ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Cultural diplomacy under the "digital lockdown": pandemic challenges and opportunities in museum diplomacy

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Abstract

The article analyzes the case of museum diplomacy during the Covid-19 global outbreak to illustrate two important trends that were reinforced in the condition of the pandemic. First, it argues that digital innovations achieved by cultural institutions in their international communication in the conditions of mass closures and national lockdowns significantly accelerated and even further legitimized digital diplomacy (Bjola et al. in Hague J Dipl 14(1–2):83–101, 2019). During the Covid-19 crisis, for instance, the volume of digital cultural production and its global consumption rate have dramatically increased (UNESCO in Report "Culture & COVID-19: Impact and Response Tracker." https://bit.ly/3iQLN74, 2020b), paving more reliable avenues for digital communication and even diplomacy. Second, the pandemics prompted cultural actors to take institutional initiatives and complement official cultural diplomacy exchanges, which due to the travel boundaries either temporarily ceased to exist or considerably slowed down.

Keywords Cultural diplomacy · Digital diplomacy · Museum · Covid-19 · Digital heritage · Livestreaming

Cultural diplomacy has traditionally been a strategic instrument of national governments to achieve foreign policy objectives. Nation states have employed cultural diplomacy to facilitate cross-cultural events or a series of cultural activities among different countries to achieve political or economic goals in the international arena. Defined as an "exchange of ideas, information, art and other aspects of culture between countries to improve mutual understanding" (Cummings 2003, p. 1), cultural diplomacy has always been a tool to communicate to the outside world through human-to-human contact. The crisis caused by the Covid-19 pandemics, though, significantly shifted priorities and focus in international collaborations, while challenging cross-cultural communication in the global context. The cultural sector and artistic exchanges have been heavily affected by the new realities of travel restrictions and protection regulation measures. A global survey among 737 respondents from 45 countries across five continents, revealed that in the

performing sector 62% of all international events in 2020 were cancelled while 38% postponed (CINARS 2020). UNESCO (2020a) reported that due to Covid-19, 95% of all museums worldwide, which is about a hundred thousand museums across countries, were closed in May 2020 and did not reopen throughout the year.

Under these conditions, disrupted international programs, cancelled traveling shows and exhibitions, postponed international art residencies and eventually nonfunded commissioned work from artists abroad made cultural diplomacy very difficult, if not impossible, to implement. Such an interrupted exchange of people, arts and cultures across borders, has especially been devastating for cultural diplomacy, that has always been based on two-way flow of information providing opportunities for people-to-people connections and engagements (Melissen 2005; Parkinson 1977). With the mobility of the population around the world decreased by 73% (Nouvellet et al. 2020), could we assume that the Coronavirus crisis completely eliminated cultural diplomacy?

This piece looks at the case of museum diplomacy during the Covid-19 global outbreak to illustrate two important trends that were reinforced in the condition of the pandemic. First, it argues that digital innovations achieved by cultural institutions in their international communication in the conditions of mass closures and national lockdowns

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significantly accelerated and even further legitimized digital diplomacy (Bjola et al. 2019). During the Covid-19 crisis, for instance, the volume of digital cultural production and its global consumption rate have dramatically increased (UNESCO 2020b), paving more reliable avenues for digital communication and even diplomacy. Second, the pandemics prompted cultural actors to take institutional initiatives and complement official cultural diplomacy exchanges, which due to the travel boundaries either temporarily ceased to exist or considerably slowed down.

Specifically, this article demonstrates how museums under the pressure of the global Coronavirus outbreak served as non-state actors of cultural diplomacy navigating online avenues to support a cross-cultural exchange and dialogue. Historically, museums have remained key actors of cultural diplomacy. Their travelling exhibitions and professional exchanges have always empowered rich and diverse museum collections to communicate political messages beyond national borders, directly contributing to foreign policy agenda of their nation states (Arndt 2005). In the last two decades museums have transformed into key actors of "soft power" (Lord and Blankenberg 2015), in many cases operating without government commission or control and increasingly through digital and new media technologies, expanding their power and reach across political and cultural borders (Grincheva 2019, 2020). During the pandemic situation in the past two years these development trajectories inescapably reinforced.

The global outbreak of Covid-19 virus has prompted museums and galleries worldwide to innovate as never before. Despite mass closures and tremendous loss of revenue under the pressure of 24/7 digital lockdown, many museums have increased their digital services, reaching in certain cases up to 150% of regular online attendance (NEMO 2020). For example, livestreaming of educational events, curators' lectures, and special events augmented its scope and reach during the pandemic crisis, offering new channels for museum diplomacy. For instance, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism of China reported that during the Spring Festival in 2020 museums across the country livestreamed more than 2,000 exhibitions online, attracting over 5 billion international visitors (CD 2020). The Palace Museum in Beijing, also known as the Forbidden City, has held several live stream guided tours broadcasted on CCTV news, attended by 10 million viewers from around the world and #FirstLiveofPalaceMuseum2020 gained over 100 million views (CD 2020).

New digital platforms empowered museum collections to travel wider and reach larger international audiences, establishing new virtual avenues for the national cultural projection. However, the rise of new disinformation and propaganda tools, like bots and fake news significantly disrupted the flow of global information exchanges, accelerating anxiety, negative sentiment and cross-cultural misunderstanding among online participants. The rapid global spread of the Covid 19 elevated waves of online populist movements and infodemic, spreading according to the World Health Organisation faster than the pandemic itself (WHO 2020). It also exacerbated a speedy circulation of conspiracy theories, especially concerning distrust in China (Kamali-Chirani 2021). From former US President Donald Trump's controversial usage of labels such as "the Chinese virus" to such viral memes as "Death Made in China," these infodemic wave incited racist attacks against Chinese in different countries (Viala-Gaudefroy and Lindamann 2021).

In the UK, for instance, according to the recent research conducted by the British Foreign Policy Group "the coronavirus pandemic lit a fire under the urgency of such an endeavor" hardening the relationships between China and the UK (BFPG 2021). Some of these repercussions include the disruptions of a cultural dialogue and restricted cultural exchanges, instigating the urge to strengthen important partnerships between both parties. In this climate, online engagements among Chinese communities and the UK museums proved to offer a valuable platform to address urgent tasks on the foreign policy agenda of both countries, trying to overcome public distrust on two sides.

A good example of this strategy is a highly successful livestreaming tour in Chinese language facilitated by the Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum in August 2020 on the most popular Chinese livestreaming platform, Kuaishou. Viewers of the V&A's Kuaishou tour were guided by the museum's Chinese social media consultant Lang Xiao and the Curator of the Asian Department Xiaoxin Li. The tour included the walk through the John Madejski Garden, Tippoo's Tiger, the China Gallery, Cast Courts and Fashion Gallery inviting audiences not only for explorations of the museum's diverse collections, but also engaging them in conversations about both countries' traditions, histories and cultures. The Curator stressed that interactive activities offered to visitors through live Q&A and quizzes, kept audience attention for several hours. Such a genuine enthusiasm and engagement worked really well to "address existing misunderstandings and soften public negative perceptions and hostility" (Li 2020).

With the largest collection of Chinese arts outside Asia, a very close long-standing relationship with China, and even its own outpost V&A Gallery at Design Society in Shenzhen, the museum is committed to sustain "active partnerships contributing to a greater understanding of the world" (Marchand 2020). Challenged by the pandemic crisis and its infodemic consequences, the museum remained loyal to its international vision to "champion the idea of a two-way conversation and cultural exchange, together with a more genuine, more nuanced engagement that goes deeper than any financial reward or national standing" (Marchand 2020).

If the traveling is no longer viable and it is not possible to engage with people in physical world, the museum's Chinese social media consultant Lang Xiao explained, it can continue build trust and understanding with its Chinese audiences through platforms were the majority exist in the pandemic reality (Xiao 2020).

In fact, the V&A communicated to its Chinese audiences through local social media since 2018. Back then it launched its WeChat account and established its Weibo profile, currently followed by 86,069 users, and even opened a store on e-commerce platform Tmall. In 2020 V&A became the first overseas museum to launch an official account on the Chinese livestreaming platform Kuaishou, reaching up to 170 million people daily (Li 2020). Li (2020) explained that most recently the livestreaming format has become a very popular form of communication and entertainment in China. Embracing this format and reaching Chinese people though their own social media helped the museum to engage with their target audiences on the emotional level, offering "a much richer multisensory experience" (Li 2020). The Curator emphasised that in a physical tour, a museum can involve maximum 30 people, and in the case of a livestreaming, the scope of the audience reaches millions of viewers who can connect from different parts of the world, amplifying their own excitements and hype. Indeed, just in two hours of livestreaming, the tour attracted 3.8 million Chinese viewers, almost reaching in numbers the annual onsite museum visitation, received in 2019 before the pandemics (V&A 2019).

Doubtlessly, new capabilities of digital technologies and online platforms have tremendously expanded the global reach of museums. However, it is questionable whether digital tools are able to improve or at least maintain the same level of cross-cultural relationships, which are based on human-to-human communication. The digital environment does not necessarily offer the climate of trust and privacy in conversations. Indeed, digital diplomacy in general, and online museum diplomacy in particular, have certain limitations. Specifically, a lack of physical contact between participants prevents the development of deeper personal connections. By contrast, traditional diplomatic exchanges involve long-lasting personal connections in which participants carry their positive personal experience to their home countries where they promote "international goodwill and understanding" (Mulcahy 1999, p. 22). Nevertheless, these brief contacts can be very productive in exposing online participants to new cultural knowledge. They can unearth cross-cultural stereotypes, stimulate interest in other people's cultures and traditions and even generate cross-cultural curiosity leading to personal engagements across countries (Grincheva 2020).

A global online exchange of cultural content and the ease of crossing borders through teleconference technologies further digitalized cultural diplomacy, a trend that slowly started several decades ago with cultural institutions building their first online representations and digitizing their heritage collections (Grincheva 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic speedily progressed these processes, challenging digital diplomacy with the raise of algorithmic cultures, artificial intelligence, data science, augmented and virtual reality. These changes are happening rapidly and dynamically, fostering technological innovations to simplify, yet simultaneously complicate, cross-cultural contact between people, communities and institutions. They also further transform cultural diplomacy by offering new channels of communication that empower non-state actors and engage them in new tasks and endeavours on the international arena.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author declare that they have no conflict of interest.

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