

Mission: Impossible. Is there a role museum can play in the age of divided society?

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Sub-theme: Redefining the role of Marketing and Public Relations at museum

Five years ago, in 2014, Édouard Louis published his debut, autobiographical novel called *The end of Eddy*. He was 21 years old and came from a village in Picardie, Northern France. When the world discovered this book, everyone has doubts about it: it is a big fiction; no-one lives in such poverty nowadays, maybe fifty, sixty years ago... The book quickly **generated debate over social perception of the working class**. Soon after Louis declared that the rise in popularity of nationalist and right-wing politicians among working class and poor voters in France was a result of changing priorities on the left.

In 2016, a former marine and Yale Law School graduate J. D. Vance came with his book called *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis*. He was 32, coming from the Appalachian cultural region where impoverished immigrants who came from Scotland and Ireland settled in the eighteenth century. The book is a personal analysis of a culture in crisis, view on white working-class Americans from the inside. Shortly – drug-addicted moms, broken marriages, teen pregnancies, alcoholism, violence, mistrust, anger. The book became bestseller shortly after its publication when Donald Trump surprisingly won the presidential elections as it explains the surroundings of many Trumps' voters.

Do you remember how much we were surprised when Donald Trump became president? I still strongly hope Brexit will not happen. And – to the Czech Republic reality – I personally know the only one person who voted Miloš Zeman as a president. I live in a bubble, I know it. But anyway, who voted him? **How this all happened?**

After couple of those affairs **well educated liberals in institutions** became curious about 'the others', people who voted out of anger, out of defiance. And those who mistrust the system and institutions so much they never vote. **Those forgotten, unrepresented**. Those who could not identify themselves with the characters in a film, book, or painting because they are not about themselves and their lives. And what we learn? Those two mentioned books present two insider voices which can give us an idea about the other side of a strange, unexpected, and quite a new situation in social organization, a state called **divided society**. By the way, their popularity derives from it.

We in museums have always believed **we are here to educate masses**. Since the 19th century. Even if we adopted a word **entertainment** and did a pretty good job in implementing it into the educational frames, amusement parks were always our concurrency **we mocked**.

And now we face scandals like **Cambridge Analytica**, the existence of **troll farms** paid by authoritarian regimes to manipulate a public opinion, social media discussions which are more **radical in speech** than ever. Does this world need museums? And what for? If approximately one third of a population does not trust institutions, why museums should be interesting for them? And what about the second third who votes for anti-system, extreme right, and populists? Well, the recipe could be the same as in other cases – minorities, ex-colonies, underserved etc. – we can go and ask them. And draw them in the process of museum work. **But there is a difference**.

Fifty years ago museums adopted marketing techniques to attract audience. What we were able to accept was a lack of interest. But not **disrespect**. Museum position has been always strong as seen as unchallenged, objective, and truthful. What we have not faced yet is disrespect and questioning

of museum authority. If we are going to build a position of a guardian of values we believe in (and there is no other way), we have to be realistic and prepare ourselves that we can become a target of depreciation, hate speech, and disinformation. What might come is self-defence. This topic is very present now as ICOM is discussing a new definition of a museum.

I am an optimistic person. I believe museum as medium and communication channel can still be relevant in the time of divided society. **But values itself does not save us.** We have to not only define them but also find a distinctive way of their presentation relevant to **'the new others'**. And find a functional way to talk to them. It may be painful and it probably changes us a lot. It depends on what we will assess as the core. But we can go through it stronger and more relevant for the new society we will help to build.

But first we have to be interested more about what's going on behind our walls. We also have to find partners for building, establishing something new. And then we have to ask not only how the new, post-divided society could be, but how can we serve the process as for example a platform for a formation of a shared concept of the world.

So how do you personally perceive a museum role in a new society?

Introduction: Despite of an effort of its founders to educate masses, the museum has always been an exclusive place where educated people distinguished themselves from the others. So when we talk about the changing world, what it means for the museum? Is there any reason (and chance) to change its DNA? And if so, how?

Aims: In the last 20 years museums did a pretty good job in following major trends. We adjusted our communications and work regularly with social media. We count with a distraction of a young generation and make our exhibition interactive. We ask for a feedback and design our exhibition according to needs of our visitors. We work with post-colonial, gender, and other concepts. But last three years taught us we live in a neo-liberal bubble. Those yet "forgotten" and under-represented ones found their voice. And it is full of anger. Now we face the movement of populism with the peaks like Donald Trump or Brexit. What it means for museum, its goals, and purpose? And what "in the service of society" means in this context?

Conclusion: Can museum as medium and communication channel be still relevant in the time of divided society? Can it serve for instance as a platform for a formation of a shared concept of the world?

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