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Painting Shades of Gray: How to Communicate the History of Communism in Museums

Abstract

Communication of sciences / arts lies at the core of a museum public activity. It is a special type of communication, meant to make the collections and the domain of the expertise of the museum accessible to a wide public in order to fulfill the special cultural and social role that museums have in the contemporary society. This can not be achieved without the cooperation of visitors, as well as the museum stakeholders. For fruitful relationships, museums have to design their activity and public offer taking into account the characteristics as well as the interests of various segments of its audience. The present paper discusses the prerequisites for a successful museum exhibition. Special attention is given to designing an effective exhibition on the history of communism. By investigating the profile of the potential visitors for such an exhibition, the paper draws a framework to be considered when designing it. The discussion is timely, since in the last few years there are discussions and initiatives related with the establishment of a museum of communism.

Keywords: communicating history, museums, history of communism, communism exhibition, Romania

Introduction

Museums are constantly communicating with various segments of the public: to their visitors, to the scientists interested in their collections, to various stakeholders. Museums differentiate themselves from other organizations by making purposeful-communication with their visitors their main purpose. Any museum communicates primarily to educate the public in relation with its collections and its domain of interest, to engage the public into debating cultural values, in order to achieve its specific mission. Compared to other organizations, the communication processes in a museum are not primarily associated to public relations and marketing communication strategies, but with the reason of being of the museum. The means used to communicate are also different. Museums communicate mainly through their collections presented in exhibitions, as well as in the context of their public programs – especially the educational ones. The contemporary museum is a storyteller engaged into a stimulating dialogue with its publics, as well as a socio-culturally involved entity. Organizational communication in the classical sense of an organizational system, specific networks and strategies designed to support the managerial (and marketing) processes of that organization also exist in a museum.

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The present paper investigates how the communication strategy of a museum can be optimized, considering the mission of the museum and its visitors. In other words, several issues are under scrutiny: What is the framework that a museum has to consider when designing its main communication strategies (referring to transmitting the cultural values associated with its collections)? How are the visitors approached in order to better achieve the mission of a museum? What are the prerequisites of a successful museum communication? Since the theme investigated is of high complexity, therefore we concentrate our analysis only on history museums, particularly on history exhibitions dedicated to communism. The recent discussions on how to present communism in museums, as well as the debates around a museum of communism offer us the relevant framework and makes our investigation of actual interest for Romanian society. Our investigation identifies the points of reference that should be considered by a history exhibition on communism, proposed in Romania, in order to successfully communicate this sensitive subject.

The role of museums in contemporary society

Nowadays museums have a very active role in society, as the definition of the International Council of Museums underlines: *A museum is a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment* (icom.museum). Maybe this approach is too general, therefore specialists in the field of museum studies have elaborated on various specific aspects: a museum is a cultural animator (Gob & Drouguet, 2004, pp.50-51), is a space for socio-cultural dialogue, for debate and social engagement, of community development, a museum supports its communities, as well as a place of socio-cultural inclusion (Kavanagh, 1990, p.71; Karp et al., 1992; Ross, 2004; Crooke, 2007; Watson, 2007; Coffee, 2008; Simon, 2010). Increasingly the economic impact of museums is researched. As museums attract tourists (AECOM, 2013, p.54; Pes, 2014), they contribute to the revitalizing of cities and they make regions more appealing for investments (AECOM, 2013, p.56). Their contribution to the sustainable development is officially recognized and encouraged in the European Union (EU, 2014).

The educational role of any museum nowadays lies at the core of all these aspects. Education is not any more considered under a narrow perspective of "learning", of informing the public and making visitors remember various facts in relation with museum's collections or their associated domains. Learning in museums is not any more about knowing about sciences and arts, but about understanding and correlating the acquired information with the evolutions in contemporary society. In this context, museums have democratized, they are no longer places for elites but are of relevance for the wider public.

The specific museum-related educational processes could be very diverse and with significant impact, both at individual and social level, both in the context of private interaction with a museum and in the context of educational system (Garcia, 2012). Hooper-Greenhill (2007, pp.44-62) identifies the following categories of outcomes of museum education: knowledge and understanding, skills, attitudes and values, enjoyment - inspiration - creativity, and activity behavior and development. In such a context, museums developed their educational offer, as well as the variety of public programs proposed to various segments of their audience. The

as well as the variety of public programs proposed to various segments of their audience. The contemporary museum does not primarily take into account its collections when developing its public activity, but the "clients" – visitors as well as stakeholders. The contemporary museum is a visitor-centered museum (Ballantyne & Uzzell, 2011; Opreș, 2008, p.105). Museums have become active and complex socio-cultural centers (Zbucnea, 2014, p.31).

The public perceptions of museums changed accordingly. A study developed in Australia in 2005, shows that the most common views on the role of museums are: places for historical reflection, places of learning from the past to better cope with the future, and social activism (Cameron, 2005, pp.220-223). These evolutions also determined the diversification of museum discourses and instruments used to educate and communicate the collections to the audience. Among others, the internet offers nowadays a flexible support for interactive communication platforms therefore special educational websites and applications addressing teachers, families, youngsters or other segments of the public could be designed by museums to more effectively reach their publics.

We can notice a professional dynamism in the museums world, considering the evaluation of their status and their complex role in society. What are the factors leading to this dynamism? On the one hand, the increased professionalization in the domain, including the search for meaningful and relevant activity, is an aspect to be considered as a drive for change. On the other hand, the external pressures are also to be considered. For instance, Ballantyne and Uzzell (2011) consider that an important influencer of the recent evolutions concerning museums is the decline of public funding, which in turn determined museum to look for alternative resources. Some other factors should also be considered, such as the change of expectations of the wider public as well as public perceptions regarding museums. Statistics show a rather low interest in museums, all over the world, therefore museums are obliged to be innovative, flexible and dynamic, to redesign themselves to be more appealing and effective in their public activity. At the same time, the public perceptions of museums changed accordingly. A study developed in Australia in 2005, shows that the most common views on the role of museums are: places for historical reflection, places of learning from the past to better cope with the future, and social activism (Cameron, 2005, pp.220-223). These evolutions occurred in other societies too. Therefore, museums that would remain only factual and would not evolve according with their visitors expectations and needs risk to be neglected and forgotten by the public.

One indicator of the success of museums is their attendance figure. Considering the evolutions in modern society, as well as the impact of the internet, museums could reach their target audience online, too, and impact even those who are not visiting them. Nevertheless, for most museums, visitors are the main public to be considered. Museums still primarily communicate with those visiting them or participating in their public programs, and have few communication strategies for non-visitors or the online public.

Data generally shows an increase in the attendance of museums in the United States (AAM, 2010; AECOM, 2013, p.54) and in the most famous museums around the world (AECOM, 2013; Pes & Sharpe, 2013, 2014). Nevertheless, the data in the European Union reflecting the global situation of museums show a decrease in general interest between 2007 and 2013 (EU, 2013, p.8). In 2007 58% of the respondents declared they had not visited any museum in the past 12 months, while the same figure for 2013 was 62%. The numbers differ from country to country. In general, northern countries register higher attendance figures, the top being Sweden, Denmark, the Netherlands and the UK (EU, 2013, p.17). In these countries, more than 10% of the population declare they have visited museums at least 5 times a year.

The appeal of museums depends on the profile of their collections. Art museums worldwide seem to be the most interesting for the general public (AECOM, 2013). Visitation is also influenced by the entrance fees, as well as by their blockbuster offer.

Considering the specific interest in Romania, the picture is gloomier. According with recent European statistics, Romanians are the less interested in museums and the most exigent when evaluating the museum offer in their residence place (EC, 2013, p.26). 77% of the Romanians do not visit any museum in an entire year (EU, 2013, p.17). In many instances, they are "brought" to museums in organized (school) groups (CCCDC, 2010). The Barometers of Cultural Consume (CCCDC 2006, 2010) show a general low interest in museums in Romania, but a thin general increase is noted in 2012-2013 (www.insse.ro). The profile of the Romanian museum-goer is: highly educated, having elevated interest in the cultural offer of museums, less influenced by the facilities and additional opportunities offered by museums, interested in other cultural activities too (CCCDC, 2006, 2009, 2010).

It is difficult to explain the general lack of interest in museums in Romania. The only available data show that Romanian claim that they are not visiting museums because of lack of time, or because the offer is not diverse and of poor quality (EC, 2013, pp.5, 26). We consider that the low frequency of visitation could be related to an unappealing perception of museums in general, to the financial difficulties that Romanian museums are facing since the fall of communism (Bădică, 2010a, p.275), and also to the changing role of museums in the Romanian society – especially of history museums. Before 1989 history museums have been used as instruments of the official propaganda (Bădică, 2010a, pp. 275-279). Their role was not to represent history or to investigate historical evolutions, but to impose a certain vision on history, to support the nationalist ideology falsifying the historical memory (Ciugureanu, 2011).

Reframing history in museums is a very difficult and controversial topic, not just in Romania, but also in other former communist countries. The old perspective on how history should be presented in museums is still observable in many museums (Ciugureanu, 2011). The most common "solution" of museums with dealing with the historical changes after the second world war is to ignore them, even if the generally agreed discourse is anti-communist (Bădică, 2010a, p.276; Apor, 2011, pp.570-571). Communism and, especially, anti-communism still have a role in the political life in Eastern Europe (Mark, 2010), therefore discussing communism (in museums) as objectively as possible would be of interest for the wider public. Still, the process is difficult, considering the way Romanians relate themselves to communism (see further our research), as well as various individual and institutional (including political) legacies of communism (Pop-Eleches & Tucher, 2010; Stoica, 2012).

How museums communicate history

A proper strategy of science communication would lead to a successful museum / exhibition (Filippouliti, 2010). In addition to the approaches to be considered in this context, when planning a history exhibition some other issues should be considered. For instance, history is related to memory and communities that have produced a certain heritage (Kavanagh, 1990; Ciugureanu, 2011), therefore more personal reflection would be connected to the museum discourse and would influence its reception, compared to other science exhibitions.

Gavanagh (1990, p.61) draws attention on the ability of history exhibitions to touch the visitor personally. A rewarding experience in a history museum might be attained if curators

are concerned with qualitative aspects of knowledge transmitted, rather than with quantitative ones, ensuring a meaningful exhibition (Gavanagh, 1990, p.72). The aim would be to stimulate and promote discussions rather than control the discourse (Gavanagh, 1990, p.153). Therefore, it is important to have in mind not just the collections, but also the visitors when designing an exhibition. Even more, Smith (2014) argues that taking into account only an educational framework when designing an exhibition is not enough since visitors also engage emotionally and generate personal meanings of the perceived exhibits. The actual impact of an exhibition is not just a matter of its design, but also of its reception.

Since collections are extremely vast, the selection of the artefacts presented in a exhibition is extremely important to have an effective exhibition. Several criterias would be considered (Gavanagh, 1990, p.74) as well as a model to investigate the material objects in the collections (Elliot et al., 1994; Pearce, 1994). The result is a multi-faced interpretation of the heritage, and it has more to do with the present and future, rather than with the past (Tilley, 1994).

Therefore, another important issue museums have to consider is the profile(s) of its visitor(s). Not just the general public is interested in a history exhibition, but also professionals/experts in history: teachers, researchers, academics etc. All these categories are at the same time stakeholders of the museum, therefore it can not ignore them. The larger public itself has different levels of knowledge and interest in history and each visitors is looking differently at an exhibition. To better develop a successful history exhibition in this context, one has to consider the specific historical reasoning for each segment of the audience. Van Boxtel and van Drie (2004) propose a model for historical reasoning that might be useful in better designing a history exhibition, in shaping a more appropriate communication approach. Their model contains six components: a proposal of a claim and supporting it with argumentation, organizing information, use of sources, use of historical concepts, asking historical questions, and contextualization. The study of van Boxtel and van Drie on how novices and experts in history approach historical information shows that both categories are using both chronological and spatial frames, both connect new information with what they consider to be significant historical knowledge they already possess. Experts in history discuss more presented phenomena, investigate alternatives, and contextualize on the level of specific occurrences.

Other factors influencing the actual impact on the public of an exhibition is how interactive it is, as well as the personal agendas of visitors or their disposition (Rennie et al., 2010). By nature people are subjective, and therefore decode an exhibition in a large number of ways. Each museum experience is unique in its way. By exhibition planning and design, curators seek to structure the visitors experiences in order not only to attract them, but also to obtain a deeper outcome through transformative experience (Beghetto, 2014). Therefore, understanding how visitors experience an exhibition is extremely important.

The focal point of a museum (exhibition): the visitor

Museums have evolved together with the society, constantly changing their role and the way they relate to their audience. The contemporary museum is a visitor-centered museum (Ballantyne & Uzzell, 2011). This approach is effective not only in increasing the number of visitors, but also in ensuring its high impact and the reach of its specific mission.

Museums are continuously trying to attract new visitors or to increase the frequency of the visitation. The larger the number of visitors, the greater the chance museum has to reach

its mission. Therefore convincing those who have never visited museums to enter the museum is an important aspect of the marketing and communication strategies. In order to be successful in this endeavor, a museum has to understand why people avoid visiting it. When considering the Romanians who are not interested in museums, the most recent data shows that most of them claim the museum offer is not varied enough and of low quality, but also a significant part of them – of 22% - have no interest in any of the museum offer (EU, 2013, p.26). Again we stress that through adequate offer, as well as proper marketing and communication strategies Romanian museums could change this opinion for the benefit of the museum but also of those persons.

In order to better design the museum offers and exhibitions, the museum has to understand visitors and their pattern of visitation. The motives to visit or to participate in museums programs could be important points of reference when designing and communicating the museum offer (Zbucea, 2014, pp.35-36). An effective design of an exhibition does not take into account only conservation and esthetic aspects, but also the characteristics of visitors and the way they behave during their visit. A study developed in Bucharest by Zbucea and Ivan (2014) shows that there are two main patterns of visitation when considering frequent museum visitors: selective and broad-image visitors. The first type of visitors are highly-educated. These visitors are interested in only some sections of the museum, are not very keen in using the new technologies available in museum and they take part in the educational programs of museums. The second type tries to learn as much as possible when visiting, therefore they read the labels, they use the multi-media and other available equipment in the exhibition.

Visitor (and nonvisitor) research (Kawashima, 1999; Baril, 2001; Kelly, 2004; Griffin et al., 2005; Hooper-Greenhill, 2006; Zbucea & Ivan, 2008; Wallace, 2010; Dawson & Jensen, 2011) is essential to adequately design the museum offer. This is important to achieve the museum mission, since through its offer a museum transmits the information about its collections and its domain of expertise, thus educating the public or getting them involved in cultural social. The exhibitions and public programs are not only the main elements of the museum activity that justify its public existence, but also the principal communication tool between museum and society (Menezes de Carvalho, 2013, pp.77-78). Menezes de Carvalho argues that museums design and transmit their specific discourse using exhibitions, thus narrating their representation of the world and engaging visitors, transmitting values and cultural ideas. Exhibitions are not any more only spaces to present collections, they propose exhibits-related activities, they challenge visitors to interact with the cultural heritage / science, they involve willing visitors in debates and stimulate them to take position if the case. In order to be more effective in this context, exhibitions should be designed considering how visitors learn, perceive and process information, how they socialize and relate to the proposed topic (Leshchenko, 2013).

Modern museums do not just take into consideration what they know about their visitors, they also actively involve visitors in developing exhibitions (Zbucea, 2014, p.63) and empower visitors in all museum activities (Duarde Candido et al., 2013, pp.54-57). Visitor studies are also relevant in the context of designing and evaluation of museum offers (Zbucea, 2014, pp.70-72). Part of the aims of these studies is to evaluate the level of interest, as well as of knowledge regarding the theme proposed by an exhibition. For instance, if a person is not interested in what happened during communism, s/he would not visit such an exhibition unless it also makes reference to a topic of interest for her/him. Let's suppose somebody is not at all interested in communism but s/he is interested in fashion and cooking. Therefore, s/he might visit with great interest an exhibition presenting these topics in times of communism. The success of an exhibition on communism does not depend only on the level of in-

terest in the topic, but also on the level of specific knowledge somebody already possesses. If a visitor does not find new and interesting information, s/he would negatively perceive that exhibition and probably would recommend to others not to visit it.

The memory of communism in Romanian society

In the past few years, the reflections on the communist part of the Romanian history have been stimulated by discussions about the establishment of a museum of communism and the increase of temporary exhibitions dedicated to various aspects of the Romanian history during communism (Cristea, Radu-Bucurenci, 2007). Still, not even history museums propose a coherent and extended discourse on the period, some of them almost ignoring the evolutions after the Second World War (Bădică, 2010a, p.283; 2010c, p.85). It has been already mentioned that fresh and more visible interest in communism, as political, economic and social experience, is manifest throughout Eastern Europe (Apor, 2011).

A main promoter of a museum dedicated to communism in Romania has been, for the past few years, the National Network of Museums of Romania (NNMR). NNMR is not the only organization with such a project. The Institute for the Investigation of the Crimes of Communism has been involved in the development of several museums in former penitentiaries used during communism to imprison political opponents and exhibitions dedicated to the history of communism (<http://www.iiccr.ro>). The interest of an important part of the intellectual and political elites in Romania in such a museum is also proved by various debates in media in the last years, especially stimulated by the official damnation of communism.

NNMR proposes a project based on the design of Viviana Iacob (2012) which proposes a dynamic exhibition, a *laboratory-museum*, a place for open discussions around the exhibits, a place of experimentation involving the audience, aiming to facilitate the understanding of the complex social and economic aspects during communism, as well as aiming to come to terms with some sensitive issues that still torment the Romanian society (Iacob, 2012).

The latter aspect is extremely important, since it influences the social and political life of present-day Romania by shaping mentalities and attitudes such as the belief that the state is responsible for ensuring jobs for all the citizens, or nostalgia for the communist era. Data show a relatively high level of nostalgia in Romanian society (IRES, 2010; ICCMER 2010, 2011, 2012, Iacob, 2012) or maybe just an embellishment of the past as a reaction to the insatisfactions related to the present (Abraham, 2011). The level of nostalgia is measured by the mentioned studies as the number of persons who consider that during communism the life standard was higher. The number of nostalgics has increased in Romania between 1991 and 2004 from 26.3% to almost 45% (Rusu, 2013, p.49). The positive remembrance of communism, shared by part of society, is in opposition with most of the museum-discourse referring to that historical period (Bădică, 2010a, p.276). Therefore, part of the public would not be willing to accept the previously described approach of museums. Museums and their exhibitions must be more flexible and open to dialogue when addressing communism. Bădică (2010b, p.97) observes a shift in the approaches adopted lately in the studies on communism, being more objectives and detached compared to the previous studies that were more "black-and-white". Tileaga (2012b) also draws the attention on the necessity of a flexible and including discourse related to communism, observing that in the Romanian society mainly an elite-political discourse is to be heard. He also stresses that there is no "ultimate story" when

elite-political discourse is to be heard. He also stresses that there is no "ultimate story" when thinking about communism, and that the creation of a meaningful social memory of communism is necessary in order to fight political manipulation and ignorance (Tileaga, 2012a). These issues do not make the task of a museum / exhibition on communism easier, but give it more responsibility.

Several studies on the attitude of the Romanian society towards communism were developed by the Institute for Investigation of the Crimes of Communism (www.iiccr.ro). The latest available research, shows that less than half of the Romanians consider that the fall of communism has been beneficial (IICCMER, 2012, p.47). Those considering that the fall of communism has had negative impact on Romania (38%) live mainly in (poor) rural areas and are older adults. They are less likely to be visitors of a museum or exhibition, still they represent an important segment of the population and could influence their families. A potential interest in communism is suggested by the opinions of the respondents referring to the "distance" of the present society from the communist past: especially 40+ years old adults living in urban areas consider that Romania did not detach itself from its communist past (11%) or did detach itself but only in a small degree (40%) (IICCMER, 2011, pp.50-52). Therefore, communism is, for part of the Romanian society, a matter that is still connected with present-day realities. It suggests that it could be of interest for many Romanians to know more and to understand more about communism.

Interest in understanding communist times might be also high, when considering that only a quarter of Romanians consider that communism was "a bad idea" (IICCMER, 2011, p. 2). Most of the population considers that communism was "a good idea, wrongly implemented". The figures vary from study to study, but the levels registered are between 68% (IRES, 2010) and 43% (IICCMER, 2011, p.2). Nostalgia and frequent regrets of large segments of population regarding communism have been registered. Some indicators of these feelings are the following data: 18% of the population considers that communism was a good idea, well implemented (IICCMER, 2011, p.2), 38% believes that the instalment of the communism regime after WW2 was positive (IICCMER, 2011, p.5) even if most of them consider that it was imposed by outside forces (IICCMER, 2010, p.5), 37% of the population regrets the fall of communism (IRES, 2010), 41% would vote with Nicolae Ceaușescu as president (IRES, 2010), and 63% considers that the life standard was higher before the fall of communism compared to present times (IRES, 2010). All the studies show that the regret associated with communist times and positive evaluations are to be found amongst older adults, living in (poor) rural areas. Therefore, the way people see communism is directly related with the level of satisfaction with their present life. Probably the same factors influence similar nostalgia to be found in all former communist countries (Tileaga, 2012b).

Young people see communism differently. They appreciate to a higher degree the contemporary social and political situations and are stereotypical when describing communism (Petre, 2012, p.282). Some stereotypical views regarding communist times are found also in the study of Ciocea and Cărlan (2015). Young people associate communism with a certain human type: authoritarian, not flexible, old-fashioned (Petre, 2012, pp.278-280). Their opinions seem to be strong, most of them being shaped by the educational system, but also through family socialization (Petre, 2012, p.285). Nevertheless, the study of Ciocea and Cărlan (2015) suggests that the family experiences are not so influential. This may be also related to the fact that young people do not tend to engage too much in conversations about communism with members of their family (IICCMER, 2011, p.34) or even less with friends (IICCMER, 2011, p.38). An experiment conducted by Stanciugelu, Țăranu and Rusu (2013) suggests that

the young generation does not evaluate the cultural heritage associated with communism differently from the one associated with other historical eras. Therefore social and ideological tensions found amongst older generations when discussing communism are not present amongst those born after the fall of the communist regime in Romania.

13% of Romanians consider that pupils should not learn at all about communism, especially the younger generation (IICCMER, 2011, pp.27-29). Therefore the risk of failing to gain interest with a communist-related exhibition could be high amongst the young people, especially if the visiting experience is presented from an educational perspective. On the other hand, the study of Ciocea and Cărlan (2015) suggests that young (museum-goer) Romanians see museums in a "traditional" way, expecting them to educate.

The study of Pop-Eleches and Tucher (2010) investigates some patterns of thinking – mainly regarding the views on politics and evolutions in society – in former communist countries, compared to "capitalist" countries. It confirms that the impact of communism is not mainly related with having personal experiences of the period or with the length of living under communism (Pop-Eleches & Tucher, 2010, p.25). The same study suggests that the ideological preferences of the population in Eastern-Europe evolve continuously (pp.25-26), therefore they will pose constant challenges to a museum discourse on communism that could hardly avoid the ideological framework.

The memory of communism and private discussions on the topic are also factors influencing the interest in communism: 18% of the respondents talk about communism often and very often with their family, while 17% talk mostly with friends. About 40% of the Romanians never talk about communism on their social networks (IICCMER, 2011, p.33). The study previously done by IRES (2010) presents a different figure for the frequency of the discussions within family group - 69%. The differences could be explained by the time span between the two studies, as well as by the way questions were asked. Older persons (aged over 40 years old) consider communism to be a topic of discussions more than other age-groups (IICCMER, 2011, p.34).

Romanians do not consider themselves very informed regarding communism times (IICCMER, 2011, p.13), therefore a proper communication strategy could stimulate them to visit a museum / exhibition dedicated to various aspects of communism. There is a strong correlation between age and the level of information. The younger the respondent, the less informed s/he declares to be (IICCMER, 2011, p.14). Those living in rural areas are also less informed (IICCMER, 2011, p.14). The main sources of information considered by the larger public are: mass media (especially in the case of men and older adults), followed at great distance by the educational system and family (IICCMER, 2011, pp.8-11). The Romanian public would prefer to acquire knowledge of the communist period mainly through TV and radio shows, closely followed by documentaries (IICCMER, 2011, p.16). We stress that young persons did not mention mass media, as well as documentaries as much as adult population, preferring artistic films and school-related classes (IICCMER, 2011, p.19). Museums are not singled out in the questionnaire, therefore we do not know how interesting they would be considered by the wider public compared with the other communication channels.

Another element that suggests a potential interest for an exhibition / museum covering communism is that Romanians generally consider that pupils and students are poorly or extremely poorly informed (79%) about this topic, but it is important and very important (52%) for them to have proper knowledge on some issues regarding communist period (IICCMER, 2011, pp.20-26). Therefore, adults with families might encourage their children to visit exhibitions dedicated to communism.

The interest in communism might be also fueled by a bipolar view at the lever of society regarding the impact of communism on the present-day society. 21% of the population considers that it has had a positive impact, while 29% is convinced of the contrary (IICCMER, 2011, 45). This debate could be exploited both when designing an exhibition on communism, and when communicating it.

Public perception on a communism museum – a survey

Method

We conducted a sociological survey based on questionnaire using field operators. Data were collected from a non-probabilistic quota sample ($N = 219$) in București ($N = 66$), Iași ($N = 72$), and Sibiu ($N = 81$). Taking into account the fact that cultural consumption is very much dependent on education, we selected respondents, in all three cities, using education as a main criterium: 1/3 secondary education (high school completed) and 1/3 tertiary education (university degree) and 1/3 (post-university degree).

The questionnaire was structured on the following issues: 1) Respondents' opinions regarding how a exhibition on communism should look like; 2) Their interest in finding more information about communist period in Romania; 3) Respondents' general view on the communist time; 4) The perceived role of an exhibition about communism in Romania.

Results

Our research sample is well balanced on sex and the level of education (see Table 1). We selected mainly participants with high level of education in our sample (66.5% of the participants have university and post-university degree) and people bellow 36 years of age (59.6%) because previous research studies on museum visitors in Romania showed that those interested in visiting museums and with high frequency of visitation are young and college graduated. Table 1 presents sample structure on all three variables considered for quota sampling as well as significant differences on age subgroups ($t(217) = 29.31, p < .001$) and education sub-groups ($t(215) = 32.75, p < .001$).

Table 1. Sample structure.

		% (N)	M (SD)	Total
Sex	Women	54.3 (119)	—	219
	Men	45.7 (100)		
^a Age	19-24 years of age	27.1 (59)	2.79 (1.40) $t(217) = 29.31$ $p < .001$	219
	25-30 years of age	18.3 (40)		
	31-36 years of age	14.2 (31)		
	37-55 years of age	28.9 (63)		
	+55 years of age	11.5 (26)		
^b Level of education	Highschool completed	34.0 (75)	2.76 (1.23) $t(215) = 32.75$ $p < .001$	219
	University degree	35.0(75)		
	Post-university degree	31.5 (69)		

We got also a significant age difference in our sample between men and women ($M = 34.41$ – for women; $M = 38.55$ – for men; $t(216) = -2.11, p = .03$) and we consider this aspect significant in our further analysis.

When we asked respondents to rate their frequency of museum visitation, we got higher percentage compared to previous studies on national representative samples, described above: 41% of respondents declared they usually visit “between 2 and 4 museums in year time”; 11% declared they usually visit between “5 and 10 museums in a year”. Previous research studies conducted on national representative samples of adult population in Romania show that one third of population practically has never visited museums, whereas our research (on a sample of higher and medium educated adults) found a significant lower percentage (10%) for those who declared they usually do not visit museums. The differences between data recorded in our sample and those on the national sample could be explained by 1) the fact that our research has an over represented sample in terms of higher education, because we basically selected people who are potential visitors, taking into account the socio-demographic profile of the typical museums visitor (young, educated, from the urban area); 2) the fact that we conducted the research in three urban localities (Bucharest, Iași, Sibiu) that have establish a tradition in museum development. Therefore we can not generalize our findings at the national level.

How should a communism museum look like?

The participants associated a communism museum with categories that describe social and economic situation of that period. They perceive a communism museum as a place that depicts “Romanian relationships with other countries (81.3%), “economic situation” (77.1%) and “political evolution” (75.3%) at that time. They associate a communism museum with “individual life stories” (61.6 %) and “daily life activities” or “cultural life” (approximately 62%) to a lesser extend. Generally speaking, our respondents expressed high interests in seeing all the above mentioned categories in a communism museum (above 50% for each category). However, their agreement with an association between communism museum and macro-phenomena is higher: they perceive such a museum as dedicated to reveal the country’s social and economic situation at that time.

We did not find any gender or age differences regarding respondents’ perceptions on how a communism museum should look like. Still we found differences in terms of education level: people having college degrees appreciate more than those with high school degrees the fact that a communism museum could present “information about communism resistance” ($F(df = 4, 211) = 3.04, p = .01$). Similarly, those who frequently attend museums are more interested in finding information about “daily life in communism” $F(df = 4, 211) = 4.06, p < .01$, compared with those who have a lower visitation frequency. Also, respondents from Bucharest seem to be more interested in finding “information about communism resistance” in a dedicated museum than those from Iași and Sibiu.

Who is more interested in finding information about the communist period

Participants were asked about their level of interest in the Romanian history in general and in the history during communism time, in particular. Table 2 presents data about those who declare they are “extremely interested”.

Table 2. Interest in the communist period crosstab with age.

Extremely interested in [...]	19-24 years	25-30 years	31-36 years	37-55 years	55+ years
history, in general	20.3%	10%	22.6%	23.8%	40%
Romanian history in communist times	23.7%	5.0%	12.9%	28.6%	40%

The group of the respondents aged 55+ showed the most interest both in the history in general and in the communist history in Romania. Still this age group is underrepresented in our sample and we know from previous studies that they have lower visitation frequency of museums in general. One must note that respondents aged 55+ were adults during communism and they seem to be also an age group more interested in rediscovering that stage of their life. A moderate interest in history and Romanian communist history is found in the age group 37-55 and also among 19-24 years of age group (20 to 24% “extremely interested”). We found no correlation between participants’ age and their interest in the communist history. Our data rather suggests three groups of persons: 1) the group above 55 years of age that has high interest in communist history; 2) people 19-24 years of age and those 31-55 years of age – showing a relatively moderate interest in finding more about that period; 3) the 20-30 years of age group, showing low interest in history and communist history in particular.

There was no difference between the level of education when participants expressed their interest in the Romanian history and the communist history in Romania. Still men from our sample expressed more interest than women ($t(217) = -1.98, p = .04$) for communist history and history in general. We did not find any interaction effect between gender and age when analyzing respondents’ level of interest in communist history, neither in their perceptions on how much they know about the Romanian history after 1945. Nevertheless, men seem to be more interested in finding things about that period and they appreciated, to a higher extend compare to women, that they know a lot “about the Romanian history after 1945” ($t(216) = -1.80, p = .07$) and that they “remember a lot about the communist period” ($t(213) = -3.54, p < .001$).

In sum, particularly men, aged 55+ and also those 19-24 and 35-55 years of age are interested to visit a communism museum in Romania. When adding the fact that generally speaking people +55 have a low frequency of vision of museums in general and that the visitation behavior correlates with the level of education, a more nuanced profile of visitor emerges: young (19-24 or 35-55 years of age) mediul or high educated visitors, mostly men.

Respondents’ perception on events during communist time in Romania

Age shaped also respondents’ perception on events that happened during communism in Romania. The main differences are between 55+ years of age group, the group of the respondents aged 19 to 24 years, and respectively 25 to 30 years group. People aged 55 and above tend to consider that “communism brought welfare to the poor” ($F(4, 211) = 3.64, p = .007$). Those from the 37-55 age group considered to a higher extend that in the communist period “elites have been persecuted” ($F(4, 211) = 2.75, p = .02$), whereas respondents from the 55+ group are more inclined to estimate that “arts have flourished during communist time” in Romania ($F(4, 211) = 2.63, p = .03$).

People’s perception about events that have happened during communism are significantly different with the level of education: respondents with high school degree perceived to a higher extend than those with a university degree that “during communist time things were

better than now" ($F(4, 209) = 7.03, p < .001$); and also that "during 1945-1989 several positive things have happened" ($F(4, 208) = 3.96, p < .01$) and that "communism brought prosperity to poor" ($F(4, 208) = 4.11, p < .01$).

Furthermore, medium educated people considered to a higher extend than high educated people that "arts have flourished under communism" ($F(4, 210) = 4.38, p < .01$) and that "the entire Romanian population is very familiar with the events that happened during the communist period" ($F(4, 209) = 2.93, p < .05$).

We found different perceptions about the historical developments that occurred in Romania during communism. Generally speaking, medium educated people tend to evaluate more positively that period compared with college graduated respondents. People with a medium level of education are also more certain that events which happened during 1945-1989 are mostly known by the entire population, compared with those higher educated, who expressed a negative view on the communist period in Romania and also considered to a lower extend that events from that period are well known by the general population. As a result, we can talk about two relatively separated groups of people: 1) medium educated individuals - with a rather positive view on the communist period and with a low interest in a communist museum and 2) higher educated people - with a rather negative view on communist time in Romania and willing to know more, potentially interested in what a communist museum could offer.

The perceived role of an exhibition about communism

Different perceptions on what happened during communism (on educational and age groups) are followed by differences in the perceived role of a possible communism museum in Romania. Consequently, the perceived role of such institution could be different and the way an exhibition on communism should look like could create rather divergent opinions. Our data shows that medium educated respondents appreciate more than college graduated the fact that "such a museum could offer clarifications and not create controversies" ($F(4, 211) = 6.69, p < .001$). The same thing is claimed more by people over 55 years of age ($F(4, 213) = 4.00, p < .05$), compared with those 25 to 30 years of age. Thus it looks that older and medium educated people are more interested in finding answers and/or certitudes when visiting a communism museum, than to debate or problematize that period.

Regarding the items included in an exhibition about communism, college educated people, compared with high-school graduated, expect to see more "resources on propaganda" ($F(4, 210) = 2.22, p = .06$) and also "personal belongings of regular people" ($F(4, 211) = 2.67, p < .05$) and resources on opposition towards communism" ($F(4, 210) = 2.41, p = .05$). We did not find any age differences regarding expectations of what to see in an exhibition about communism. Still we found gender differences on the perceived role of communism museum in the contemporary society: Men expressed more agreement than women with the sentence: "objects made in the communist times do not have any historical value" ($t(217) = -2.31, p < .05$) and also that "the depiction of the communist period is very dependent on the current political context" ($t(212) = -2.35, p < .05$). Moreover, men expect more than women to see "official state documents from that time" ($t(217) = -1.91, p = .05$) in an exhibition about communism. When we link these data with the fact that men have a higher interest in communist history in general, we conclude that a segmentation of communication strategies used by museums in order to attract visitors for an exhibition about communism is needed. Our data suggest that men and women have different expectations regarding the role and the structure of a potential exhibition on communist period in Romania.

Discussions

The current study supports the idea of organizing an exhibition or a museum about the communist period in Romania. More than 50% of the respondents from our sample declared they were sure that they would like to visit such a museum and one third of them already had information about the existence of some museums or collections in Romania that depict the communism history. Our participants consider seeing in a communism museum discussions of *macro phenomena* of political and social life during that period as very important and to a somewhat lesser degree aspects of everyday life in communism, personal stories or stories about cultural life in that period. Probably Romanian's perception of a communist museum is related to the importance of showing some clarification about communist events that have given birth to controversies. At least for people above 55 years of age, we can use such an explanation, because they mostly declare that a communism museum should bring more clarification and no controversy. Since a museum of communism would not address locals, but also foreigners, a study aimed at visitors from outside of Romania will be effective in comparing local expectations with foreigners' expectations when visiting a museum about communist time.

Our respondents, particularly those with higher education, expect to see aspects related to resistance to communism in such a museum to a relatively higher degree. The differences between higher educated and medium educated people from our sample in terms of expectations (i.e. particularly high educated preferred to see things about communist resistance in museums) could be explained by the relative distinctive perceptions that the two categories have on the 1945-1989 period in Romania: people with high-school degree tend to have a positive view on the communist time in Romania, whereas those which are higher educated have a rather negative view.

Our data reveal three groups of respondents: those above 55 years of age – very much interested in that period, those 19 to 24 years of age and 31 to 55 years of age with a moderate interest in finding things about communism, and those 20 to 30 years of age having the least some interest in history and also in the communist history in Romania. In our opinion, these three groups emerged due to experiences they have lived as a generation and the socialization process they have gone through in their families. Note that people 55 years of age and above were adults during communist period, whereas the age group 19 to 24 years was born after 1989, having only indirect information about that period.

When organizing an exhibition about communism we have to consider the way potential visitors experience museums visitation in general and also the expectations of different social groups. Our research indicates that for young visitors and women the visitation is more a sensorial experience: They tend to touch the objects, to use the audio guide when it is available, to see the touch screens and thus the use of new technologies for these particular groups becomes important and has to be considered in the museum communication strategy, particularly when targeting young visitors. In the case of men, we identify higher interest in history in general that could shape differently the interaction with a potential communism exhibition. Similar comment is valid for the 55+ group who is more interested in authoritative facts about communism.

Our research study identified two types of visitors, distinguished by their level of education and the visitation pattern: 1) one type of visitors includes higher educated people, already having interests in a particular subjects when coming to a museum and who tend to have a selective visitation pattern. This category of people is not that interested in interactivity dur-

ing visitation, has previous experience with the educational programs conducted in the museum and consequently higher frequency of museums visitation, and also is more focused on particular items from the museum collection. A larger group of the respondents could be integrated in the second category, called here “the broad-image visitor”. Here we talk more about an occasional visitor, with lower frequency of museum visitation, who tries to take advantage of the opportunities offered by the experience of visiting a museum: they use the audio guide, the *touch screens*, follow the documentary movies inside of the exhibition, try to follow the entire collection and to buy at least one item from the museum shop. We can argue that for this category of people the museum visitation is a “total experience” and they expect the visit to be a unique time that is worth remembering.

We limited our sample to those medium and high educated from three urban areas in Romania: Bucharest, Iași and Sibiu, therefore our conclusions can not be extended to the whole population. Still this current study is an exploratory research that would help in organizing a museum dedicated to communism and we target mainly the visitors that have higher frequency of visitation compare with the mean on national level. A potential complementary research serving the same purpose is to investigate visitors from abroad and their visitation experiences and expectations towards museums in Romania. Particularly in the cities mentioned here: Bucharest, Iași and Sibiu that have increasing number of tourists from abroad in the past few years, a communism exhibition could rise different expectations from local visitor compare with a visitor coming from a different social and cultural background.

Conclusions and Implications

The most important segment of museum communication is associated with their collections and cultural profile. Museums achieve their broad mission of educating the audience and making them understand the particularities of their collections and associated field of interest by a very particular type of communication: through exhibitions, various types of public programs as well as specifically-designed communication channels.

When designing this specific communication strategy, a museum has to consider a broad framework. The publics considered are the same as in the case of traditional organizational communication – which is also highly important for the success of any museum. The main category of the public is formed by visitors, but the number and profile of stakeholders of a museum increased significantly since museums became an active socio-cultural actor in society. Museums have a more complex and socially engaged role in the contemporary times, no limiting themselves anymore to their mission to educating the public even if it still is at the core of any museum activity. One observes that the educational mission of a museum comprises an increasingly important component of engaging the audience into socially- and culturally-relevant discussions and activities. Therefore, the way exhibitions and public programs are approached diversified, as well as the instruments and channels used to communicate museum’s messages.

The evolutions in the museum world are related not only with inner developments, but also with the way visitors and museum stakeholders perceive a museum and its role. In this context, the museum publics have become an important factor in designing and ensuring the success of the museum discourse.

The prerequisites of a successful museum communication are outward oriented, rather than related with the collections. Of course, the quality and diversity of collections facilitate a more appealing discourse, but having valuable exhibits on display is no longer enough to attract and influence the public, as well as society in its entirety. Investigating the visitors and other stakeholders, as well as involving them in designing the museum offer. In this way a more interesting and relevant exhibition will be proposed, encompassing multiple-voices in the museum discourse. Understanding how public learn and interact with sciences and arts, as well as taking into account the audience's level of knowledge and their specific interests could ensure a high impact of the museum offer, both in terms of engagement and of educational outcomes.

The points of reference that should be considered by an exhibition on the history of communism, proposed in Romania, in order to successfully communicate this sensitive subject are therefore tightly related with how the public perceives communism, its knowledge and interest in communism. Making an exhibition on communism succesful is difficult considering the debates in the society around the communism legacy, the gap between the discourse offered by most of the exhibitions opened up to now and the public perception and interest in the topic, as well as some more general issues as the significant lack of interest in museums.

Investigating the public discourse and the perception of the wider public on communism, no objective historical perspective can be traced. In the same time, more debates are generated around communism and the voices multiplied. Not only the crimes of communism are in the focus, but also some more mundane aspects, such as every-day life under communism. This would make museum exhibitions more appealing, since part of Romanian society feels that communism is still connected to the present and, therefore, would relate any museum discourse with their lives.

Our research shows a complex representation of communism amongst the wider public. It confirms the national surveys previously developed and it reveals some additional aspects, relevant in the context of designing an engaging museum/exhibition on communism. The public states a high interest in a wide variety of topics, both related to macro-history and micro-history. Nevertheless the focus of interest depends on gender, age and education level. It is also relevant to notice that museum goers have different interests compared to those who are not familiar with museums and who would appreciate more a display on macro-phenomena. Many exhibitions and museums that address communism that have been opened up to now, present various aspects of the resistance to and the crimes of communism. The survey shows that mostly high educated public are interested in these topics. A museum about communism should address a wider public, therefore it should have a balanced choice of themes approached. Considering the overall image exposed by the survey, a museum of communism would be more appealing for the Romanian public, especially if it is placed in Bucharest, if the discourse is mainly addressing economic and political evolutions during communism, permanently relating them with their impact at individual level.

Another aspect to be considered when communicating communism in a museum is that Romanians, especially men, consider that they have significant knowledge on and remember a lot about communism. Therefore it would be challenging to design a display that attracts the interests and involves these persons, as well as children and young people who are not so connected. A museum / exhibition on communism should also consider the role that Romanians expect such a display to fulfil. Part of the public would like it too be a platform allowing discussions and multi-faced understanding of the communism times, others have more specific requests such as clarifying and informing on the past events.

This study, corroborated with the previous research on the perception of communism in Romania, sets a framework of reference for designing not just an appealing and effective museum of communism, but also any communism-related exhibition. Still additional studies would be recommended, to better understand the public, both Romanians and foreigners.

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