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THE "STARFISH" OF CULTURAL DIPLOMACY: SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE TOOLBOX OF MUSEUMS

Ori Brafman and Rod A. Beckstrom begin their famous book *The Starfish and the Spider* with a brilliant metaphor that aims to describe a sophisticated nature of decentralized organizations or social structures that have emerged in the last decade with the advent of the social media on the Internet. A "spider" and a "starfish" are two metaphorical symbols used by the authors to refer to traditional top-down organizations (spiders) and newly evolved open structure decentralized networks (starfish). (Brafman, Beckstrom 2006) The great excitement about the new social structures facilitated by the technological advance online can be traced in a number of recent publications. (Brafman, Beckstrom 2006), (Shirky 2009), (Bruns 2008) All of these books enthusiastically argue that the development of new social technology has redefined how global communication is conducted and suggested new approaches to engage with diverse communities around the world. "Social networks", "decentralized social structures", "open source communities", "*produsage* society" – all these terms refer to one and the same social phenomenon embracing new ways of generating and sharing content in a global net community characterized by such principles as open communication, decentralization of authority, and freedom of creation, production and sharing. The development of such open source communities on the Internet was facilitated by social media tools. Social media uses Internet and web-based technologies to disseminate information through social interaction and transforms media monologues (one to many) into social media dialogues (many to many). Social applications are designed to democratize information by allowing larger audiences to become active content producers rather than passive content consumers. Andreas Kaplan and Michael Haenlein define social media as "a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user-generated content." (Kaplan, Haenlein 2010: 59)

A lot of works have been produced to describe the changes in the agenda and major objectives of public diplomacy being altered in the age of social media communications. Though interesting attempts have been made to frame public diplomacy (Fisher 2008) and cultural diplomacy (Leadbeater 2010) in the new realm of emerging social phenomena, there is still little clarity about what exactly "open source" approaches mean when it concerns international work of major national cultural organizations. This paper addresses this problem by starting a discourse that can be used and further advanced by such important cultural institutions as museums. The study questions the potentials of social media to reach global audiences within the agenda of museums' international

practices. Specifically, the essay looks closely at international social networks on the Internet through a multifaceted prism of geographical, cultural, social, and political diversity; and critically analyses the abilities of the social media to represent international publics on the Internet as a democratic and inclusive community. The paper aims to demonstrate the opportunities and constraints brought by social media to the cultural diplomacy initiatives of museums. To address this task the paper starts with opening a discussion about the transforming objectives of cultural diplomacy in the XXI century. The following parts contextualize the international Web 2.0 practices of museums within the agenda of cultural diplomacy and measure the potentials of social media to help museums to outreach to wide and diverse global populations.

Cultural diplomacy, a narrow stream of public diplomacy, was defined by the US political scientist and author, Milton C. Cummings, as "the exchange of ideas, information, values, systems, traditions, beliefs, and other aspects of culture, with the intention of fostering mutual understanding." (Cummings 2003) Though the important role of such exchanges in international relations was recognized a long time ago and has been extensively exercised for many years in different countries, a new generation of actors – such as social media and Internet communications services – has accentuated its key objectives. Some publications reveal that cultural diplomacy is undergoing a period of intense changes. (Bound 2007) Although "the ability to persuade through culture, values and ideas" is considered a more effective power as opposed to so called "hard power"(Nye 2004), image cultivation, propaganda, and marketing-oriented activities (Melissen 2006:3) have proved useless and outdated diplomatic strategies in a new global environment. Politicians, diplomats, academics and other key stakeholders have been actively engaged in finding new effective approaches of cultural diplomacy aiming at "multilateral cooperation with a diverse range of international actors that is based on dialogue, understanding, and trust."(Institute of Cultural Diplomacy 2010)

Exciting new opportunities and powers of new media tools have transformed the requirements of diplomacy that "moves towards engaging with foreign audiences" in a new way. (Melissen 2006:13) As British Diplomat Robert Cooper emphasized, "success in diplomacy 'means openness and transnational cooperation'. Such openness and multi-level cooperation "call for the active pursuit of more collaborative diplomatic relations with various types of actors", that can be better facilitated by social media tools. (Melissen 2006:5)

The potential of social media to reach wider, diverse audiences and establish communication in a faster and easier mode with a variety of different actors has been recognized by many countries. Though the process of integration of new technologies is slow and in many cases is retarded by economic challenges and political issues, wealthy countries with leading economies in Europe and North America enthusiastically advocate for adding social media to the toolbox of public and cultural diplomacy. For example, the report Cultural Diplomacy produced by the British Council in 2007 proposes that the new technologies should become "the basis for innovative new working strategies" and online tools "should reflect the full range of possible contributions to cultural diplomacy."(Bound

2007:14) Furthermore, the authors of the report advise to address their recommendations as a matter of urgent priority in order to make the UK "stay ahead of the pack on cultural diplomacy."

On the international level new media opportunities have been discussed in a number of conferences organized by a variety of international organizations, for example UNESCO. In May 2010 in Geneva UNESCO hosted a High Level Debate on Social Networking at WSIS Forum 2010 that discussed the increasing popularity of social networking including blogs and wiki as new tools of international communication and political and social implications of platforms based on Web2.0 applications for knowledge societies. (UNESCO 2010) As a result of the debate, panellists concluded that "social networking tools have tremendous potentials to promote freedom of expression and political and social cohesion" and are able to "foster all forms of human rights."

In order to implement new directives of social media integration into the complex fabrics of cultural diplomacy initiatives, new options are actively explored "for supporting the development of the online aspect of the work of cultural institutions."(Bound 2007:69) In many countries museums have traditionally served as leading cultural institutions comprising the national resources and aiming to build cultural bridges across borders whether by developing cultural tourism or by facilitating diplomatic dialogue with foreign nations. David Anderson in his report commissioned by the UK Department for Culture, Media and Sport indicates that museums as diplomatic actors are able to communicate "across boundaries of language, culture, and time."(Anderson 1999) Furthermore, as high profile public organizations, museums can use the Internet "as a tool to form (often ad hoc) activist groups to influence public opinion."(National Museums Directors' Conference 2002:8) Because the social needs of contemporary audiences have changed, cultural diplomacy actors have to find new approaches to "influence" perceptions of foreign publics. As Howard Besser, one of the authors of the book *Wired Museum* predicted, public would come to "view culture less as something to consume and more as something to interact with", (Besser 1997:121) museums have to adapt to Web 2.0 standards and actively engage in social media activities in order to exercise this "soft power" in a more delicate way.

Many museums around the globe are increasingly using social media technology to reach audiences outside their physical walls. (Huffington 2010) Social media indeed gives museums additional opportunities to build online communities, both on their own websites and on popular international networks like Facebook or Twitter, which potentially can extend their cultural outreach beyond national borders. As the American Association of Museums and International Council of Museums at UNESCO indicate, the notion of public or audience is central to the whole conception of museums. Museums strive to make collections available to larger and more diverse audiences from geographic, cultural, and social perspectives. (AAM 2010) (ICOM 2010) Cultural diplomacy initiatives have always been very selective, especially in cultural exchanges, because these kind of programs gave opportunities to only a limited number of the most talented artists or the most valuable art collections to go abroad as cultural ambassadors. Also, financial challenges and time limits

imposed significant constraints on the sizes of the audiences that could be potentially reached through such exchanges. On the one hand, social media and Web 2.0 activities provide a more democratic environment and facilitate a cross-cultural exchange on a bigger scale in terms of the cultural content being shared and in terms of the sizes of the audiences that gain an access to this content. The Chair of Arts Council England Liz Forgan in her inspirational Media Festival Arts speech enthusiastically advocates for wider use of the social media that enables cultural institutions to work more effectively to reach new audiences. Specifically, she emphasizes the opportunities brought by social media to best distribute and promote art and culture on a global scale by making the arts " …a powerful ambassador abroad, demonstrating the creativity, vibrancy and diversity of 21st century Britain." (Forgan 2010)

Though the use of digital technology and social media have indeed high potential to spread information further and faster, on the other hand, the geographical boundaries of such an international outreach still have certain limits which are often ignored in the rhetorical discourse about the new media powers. According to the Nielsen Report, social networking, blogging and sharing content (music, video, photography, etc) are the fastest growing online activities, increasingly popular among the two-thirds of the world's online users. (Nielsen 2009) Arts Council England indicates that millions of Britons daily connect to the arts and cultural sector through social media. Therefore, "over 40,000 people track the Royal Opera House, and over 58,000 the British Museum, through Facebook; while FACT in Liverpool has 7,000 Twitter followers."(Arts Council England 2010:4) Nevertheless, the share of online users who can be potentially targeted through social media is rather high in the circle of wealthy countries with strong economies, it is important to admit that in many less economically developed countries the online activity of major population is significantly lower. This fact seriously questions the ability of museums as cultural diplomacy actors to create democratic online communities which embrace the diverse world populations and where the voices of representatives from various cultural backgrounds can be equally heard. However, the recent report of the Pew Research Center points out that increasing online participation of people from less economically developed countries is only a matter of time. The research reveals that the low level of online engagement in these countries is mainly due to the fact that they have a limited access to the Internet, rather than there being a lack of interest in online social networking. (Pew Research Center 2010)

Though now the digital divide is indeed imposes significant constraints on the audiences diversity on the social Web, Internet political censorship exercised by the governments of some countries presents an even more subtle issue that is often being overlooked by social media evangelists. For example, China censors Internet information and blocks politically sensitive Web content including social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube." (Cara 2010) The problem of the Internet freedom is in the heart of the rhetorical discourse about the 21st century human rights and democracy (Foreign Policy 2010). However, this international call of political leaders from

the global west is a weak force that can aid to change the present situation; as a result, museums are restricted to use social media for cultural diplomacy outreach in some countries.

Though the geographical distribution of social media audiences in museums online communities has future potentials to become more diverse, there are certain social boundaries that prevent the equal use of the Internet by populations from varied social backgrounds. American scholars C. Witte and Susan E. Mannon in their book *The Internet Use and Social Inequality* point out that the changing nature and uses of the Internet reflect today's social inequalities. (Witte, Mannon 2009) Their study goes beyond the discussion about the digital divide and reveals that although Web 2.0 has become a "repository of collective intelligence, a platform for information sharing, and a vehicle for collective interaction and expression," it has a strong potential to alienate some groups of individuals. Therefore, very young or very old population, as well as people with lower income do not use social media as often and as willingly as other social groups do. (Witte, Mannon 2009: 10-23) Also, all those without a certain level of Internet savvy and without a consistent interest in the kinds of information brought to the Internet stay away from social media and therefore cannot be reached through it by museums. Their research is well supported by empirical data that illustrates that Web 2.0 works best for the Internet users who tend to be young or middle aged, educated and well-off. (Witte, Mannon 2009)

Contradicting these findings, the most recent report of the Pew Internet Center reveals that older people are becoming as skilled online as younger ones. "According to the 2010 Generations report and American Life project…certain key Internet networks are becoming more uniformly popular across all age groups."(Gahran 2010) Nevertheless, the income of the Internet users can still be an issue and can isolate people with lower earnings from equal social media use on a regular basis. Thus, the research of the Pew Internet Center indicates that among USA population only 57% of people with income less than $30,000 use Internet, while 95% of those whose earnings that exceed $75,000 are the most frequent and regular Internet users. (Jansen 2010)

While many museums work towards social inclusion and have been actively involved in developing activities and discussing issues that have characterized their approach to social inclusion agenda, (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) social inequalities imposed by the Internet can significantly undermine these objectives of museums both on national and international levels. Going even deeper in the analysis of the online audiences it is important to differentiate between online museums' audiences and physical museums visitors. As the book *Museums Informatics* indicates "Virtual museum visitors are different from those that actually visit museums onsite; there are different motivations, different reasons and different expectations from the interaction with the museum."(Marty, Jones 2008:192) Physical museum goers are looking for high quality experiences that can pay off their investments of time, effort and money. On the contrary, a virtual museum visitor

can "explore a museum in their pyjamas at any time of the day or night, as long as they have a computer and Internet connection." (Marty, Jones 2008:192) This finding does not indicate that the motivations in the virtual world are less strong. However, according to the literature review presented in the book, among the most common motivations of the online museums' visitors are gathering information for an upcoming visit to the physical site or research for specific content information both self-motivated and assigned. These findings imply that audiences brought to online museums through Internet browsing or via social media are probably not looking for receiving initial cultural experiences that can only be gained onsite in the interaction with real cultural objects. On the contrary, online audiences are possibly seeking to extend their experiences beyond the physical walls of museums or to connect to cultural content in a different form for educational or entertainment purposes. Nevertheless, it is more important to find out the motivations of those international online museums' visitors who have never been to these museums and have a low chance to visit them. This segment of online audiences is probably the most interesting for museums from the perspective of cultural diplomacy initiatives, because cultural diplomacy aims at sharing cultural content to make the arts truly accessible to new audiences and thus enlarge the cultural outreach. There is a debate in the literature regarding whether digital copy of cultural objects can indeed exert a cultural impact of the same strength as the actual physical objects. (Baudrillard 2000) (Cameron 2007) (Well 2002) Some authors believe that in the process of digitization cultural objects lose their meanings and significance because they are being de-contextualized from their cultural environments. (McTavish 2006) American journalist, Arianna Huffington, points out that the main museum's mission is to provide visitors with "resonance and wonder... or catharsis" and questions whether it is possible "to use social media to support that mission without undermining the essential art experience that allows us to connect with something larger than ourselves."(Huffington 2010) Without doubt, people-to-people cultural exchanges and touring exhibitions abroad have indeed more powerful potentials to provide better quality cultural experiences to those people who are directly involved in these programmes. Social media cannot compete with these activities in strength and the quality of cultural impact that can be exerted on foreign publics. "New technologies cannot substitute for the direct encounter of our senses with the material cultures of the present and the past. But they have the potential (which has not been realized so far) to complement, enhance, and extend the cultural experience in new ways, and share it with new audiences." (Marty, Jones 2008:154) Therefore, social media can be very useful to cross-cultural exchanges and exhibitions to get larger promotion among wider audiences and encourage people for getting their first experiences in other countries' arts and culture.

Social media has indeed revolutionized communications by providing a stable and affordable platform for ongoing dialogue that goes beyond national boundaries among European and Northern American countries. This specifically applies to communication among museums' professionals both on the national and international levels who enthusiastically engage in social media debate regarding

the changing nature of the audiences that transforms museums' marketing, PR, educational, curatorial, and diplomatic activities. In summation, it is important to emphasize that the excitement about the powers of social media in most cases overshadow many issues that arise when new technologies are employed to serve cultural institutions in their communication activities. This essay touches upon only one of those issues and looks at the online audiences' diversity from the cultural, social, political and geographic perspectives. This is the smallest part of the multidimensional complex framework that embraces a broad range of issues questioning the abilities of contemporary museums to transform their institutional nature in order to exercise cultural diplomacy of the Web 2.0 standard. These issues include strong tensions between the museums' authority and a demanding power of the audiences to co-create and co-curate cultural content. Also, the ongoing debate is progressing regarding the level of interactivity being allowed to museums visitors both onsite and online to connect to art works; the educational potential of social media; the museums' community relationship mediated by new technologies, and many more. While these hot questions remain unsolved, this essay attempts to start a conversation that addresses social media as a complex phenomenon that can be further researched from various perspectives within the framework of cultural diplomacy initiatives of museums. The example of museums presented in this essay as influential and important cultural diplomacy actors questions the whole conception of the new fashionable Web 2.0 trends in cultural diplomacy. How many of the "starfish" core principles can cultural diplomacy actually tolerate and apply without losing its meaning and eroding its major objectives? International practices and cross-cultural activities of contemporary museums can significantly enhance their efficiency if cultural mangers of the 21st century address this question with a genuine goal not to find easier ways to facilitate cultural diplomacy initiatives, but to build a truly democratic, inclusive, and diverse cultural community with the help of new technologies.

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