spend them.

Findings

Networking – defining a practice

Networking is, per se, a new concept for the organizational culture of people working in state institutions. Sometimes it is used in its English form by managers/employees that are familiarized with the new management language. The practice of exchanging information and ideas based on a common profession or special interest, usually in an informal social setting is, of course, a current one at all levels. But instead of being named as such (networking) within the interviews, it emerges under various names or is described through examples underlying its functional role. As previously mentioned, within our interviews, networking is a structural theme associated with other main themes, such as knowledge transfer and partnerships.

Seeing the professional network as a set of personal contacts is one way of considering the idea of networking. Through this perspective, networking becomes instrumental in solving concrete problems in various situations. Also, networking is considered a safeguard to the delays or blockages of bureaucracy or to the risk-taking involved by participating in a common project.

The association between networking and personal contacts occurs usually in contexts where bad experiences are recounted, or when the respondent seems to believe that there is an uneven relationship between the investment one puts in a project and the results.

„Everything is going very well [ironic tone of voice]. We use 3-4-5 contacts that we personally have, and we really help each other. At an institutional level, things [regarding partnership] don't work, because there is too much bureaucracy. (...) One uses personal contacts, between the manager and people that one previously knows [before becoming a manager]. You have a connection since before you had the

current management position, and then you have all the trust you need to call someone and to ask for advice, and that someone helps you for the best as he can". (B.T.)

„You have to know the partners, especially in national and international projects, you have to know that you may count on a bunch of people that won't cheat, that are good workers, fair play and so on. It matters to know the persons you are working with". (D.S.)

[when thinking about exchanging objects in order to organize a joint exhibition] "I call X, and Y and Z, and who knows who – Do you have something to give (for exchange) but something not too expensive in terms of insurance? That person is thinking ... Ok, how much is it the insurance ?" (A.N.)

Seeing the professional network in terms of having some form of personal connection with the representatives of other organizations or institutions occurs also when the activities considered as being the result of a partnership are „day to day" activities, like organizing events or school visits. Avoiding misuse and/or failure seems to be the guiding principle for this type of thinking about a network.

On the other hand, networking is seen as a tool for growing projects and enriching activities when it is correlated with a project-centered vision about the museum as a pivotal institution, that connects the public/the community, the heritage and various third parties or stakeholders (local and central public authorities, other public institutions, NGOs, researchers either at a national or international level). It is not the number of partnership that defines a vision where networking and partnership are central to the museum activity; it is their perceived added value to the current activities of the museum as well as to those one-time projects.

"Few museums have a heritage so rich and so complex that they are able to cover a large area of activities (...) or they need specialists in a variety of domains [that they can't possibly cover]." (C.N.)

(...) in many cases, especially in the current economic situation, there is a need for... lacking human resources and financial resources, we need partnerships in order to cover this shortage, but also to increase and achieve a greater variety of in activities that we propose to the public". (A.M.)

(...) we usually think about the scale of the project, the funding level and the concrete results that we intend to achieve". (E.V.)

Networking – The survival mode on

Professional networking seen as the opportunity to interact with peers and exchange information via a professional association is barely on the radar of our respondents. All the museums are members in at least one professional association or they are involved in another type of NGO. But their affiliation does not pop-up immediately when discussing the general topic.

There are three types of attraction poles in terms of professional networks:

- (1) a national museum network (RNMR – Rețeaua Națională a Muzeelor din România)
- (2) international / associations (e.g. ICOM, The Association of Museums in America)
- (3) specific national or local networks (The Open Air Museums Association and a regional NGO grouping all the cultural institutions and NGOs from that region).

With few exceptions, the respondents are working within museums that are affiliated to the RNMR. Also, with few exceptions, they seem to consider that the goals of RNMR are too large/ambitious for the institutions they are working in. Despite this, the extent to which they use the resources and the opportunities provided by the RNMR is considered to be low. There is a connection between the perceived lack of resources (financial resources) and the use of RNMR opportunities, namely the respondents that have discussed multiple times about the problem of underfinancing tend to participate very little in RNMR projects as partners.

"(...) with RNMR there are 7 pluses and 2 minuses ... those two being that we have to pay a member fee and the accountant does not understand why we are paying it. And the second one is that our energies are absorbed within Museums meet Museums [an annual event, organized in Bucharest and gathering museum professionals from all over Europe]. The main plus is that we have the opportunity to change

exhibitions between us. This is a good thing. The problem with exchanging exhibitions [via an RNMR application form] - is that they are too restrictive. I don't have an architect; I don't have a poster or flyers ... Those things are suitable for greater exhibitions (). We are not meeting the requirements". (B.T.)

(..) "RNMR – our museum is a member, but just a member that pays its contribution and benefits from all that the Network has to offer, its projects and events; it is a great benefice." (A.M.)

Regarding the international associations, only one respondent has voluntarily named ICOM in relation to „professional associations”, in a negative context: *„In my opinion, they are going down, there are a lot of public persons from the museum area that consider ICOM to be basically non-existent... they are not dynamic and they don't communicate enough on the internet ... when considering the new communication tools, they are not at all present and this is a pity". (E.V.).* The second occurrence of ICOM is made in relation to the American Museum Association, and it refers to the financial incapacity of becoming an institutional member: *„they have too high a fee for our museum". (A.M.)*

The other international association named is the Association of American Museums: one respondent is a member there. Again, the correlation between the opportunities they offer and the institutional capacity to benefit from them is in direct relation with the perceived economic situation: *„I am but a member who pays his contribution, and this enables me to have access to information and to the American literature on museums" (A.M.)*

National and local networks are mentioned only in three separate instances. Due to the specificity of the museums represented by our respondents, the Open Air Museum Association is mentioned in two interviews. Another network mentioned by one of the respondents federates cultural organizations (institutions, NGOs) from a specific region. The low frequency of international, national and local networks mentioned might be due to the „researcher effect”, as the focus of the interview is on museums and on their knowledge transfer process. At the time of the interview, if the respondents were not involved in any projects via a specific network, then they had the tendency not to mention it, even if they could be described as „non-active members” of those same networks.

Conclusion

The interviews show a high concern in social networks. The bureaucratic ones are considered to a lesser extent, even if most of the museums in the sample are part of such structures, and the outcomes associated with them are positively evaluated. Similar to the case of Italian museums (Bagdadli, 2003), the Romanian ones are also concerned with economic efficiency and, especially, with process explanations as main outcomes of networking. The study reveals that the main sought outcomes are better knowledge flows mechanism, followed by cultural co-creation. The main findings presented here are related to core components related to the usage of networking within museums management strategy: the how and the what.

On one hand, how a manager defines his network approach seems to be related to the type of projects in which he is involved. When speaking about networking, – all the managers are discussing in fact about the need to collaborate in order to tackle the lack of resources a museum is always confronted with. This is the case both for the managers that are considering networking rather as a set of personal contacts as well as of those for which networking is firstly related to professional/institutional collaboration. However, the lack of resources takes many shapes, as the discussion is not limited to the lack of funding: not having the needed number of employees, or lacking specialists on various niches, or being quite limited in the number and type of artifacts – all those aspects are mentioned amongst the reasons that shapes the way a manager to builds networks and partnerships.

On the other hand, what kind of networks are really functioning and what kind of benefits they bring to members are issues mentioned in connection with the projects developed within the museum. As members of a national or international network, museums have the possibility to access a series of resources (mainly informational) but also to participate in projects or conferences. However, not all museums are able to really benefit from those resources. Feeling connected to one's professional world seems to be a feature valued both by museums who are actively using the opportunities provided by their professional networks, as well as those who are involved in fewer projects and partnerships.

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