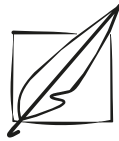

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Museums as communicators: Teaching or sharing knowledge?

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ABSTRACT

The aim of the paper is to investigate museum communication and establish to what extent museums are responding to the changing social context of the early 21st century. Museums have been traditionally perceived as authoritative and distant repositories of knowledge. Over the last few decades there has been a drive to make museum visits meaningful experiences for all peoples of different origins and backgrounds, including the development of websites, not only as a marketing strategy, but also as an important channel of knowledge dissemination. The data has been collected from the websites of four of the most important art galleries in Europe. Using a Critical Discourse Analysis approach and drawing on Blunden's work on museum communication (2017a, 2017b), the analysis will focus firstly on the webpages where the museum presents itself to the public and explains its principles, beliefs and objectives. It will then analyse what kind of information about the artefacts in the museums is given and especially how it is conveyed to the visitor. The findings reveal the different approaches adopted by the museums.

Keywords: museums, ideology, accessibility, visitors, museum communication.

1. Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate museum ideology and discourse. Museums are generally viewed by the public as repositories and authorities of knowledge, commanding respect, but appearing at times somewhat detached, even distant. This perception seems to have been confirmed by the International Council of Museums (ICOM) in 2007 when it defined a museum as "A non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves,

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researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment" (ICOM Statutes, adopted by the 22nd General Assembly in Vienna, Austria, on 24 August, 2007). However, fundamental changes in society prompted by globalization, multiculturalism and, above all, radical individualization are altering the profile of museum visitors and their expectations (Smeds 2012: 61) and, as a consequence, are forcing museums to meet new challenges. In actual fact, the ICOM's definition is currently undergoing an amendment to accommodate changing principles and practices.

Museums often embody and support what Coffee (2006) calls "the social narrative", portraying the dominant values and beliefs of society. Indeed, the 18th and 19th century conception of museums as serving to create national identity and culture still persists, but museum professionals have begun to focus on how to build on museums' reputations as places of trust and expertise (Hooper-Greenhill 2000: 10) and are trying to understand how to motivate and engage with visitors. In other words, they are looking at the museum experience from the visitors' perspective (Falk – Dierking 2016). This study will look at the way in which museums are now realizing this new approach, how they envisage their role and function in society today and whether museum communication with visitors actually reflects this change.

Numerous studies have been made on museum exhibitions and visitor experience (Jewitt 2012; Pang 2004; Soren 2009; Gurian 2007). However, nowadays museums are continuously developing their online presence, not only as a promotional and marketing strategy, but also as one of the most important sources of information and knowledge (Wilson 2011; Marty 2008). A website can act as an extension of the museum beyond its actual physical presence, its bricks and mortar, and stretch out to a variety of people. Potential visitors include tourists, schoolchildren researching an artist or a painting, people who are simply curious about the museum and its exhibits or who would really like to visit the museum but are physically unable to go there for whatever reason. The study will therefore investigate how museums communicate their specialised knowledge to virtual visitors and what kind of relationship they try to establish with them, that is whether they maintain the traditional, asymmetrical power relations between expert and non-expert whereby museums and curators fulfil their role as communicators of intellectually important ideas (Falk – Dierking 2011) or they share knowledge and transfer authority to visitors (Gurian 2007, cited in Soren 2009) in a more contemporary approach.

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2. Museum communication today

There has always been a certain tension in museums between, on the one hand, the functions of collecting and conserving and, on the other, the social purpose of educating and edifying the public. The first museums were private collections, known as Cabinets of Curiosity, and provided an exclusive space for the rich, the powerful and the knowledgeable in the 16th and 17th centuries. Various social impulses have in time gradually opened up museums to a broader public, initially with a view to "civilizing the public", before the economic, political and social changes of the 20th century favouring greater social inclusion gave and encouraged access to visitors from all walks of life and from all over the world.

Advances in technology in recent years have facilitated this approach and created many opportunities and affordances to present information in an innovative, stimulating and entertaining manner. Indeed, nowadays museums are often positioned within the leisure industry and tourism, whereby learning is linked to worthwhile, valuable, but also pleasurable activities (Hooper-Greenhill 1994). A visit to a museum is now seen as an "experience", where the visitor does not just acquire information about an artefact or an artist, but is invited to consider an object, whatever it may be, "conceptually and ideally to develop a personal interpretation linked to his/her visit experience (and life)" (Scarpati 2018: 7).

The use of technology and multimodality in museums has, in fact, led to the re-mediation of the relationship between the audience and the artefact, actively encouraging individuals to interact in the digital environment. The old emphasis on facts and grand histories of nation states has been replaced by descriptions of contexts, emotions and everyday themes to provide new perspectives (Lindstrand – Insulander 2012: 31).

This development has been heightened by the advent of Web 2.0, allowing users to interact and collaborate with each other through social media and social networks as creators of user-generated content in a virtual community. It is radically changing social relations, "empowering" all users and thus challenging the asymmetrical relations between expert and non-expert. The individual puts himself centre stage and sets his own standards and criteria, possibly in conflict with the authoritative character of official knowledge. This situation is also replicated in museums. Curators and museum staff are the experts who set up an exhibition and will guide a visitor's interpretation, but ultimately individual visitors will interpret as they wish, in relation to their personal experiences and

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interests (Lindstrand – Insulander 2012: 39-40). As Kress and Salander say, "Communication happens when a participant in the interaction has interpreted what she or he has taken to be a prompt in communication and for interaction." (2012: 8).

However, the "democratization" of museums has led to greater social diversity and fragmentation among audiences. Visitors are a heterogeneous group with a wide range of knowledge, some shared, some not, especially in the highly international context of museums. They bring with them their own personal individual background knowledge, beliefs and values, which will vary according to their culture and level of education. These will then form the basis for their understanding and interpretation of museum exhibits (Hooper-Greenhill 1999: 13). Indeed, "the fact that artefacts may be subject to multiple interpretation has important implications for the way museums think about and present themselves" (Goulding 2000: 262). To enable this personal and individual interpretation and to develop and achieve total inclusion, museum communication must also be intellectually and linguistically accessible to the broader public.

The internationalisation of audiences is, in fact, a further complicating factor in communication, as English is used not only to address native speakers, but also to act as a lingua franca for many other visitors. As well as linguistic issues, cultural and pragmatic questions are also brought into play, possibly creating great diversification in the shared knowledge of visitors. It also puts a different perspective on visitor expectations. Even within a European context Guillot (2014: 74) found native German speakers complained that museum texts in English were not explicit enough, whereas native English speakers found texts in French and Spanish museums "formal, specialised and distant".

3. Data

The study has analysed four websites of art galleries that are among the most famous in Europe, if not the world: the Louvre, the National Gallery, the Uffizi and the Rijksmuseum. The choice of which museums to include in the study fell upon art galleries because the world of art is often perceived by people as far removed from everyday life and belonging to the world of intellectuals and scholars, thus making museum communication even more challenging.

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Although museums are setting up systems by which visitors can create their own galleries and collections on the website (Marty 2011) or interact on social media, the analysis will focus principally on two traditional types of webpages which are more significant from a linguistic point of view. Firstly, those where the museum explains its philosophy, principles and beliefs and declares its objectives for the future. These include the *About us* pages and *Mission and Vision statements*, where available, and will give a picture of the official position of the museums. The mission statement was originally part of corporate communication (Swales – Rogers 1995), but it is now commonly used by governmental and non-profit organizations. They are frequently present in websites and can be seen as a way of managing an organization's public image. However, some of the pages included in the analysis are not in a prominent position in the website, which suggests they may be considered as a motivating communication tool for internal as well as external stakeholders. Whatever their function, they show the public face of intentions and purposes and can provide useful insights into the ideology of museums and their vision of their role in society.

Secondly, the data includes pages giving information about the artefacts in the museums and therefore directly addressed to visitors, thus revealing the approach adopted by the museums in the actual practice of transferring knowledge. Fifteen paintings were selected from each museum, though the choice was often guided by the website highlighting the masterpieces in the gallery. The corpora are, admittedly, very small, but they are sufficiently representative of the style and approach adopted by each museum and, therefore, can indicate the characteristics of each one.

The English versions of the websites have been analysed in the study, and therefore three of them are translations into what we may consider a lingua franca. The art galleries are globally renowned and are addressing an international audience, amongst whom there will be, in addition to many native speakers of English, also many more non-native speakers of English. However, this study is not concerned with the texts as translations, whether they be "covert" or "overt" (House 2006: 347), but rather it focuses simply on how the ideology of the gallery is reflected and how it positions itself in relation to the audience in these texts.

Table 1. Corpus of texts about exhibits

	Tokens
Louvre	12,920
National Gallery	17,164
Rijksmuseum	4,330
Uffizi	5,049

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4. Theoretical background

As the study investigates the role and function of museums in society and consequently the power relations between museum experts and non-expert visitors, a Critical Discourse Analysis approach forms the basic theoretical framework for the study (Fairclough 1995). Reference will also be made to the concept of proximity and reader engagement, which concerns the relationship between writer and reader, and in our context between museum and visitor. According to Hyland (2010: 123) proximity is "where writers acknowledge and connect to others, recognising the presence of their readers, pulling them along with their argument, focusing their attention, acknowledging their uncertainties, including them as discourse participants, and guiding them to interpretations." This can be achieved through the use of pronouns, questions, directives, shared knowledge markers and personal asides (Zou – Hyland 2019).

Within the more specific field of museum communication (Purser 2000; Ravelli 2006; Serrell 2015), the paper will draw on the work of Blunden. She investigates both what is being communicated (Blunden 2017a) and how, linguistically, it is being communicated (Blunden 2017b). Blunden (2017a) proposes a model, which has been developed from systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1978) and multimodal semiotics (Liu – O'Halloran 2009), to explore the complexity of meanings in museum texts giving information about paintings in art galleries. By analysing the relationship between verbal text, museum artefact and visitor, she suggests that text may "add something more to looking" (Blunden 2017a) and, we can therefore suppose, enhance the viewer's experience. She bases the model on two intermodal relations, converging and diverging. When both the verbal and the visual text correspond, the relations are converging. The language anchors the verbal text to the artefact, creating ideational concurrence between text and artefact and a "verbal vector" (Blunden 2017a: 10) that directs the viewer's gaze towards the artefact. On the contrary, if the meanings in the verbal texts are not instantiated visually in the artefact, they are diverging and bring new meanings. Therefore, something is added to the looking, in the first case by heightening the observation and in the second by contextualising the artefact.

This study will also examine the type and degree of detail of the contextualising information, as it will foreground the presence of the expert/ curator. The information may concern the history of the painting, the artist or more generally the history of art, refer to the social significance of what is depicted in the painting or give an interpretation. The specificity of the specialised knowledge implicitly positions the museum curator as expert in

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relation to the non-expert general public, thus upholding the asymmetrical power relation. However, the key to understanding the relationship the museum wishes to establish with its visitors is the tone and register of the language it uses. The way the information is imparted can become fundamental in "rebalancing", or at least adjusting, this asymmetry in order to give the semblance of a peer relationship and thus empowering the viewer.

Blunden (2017b) states that writing for a reading age of 12 is the usual standard in museum communication and identifies the characteristics of the language frequently used by museums that often render a text less accessible for the broader public. She makes the distinction between "congruent" and metaphorical language and, to illustrate the two types of language, provides the following examples which express the same concept, but in completely different ways (2017b: 296-297).

> "Josie badly needed a strong coffee and so she went to the café."
> "Josie's journey to the café was the result of her need for a strong coffee."

Congruent language, as in the first example here, is more concrete and closer to the real, material world: actions and processes are expressed as verbs, people and things as nouns, qualities as qualifiers and links between ideas as conjunctions. In contrast, grammatical metaphor (Halliday 1985) changes the tone of the text, making it more abstract and formal. Grammatical metaphors involve a "repackaging" of other grammatical forms, especially nominalisation, as seen in the second example with the nouns *journey* and *need*, substituting for the verbs *go* and *need*. Although greater abstraction makes the text feel less real and directly connected to the material world, grammatical metaphor can extend the meaning potential of language and offer more opportunities to introduce subtlety and nuances through the modification of nouns (Blunden 2017b: 297).

5. Analysis

5.1 Institutional webpages

5.1.1 Museum Homepages

The analysis will start with the Homepages of the websites, as they obviously give the first impression of the museum to visitors and, through them, we can begin to discern the ideology of the museum.

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The Uffizi homepage presents a picture of the magnificent building housing the museum. It is a front view, rather the usual view down the courtyard to the River Arno and therefore shows it in its full glory. On the left side of the photograph is the phrase, "An encounter with great Western art: an everlasting wonder". This may be taken as an invitation to the visitor to enter the website and satisfy his curiosity, but the tone is formal and impersonal with the unusual nominalisation *encounter* making it abstract and distant. The Louvre also uses the image of the building on its homepage and especially the famous glass pyramid. However, the visitor is addressed only in the menu for practical matters with imperatives to *plan your visit*, *buy your ticket*. Given their imposing size and majesty in both cases, the presentation of the images of the buildings, so famous as to be immediately recognised, is a strong reminder to the visitor of the institution and its authority.

In contrast, the Rijksmuseum projects a changing series of pictures, showing some items from the museum's collections, people inside the museum either looking at works of art or watching the restoration of the museum's most famous painting, *Night Watch*. It offers a very colloquial invitation to *Dive into the collection*, suggesting a more welcoming approach. Similarly, the National Gallery takes the visitor directly inside the museum, with a picture of a woman sitting with her back to the camera and surrounded by other people walking around the museum. The colours are bright, lively and dynamic and the woman's red jacket focuses the viewer's attention on what she is doing, namely sitting in a gallery and looking at a painting. In the centre of the page there is written *Welcome* and below *The story of European art, masterpiece by masterpiece*. The word *story*, rather than history, suggests a kind of intimacy and sharing of knowledge and experiences.

5.1.2 "About us" sections and Mission statements

The museums give a variety of headings to the webpages that outline their function and objectives. These include *About us*, *Our Mission*, *Our vision and strategy* or *Rules and objectives*, where the museums describe and define themselves in relation to three dimensions, each placing a different emphasis on them:

- Time – past and future
- Place – national and global
- People – individuals and society as a whole

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The Uffizi and the Louvre call upon the past in a glorification, albeit well-justified, of their collections and reputation and, on this basis, they also claim present and future recognition.

(1) **The Uffizi contains the quintessence of western art, a marvellous promise that is hinted from the architecture of the building.**
The art collections that today's visitors to the Uffizi Galleries are able to enjoy in all three complexes represent a whole that few in the world can equal. In fact, they were put together by the ruling families who lived here, and who preserved these works to hand down their unevaluable heritage destined to be enjoyed by the public. This is thanks to the enlightened, wise and generous action of the last of the Medici family, Anna Maria Luisa, who in her "Family Pact" of 1737 decided to leave the collections belonging to her illustrious family to the city of Florence so that, "no part could be removed from the Capital of the Grand Ducal State, of the Galleries, Paintings, Statues, Libraries, Jewels and other precious objects from the succession of His Serene Grand Duke, so that they remain here, as ornaments of the State, for the use of the Public and to attract the curiosity of Foreigners". (Uffizi)

The power and authority of the museums is conveyed forcibly by naming some of the most famous artists in the history of art:

(2) It is famous worldwide for its outstanding collections of ancient sculptures and paintings (from the Middle Ages to the Modern period). The collections of paintings from the 14th-century and Renaissance period include some absolute masterpieces: Giotto, Simone Martini, Piero della Francesca, Beato Angelico, Filippo Lippi, Botticelli, Mantegna, Correggio, Leonardo, Raffaello, Michelangelo and Caravaggio, in addition to many precious works by European painters (mainly German, Dutch and Flemish). (Uffizi)

In the following example (3), the Louvre positions itself in no uncertain terms as a truly intellectual authority and asserts its prowess.

(3) The Louvre: An Age-Old Institution Looks to the Future

Heir to the century of the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the Louvre was quickly accepted as the "museum among museums;" and since then it has remained a model and a recognized authority. (Louvre: Missions and Projects)

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The museums also place themselves in global terms, as being a focus of worldwide interest.

(4) Since the Renaissance, these three museum sites have been connected to one another by an ingenious construction, the Vasari Corridor, and together they form one of the most important, most visited culture hubs in the world. (Uffizi)

(5) Museum among museums
Formerly a royal palace, the Louvre has embraced the history of France for eight centuries. Intended as a universal museum since its inception in 1793, its collections—among the finest in the world—span several thousands of years and a territory that extends from America to the confines of Asia. Divided among eight departments, these collections feature works admired throughout the globe, including the *Mona Lisa*, the *Winged Victory of Samothrace*, and the *Venus de Milo*. (Louvre: Missions and Projects). With nearly ten million visitors in 2012, the Louvre is the world's most visited museum. (Louvre: Missions and Projects)

Although the National Gallery and especially the Rijksmuseum have more modest claims, they nevertheless place themselves in an international context.

(6) Collection overview
The National Gallery, London houses one of the greatest collections of paintings in the world.
Although, by international standards, the collection is not particularly large (2349 paintings, at June 2014), its breadth and quality make it a collection of world-wide importance and reputation. (National Gallery: The National Gallery's Display Policy (Permanent Collection))

(7) The Rijksmuseum is the museum of the Netherlands. (Rijksmuseum)

What really distinguishes the museums, however, is the way they position themselves in relation to their visitors. All four certainly talk about people, often in terms of numbers and their place of origin.

(8) Since the Renaissance, these three museum sites [Uffizi, Pitti Palace and Boboli Gardens] have been connected to one another by an ingenious construction, the Vasari Corridor, and together they form

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one of the most important, most visited culture hubs in the world. (Uffizi)

The Louvre is universal both in terms of the wealth of its collections and the great diversity of its visitors. Of the nearly ten million people who visited the Louvre in 2012, 69 percent were of overseas origin, with 15 percent from the United States of America, 7 percent from China, and 6 percent from Brazil. (Louvre: Missions and projects)

But it is how they refer to their visitors that is the most distinctive characteristic. In the following example the text refers to the emotions aroused in visitors to the museum.

(9) Vision and mission of the Rijksmuseum
In 2013, an entirely renovated Rijksmuseum opened its doors to the public. They are greeted by a stunning building, amazing interior design, wonderful exhibitions, lively events, and many fine amenities for young and old. (Rijksmuseum)

However, it is the museum that is acting, *stunning* and *amazing* the visitors who are passively greeted and spellbound by the wonder of the museum. Similarly, the Uffizi describes how visitors are filled with wonder on their arrival at the museum:

(10) When arriving at the museum, visitors are first and foremost struck by the beauty of the Loggia dei Lanzi […]. (Uffizi: About us)

The very word, *visitors*, gives the idea of an unequal relationship, suggesting a host and guests. This becomes particularly evident when we compare the National Gallery website, in which the museum actually disclaims ownership of the collection, stating it belongs to the people of the UK, promoting an all-inclusive approach.

(11) The Gallery's aim is to care for the collection, to enhance it for future generations, primarily by acquisition, and to study it, while encouraging access to the pictures for the education and enjoyment of the widest possible public now and in the future.
The collection belongs to the people of the United Kingdom. It is open to all.

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The gallery affirms the traditional objectives of studying, enhancing and caring for the collection, but it also envisages its role as *serving* a very wide and diverse public, thus putting itself in a subordinate position.

(12) The Gallery serves a very wide and diverse public, which includes:
- Frequent and occasional visitors to the Gallery in London
- Those who see its pictures while they are on loan elsewhere, both inside and outside the UK, and those who know the collection through publications, multimedia and TV
- Those who live nearby as well as those who live further away in the United Kingdom and overseas
- Every age group – from children to pensioners
- The socially excluded and the privileged; the uninformed and the specialist; and those with special needs
- The worldwide community of museums and galleries
- **Most importantly**: future generations (National Gallery: Constitution)

Those listed amongst *this diverse public* include people of all ages, from children to pensioners, as well as contrasting classes of people from opposite sides: the privileged and specialists who can be expected to be part of the gallery's audience in any case, but also *the socially excluded*, *the uninformed* and *those with special needs*, clearly expressing the intent to be socially all-inclusive.

5.2 Texts about the exhibits

The second part of the analysis will focus on the texts accompanying the images of the paintings. Each exhibit is given a separate webpage and allows the viewer to zoom into it, thus giving a very close-up view of the painting, a privileged position which the visitor can only enjoy in a virtual visit to the gallery (Marty 2008: 10). The information about the items given in the text may include a more or less detailed description of the painting and facts from the history of art (styles, various schools), about the history of the painting itself (the commission, who it belonged to) or the artist (his life, his technique) and/or the social, historical significance of the painting. The following paragraphs will discuss some of the characteristic features of the texts which show the different stances of the museums.

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5.2.1 Length of texts

The information load varies enormously in the websites, as can be seen in the Table below. The Uffizi has relatively short texts (average 200-350 words) compared to the Louvre which can reach 700 words and in one case even 1558 words. Interestingly, both the Rijksmuseum and the National Gallery adopt similar strategies, whereby they provide visitors with two options, a short and a longer version. In the case of the Rijksmuseum the texts are extremely short, between 50 and 70 words, but the longer audio versions, though still short, stretch to 145 and 180 words. The National Gallery, on the other hand, offers an *Overview* of 150-170 words and a much longer *In-depth* text which goes from 950 to 1050 words approximately.

Table 2. Approximate length of texts (number of words)

		Audio	In-depth
Louvre	300-700 (1558)	–	–
National Gallery	150-170	–	950-1050
Rijksmuseum	50-70	145-180	–
Uffizi	200-350	–	–

The conciseness of the Rijksmuseum short texts, however, does not imply a superficial description or limited information. As the following examples show, they can touch upon a range of topics:

(13) This curious painting refuses to divulge its secrets. The image can be interpreted as an admonition to praise God with singing and music-making, but also as a risqué scene of seduction. The young woman's gaudy garments and red shoes are in questionable taste, and the old woman looks suspiciously like a procuress. Perhaps the painting contains a warning against immoral conduct. (Rijksmuseum: Musical Company)

(14) As inexperienced as he is, the young Rembrandt does not shy away from experimenting. Here the light rakes his right cheek while the rest of his face is enveloped in shadow. It takes a moment to realize that he is peering out at you. Rembrandt accentuated the curls of his tousled hair by drawing in the wet paint with the butt end of his paintbrush. (Rijksmuseum: Self-portrait, Rembrandt)

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(15) This exceptional diptych shows the leading Florentine architect Giuliano da Sangallo and his recently deceased father Francesco, who was an architect as well as a musician. These are among the earliest portraits to characterize their sitters by profession: a pen and compass allude to architecture, the sheet music to music. Both disciplines are based on notions of harmony and proportion. (Rijksmuseum: Portraits of Giuliano and Francesco Giamberti da Sangallo)

(13) proposes possible interpretations of the significance of the painting, but leaves it as an open question. (14) explains a technique adopted by Rembrandt, whilst (15) gives some background information from the history of art. Although very brief, the texts guide the viewer in his "reading" and understanding of the painting.

5.2.2 Engagement with the reader/viewer

A clear indication of the relationship between curator/museum and visitor can be seen in the way a text engages with the visitor. The reader may be addressed directly though the pronoun *you* or imperatives, as in the Rijksmuseum and, to a lesser extent, the National Gallery websites (see Table 3 below) and is invited to focus on particular elements of the paintings, thus sharpening their observation and enhancing their experience (Blunden 2017a: 14).

(16) Look for example at the shawl in her hand – you can actually see the strokes of the brush. (Rijksmuseum: Portrait of a Couple, Probably Isaac Abrahamsz Massa and Beatrix van der Laen)

(17) However, there is nothing unusual in the pigments used – this illusion of reality relied on van Eyck's skill, not on any technical innovation. Look closely and you can see an astonishing level of detail. (National Gallery: The Arnolfini Portrait)

Even when *you* is generic, the tone is less formal and therefore more personal and engaging to the reader.

(18) If you were able to take a peek through the window of a 17th century Dutch home, you might well encounter a scene like this one, of a mother delousing her child in a simple interior. (Rijksmuseum: A Mother Delousing her Child's Hair)

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Table 3. 1st and 2nd person pronouns (raw and normalized frequencies)

	Louvre		National Gallery		Rijksmuseum		Uffizi	
we	11	(0.0851%)	27	(0.1564%)	7	(0.1614%)	2	(0.0425%)
us	8	(0.0619%)	20	(0.1149%)	7	(0.1614%)	1	(0.0212%)
you	–		6	(0.0348%)	11	(0.2306%)	–	

The pronouns *we* and *us* are used by all museums, although less frequently by the Uffizi and the Louvre (see Table 3). However, it is not just a question of the number of occurrences, but also their use and meaning. If we look closely at the following examples, we can see an important difference. The Louvre uses both *we* and *us* to include the viewer and to direct his attention to certain features of the painting:

(19) Yet, despite the illusion of immediate proximity with the lacemaker, *we* cannot really penetrate her universe. The forms of the tapestry, sewing cushion and small table come between *us* and her, and her work is hidden in her right hand. (Louvre: the Lacemaker)

(20) Slightly off-center, a woman with a sophisticated hairstyle and plunging neckline beckons *us* with her eyes and hand position toward the left side of the composition where another player, plunged in shadow, is discreetly producing an ace of diamonds from under his belt. (Louvre: The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds)

In contrast, in the Uffizi text *us* is not inclusive, without the involvement of the visitor, but very much exclusive when referring to highly specialized knowledge, thus reinforcing the asymmetrical relationship.

(21) The subject of the Nativity and the date, MCCCCLXXXVII written on the marble block in the foreground, lead *us* to think that this panel could have been painted on the occasion of the birth of Giovanni Tornabuoni, first born of Lorenzo Tornabuoni and Giovanna degli Albizi, born in 1487. (Uffizi: The Adoration of Magi)

In line with their more familiar approach that we have seen above, *we* is inclusive in both the Rijksmuseum and the National Gallery and used to draw the viewers' attention to details in the painting.

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(22) *We* can see a backroom through the open doorway and beyond it a garden. (Rijksmuseum: A Mother Delousing her Child's Hair, Known as a Mother's Duty)

(23) In The Hay Wain, the mill is out of sight – *we* just glimpse the edge of its red brick wall on the extreme right. (National Gallery: The Hay Wain)

However, the National Gallery also uses it when referring to curators' expert knowledge and therefore in an exclusive manner.

(24) *We* don't know how Hay got it, but he brought it back to England and it was bought by the National Gallery in 1842 for the moderate price of 600 Guineas. It was our first Netherlandish painting. (National Gallery: The Arnolfini Portrait)

Questions are another way of engaging directly with the viewer and, at the same time, they create verbal vectors directing the visitor's gaze toward a particular detail of the painting. Rather than describing a painting, a question invites the reader to look and think about the painting or painter in greater depth. We find once again both the Rijksmuseum and the National Gallery making a similar use of a device, whereas the Louvre has only one example of a question in the heading of paragraph and the Uffizi makes no use of them at all.

(25) By painting the bottom of the houses white, he draws our attention to the figures, the woman doing handiwork in the doorway and the children playing. And that woman by the barrel – has she just finished scrubbing the street? The waste water glistens in the gutter and flows towards us, pulling our gaze into the alleyway. (Rijksmusuem: View of Houses in Delft, Known as "The Little Street")

(26) Do these instruments and books symbolize intransience or is the music actually a reference to harmony? And what is the significance of the painting on the wall with the biblical story of Lot and his daughters? Perhaps it's a disguised brothel scene intended as a warning against immoral conduct. What did Rembrandt want to say with this painting? Opinions are divided. (Rijksmusuem: Merry Company)

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(27) An engagement present or an allusion to Christ?
One interpretation of this self-portrait, which is said to stem from Goethe, is that it was an engagement present for Agnes Frey, whom Dürer was going to marry on his return to Nuremberg in 1494. […] Combined with the inscription on the picture next to the date, "Things happen to me as it is written on high," the thistle could also be seen as a reference to Christ's Passion… (Louvre: Self-Portrait or Portrait of the Artist Holding a Thistle)

In line with this more direct approach is the use of simple, everyday lexis, as for example *pottering about* and *belting out* that can be found in the National Gallery and Rijksmuseum texts.

(28) Mrs Andrews, still only 17 or 18, is less self-confident, sitting bolt upright in the palest of blue informal skirts and jacket, and a pair of backless mules more suited to pottering about the house. (National Gallery: Mr and Mrs Andrews)

(29) This fun-loving family looks to be in a state of utter chaos. […] The slip of paper affirms this. It bears the text, "As the old sing, so the young pipe", which is to say, "Children will follow their parents' example". The father is clearly over abiding, mother and grandmother are belting out a duet, and the baby is being literally spoon fed this life of excess. (Rijksmuseum: The Merry Family)

5.2.3 Narratives and anecdotes

Another strategy to be found in all the websites, though more frequently in the National Gallery than in the others, is the use of narrative and anecdotes, which not only 'adds something more' to the looking by contextualising the painting (Blunden 2017a), but also makes the information more entertaining and intriguing.

(30) "You wouldn't recognise him anymore", said Theo van Gogh to his mother. He was referring to his brother Vincent who has just had a mouth operation on account of losing all his teeth. At the time Vincent was in Paris, where he had moved in with his brother. He painted this self-portrait one year later. His cheeks may still be somewhat sunken, but with his felt hat and cravat, he looks eminently presentable. And so he should. For Vincent, Paris was the place to be. (Rijksmuseum: Self-portrait, Vincent van Gogh)

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(31) In his memoirs, one courtier later noted that in 1756 the marquise stopped receiving visitors in her dressing room but instead received them while at her tapestry-frame: "she went from make-up to making." Embroidery was regarded as a virtuous activity for women and it was not uncommon for them to be portrayed engaged in it. (National Gallery: Madame de Pompadour at her Tambour Frame)

(32) Veronese depicts, with apparent ease, no less than 130 feast-goers, mixing biblical figures with men and women of the period. The latter are not really identifiable, although according to an 18th-century legend, the artist himself is depicted in white with a viola da gamba next to Titian and Bassano, all of whom contribute to the musical entertainment. (Louvre: The Wedding Feast)

Personal letters, memoirs or legends of the time are quoted to give personal insights, whilst (33) narrates the story of the painting, touching upon the very modern question of gender equality.

(33) The painting was completed in Rome where Artemisia returned after spending seven years in Florence and where she was able to appreciate Caravaggio's works once more. The naturalistic "virility" of the work provoked strong reactions on its arrival in Florence and the painting was denied the honor of being exhibited in the Gallery; in fact, it was only with great difficulty and the help of her friend Galileo Galilei that the painter managed to extract the payment […] Today, this painting also represents the human and professional tale of a woman who chose to be an artist in an era dominated by men; in this she succeeded, working in the courts of Rome, Florence and Naples, traveling to England and finally becoming the first woman to enter the Academy of Art and Design in Florence. (Uffizi: Judith Beheading Holofernes)

5.2.4 Technical vocabulary

The use of technical language often raises a barrier to non-expert understanding of specialized discourse. However, the museum texts do not make an extensive use of technical terms. Indeed, the Rijksmuseum does not use them in the texts analysed in this study and the Uffizi and the Louvre rarely used any. This is not to say that technical issues are not discussed, but it is done by giving a simple explanation without resorting to specialized

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terminology. In the following example, we find the term *pointillist*, but it appears in inverted commas and is glossed by referring to *dabs* of colour, so that someone who is unfamiliar with the term can, nevertheless, understand the sentence.

(34) The Delft master's genius consisted in reproducing the natural optical deformations of the human eye by creating several depths of field. The center of our attention, the lacemaker's painstaking work, is shown in great detail and in sharp focus, particularly the fine white thread stretched between the young woman's fingers. Further away from this visual focus, the forms become more blurred, including, paradoxically, those in the foreground. The white and red threads hanging out of the cushion are rendered in almost abstract dribbles of paint. The tapestry, painted with little "pointillist" dabs of pure color, is also out of focus. (Louvre: The Lacemaker)

Perhaps surprisingly, in view of its less formal style, the National Gallery uses technical terms much more frequently, often with a gloss as in (29).

(35) Leonardo has used his inventive technique, now called aerial perspective, to give the impression of a vast landscape setting. He realised that we perceive the same colours differently depending on their distance from us; green appears blue if viewed from far off. By painting the mountains in the background blue, he tricks us into believing they are in the far distance. (National Gallery: The Virgin of the Rocks)

5.2.5 Abstract language

Although there is little specialized terminology in the Louvre and the Uffizi websites, their texts are sometimes much less accessible than the National Gallery's. This can be accounted for by the use of abstract language or, in Blunden's framework, metaphorical language. The comments on the paintings tend to use nominalisations, many adjectives (often very formal) and abstract concepts making comprehension more difficult and the descriptions of the paintings more distant and almost alienating:

(36) The rigorously ordered pyramidal composition does not hinder the movement of the figures, and the painstaking orchestration of their gestures (the superimposition of hands and interplay of looks) takes

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on a new intensity in the diffuse light which softens outlines without weakening the modeling of the figures. (Louvre: The Virgin of the Rocks)

The extremely complex structure of (37) increases the difficulty for the reader. The writer describes how the artist skilfully combines two techniques with the metaphor *marries*. The *approach* is both pre- and post-modified by the adjective *strict* and the past participle clause *learned during his Florentine education*. Similarly, the second element, the *representation*, is also both pre- and post-modified by *lenticular* and *characteristic of Flemish painting* and followed by a participle clause indicating the result.

(37) The master painter marries the strict approach to perspective learned during his Florentine education with the lenticular representation more characteristic of Flemish painting, achieving extraordinary results and unmatched originality. (Uffizi: The Duke and Duchess of Urbino Federico da Montefeltro and Battista Sforza)

By contrast, the following examples from the National Gallery and Rijksmuseum websites adopt a completely different style. In place of nominalisations in the Louvre text, the subjects of the sentences in (38) are people, either the artist or the figures in the paintings, and active verbs, *captures*, *leap out*, *throws out*, are used to describe what is happening. The structure of the sentences is complex like the Uffizi text, but the description of concrete actions and physical attributes, rather than abstract concepts, makes it easier to understand.

(38) Caravaggio captures the dramatic climax of the story, the moment of revelation when the disciples suddenly see what has been in front of them all along. Their actions convey their astonishment: one is about to leap out of his chair, his elbow jutting out towards us, while the other throws out his arms in a gesture of disbelief. Typically for Caravaggio, he has shown the disciples as ordinary working men, with bearded, lined faces and ragged clothes, in contrast to the youthful beardless Christ who, with his flowing locks and rich red tunic, seems quite literally to have come from a different world. (National Gallery: The Supper Emmaus)

The text below from the Rijksmuseum has a simple style and guides the reader by signposting the information structure of the paragraph. It first announces

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that the painting has a number of characteristic features of Rembrandt's painting, before mentioning two of them and giving a specific example. It closes with an informal comment, *the effect is wonderfully dynamic*, and directs the gaze of the viewer to a detail by an invitation introduced by *if*.

(39) Already we can see all the features that would later make him so famous. Not only does Rembrandt experiment with light and shadow, he also tries out different painting techniques. For example, he added lighter accents by using the back of his paintbrush to scratch lines in the wet paint, making it appear as if his curls have caught the sunlight. The effect is wonderfully dynamic. If you look closely, you can see that he gazes out directly at the viewer, yet we actually see very little of him. (Rijksmuseum: Self-portrait, Rembrandt van Rijn)

5.2.6 Teaching or sharing expert information

The background information provided by the art galleries inevitably is drawn from highly specialized, academic and scholarly sources. The question arises of how this knowledge can be communicated without exposing the asymmetrical relationship and leave room for the individual visitor to make his own interpretation.

The websites actually present this "insider" knowledge in different ways. As we have seen, the National Gallery presents an appropriately named *In-depth* version of the text, where detailed information is coloured with insights from the history of art.

(40) His determination to capture the rural Suffolk landscape of his boyhood in these monumental paintings must in part have been due to a sense that this way of life was changing due to rapid industrialisation – the factories, steam power and locomotives that appear in works by his contemporaries, such as Turner, are absent from Constable's paintings. (National Gallery: Hay Wain)

Although the information is a result of specialized expert knowledge and understanding of the painter, it is presented here to the viewer in a less imposing manner, through the supposition *must* [...] *have been due to* and the mitigating expression *in part*.

In the following example the text guides the viewer to observe details in the painting and offers possible interpretations of the scene, but without a definitive answer. *Perhaps*, *but then*, *perhaps*, *may help us*, *it seems* are all expressions which lessen the force of the statements.

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(41) A young woman standing at a keyboard holds our eye with a direct gaze. Suffused in the light which streams through the window, she seems caught in a moment of expectation and uncertainty. Perhaps we have interrupted her playing, or perhaps she is waiting for us so that she can start. But then maybe the empty chair in the foreground is significant: perhaps she is waiting for someone else. The large painting of a naked Cupid, the god of erotic love, on the wall behind her may help us to understand the situation. It seems to be a signal that this is not just a scene of music making, but that the woman is waiting for her lover. (National Gallery: A Young Woman Standing at a Virginal)

Similarly, the Rijksmuseum draws the viewer's attention to the appearance of the figures and then suggests a comparison with other paintings from the same period, thus "teaching" or informing in a deductive manner.

(42) Jan Steen expertly rendered the figures effusive moments and facial expressions which already distinguished him in his own day. Compare this to the dignified and calm poses of the figures in the other 17th century paintings. (Rijksmuseum: The Merry Family)

The Louvre, on the other hand, presumes a surprisingly deep level of knowledge on the part of the viewer and this raises the question of what kind of audience the museum is actually targeting. For example, in (43) the word *diurnal* is unusual and maybe a result of a literal translation. Nevertheless, the text pretends that the visitor knows that the scenes in most of Georges de la Tour's works were in candlelight.

(43) The only diurnal painting by Georges de La Tour in the Louvre along with the Saint Thomas, the Cheat illustrates a theme that was frequently taken up in the wake of Caravaggio. (Louvre: The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds)

Similarly, in (44) it expects the visitor to have a good understanding of the Cubist and Surrealist art movements in order to appreciate the comment on the painting. Furthermore, it supposes this is a fairly obvious observation, *It is easy to imagine*, thus underlining the asymmetrical knowledge and power relationship between museum and visitor or suggesting the sharing information at a peer level, or at least expert to (semi-)expert.

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(44) Dialogues with the 20th century
In the simplified volumes, the oddness of the composition, and the comical aspect of the subject matter, the Louvre's Cheat found pride of place in 20th-century sensibility. It is easy to imagine how this work must have fascinated the Cubists in its treatment of mass or the Surrealists with its mysterious character, as did another painting a few years its predecessor: Gabrielle d'Estrées and One of Her Sisters, an anonymous work from the second school of Fontainebleau (Louvre). (Louvre: The Cheat with the Ace of Diamonds)

The Uffizi also calls upon a level of education and cultural knowledge on the part of the visitor that can be fairly described as above average, as for example the reference to Horace's "hedonistic ideology" in the following excerpt.

(45) His depiction of the basket of fruit and the cup of wine proffered by the god is surprising, with such elements interpreted by some critics as a Horatian invitation to frugality, conviviality and friendship. (Uffizi: Bacchus)

It also presumes a specific knowledge of art history as it refers to Vasari, an Italian painter, architect and biographer of Italian artists, without any explanation as to who he is.

(46) It is highly probable that the work was commissioned by a member of the Medici family, although there is nothing written about the painting before 1550, when Giorgio Vasari describes it in the Medici's Villa of Castello, owned by the cadet branch of the Medici family since the mid-15th century. (Uffizi: Birth of Venus)

6. Concluding remarks

Museums envisage their role in society as educators and as having a duty to share their knowledge and expertise with the public. All the art galleries considered in this study certainly fulfil this function by giving contextualising, background information that enhances the understanding and appreciation of the paintings. This information acts as a "prompt" (Kress – Salander 2012: 8) to visitors who can then exploit or capitalise on the facts, observations and insight for their own purposes or interests. However, the analysis has shown a number of similarities and differences in the approach

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adopted by the museums and the relationship they wish to establish with their visitors. In fact, there is a noticeable distinction between the Louvre and Uffizi on the one side and the National Gallery and the Rijksmuseum on the other.

The Louvre and the Uffizi maintain a more traditional, conservative approach and seem to aim at a higher threshold level of shared knowledge amongst visitors, which may, in fact, satisfy some nationalities, bearing in mind Guillot's findings (see above). However, they do not make the museum information easily accessible to all, either intellectually or linguistically. The tone and register used by these two art galleries reflect their vision of the role of museums today, which, as we saw in their institutional webpages, highlights their authoritative status.

In contrast, the National Gallery and the Rijksmuseum seem to place the bar at a lower level, so much so that they could be accused by some perhaps of dumbing down. The National Gallery, in particular, glosses and explains in greater detail than the other websites, although it also makes quite an extensive use of terminology. Their use of pronouns and questions to engage directly with the reader establishes an apparently more symmetrical relationship. Rather than imparting their specialized knowledge in a top-down manner, they seem to share it and thus embody a more contemporary vision of museum communication.

The art galleries' expertise, no matter what their style or approach is, certainly enriches the learning experience. But, unlike knowledge dissemination in other specialised domains, such as law or medicine, where the knowledge of the subject and its technical terminology may be essential for the empowerment of the individual, the average museum visitor has no specific need for the cultural information offered there, except for his own edification. A visit to an art gallery, whether in person or online, can inspire interest and curiosity in art, stimulate wonder at the beauty of the paintings or simply bring pleasure.

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