



COVID-19 Pandemic: Threat or Opportunity for Blind and Partially Sighted Museum Visitors?

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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ABSTRACT

The Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is having a severe impact on museums and the cultural sector. New social distancing rules, one-way navigation systems, and hand sanitising regulations are affecting the embodied practice of visitors inside the museum. These changes potentially pose a threat to the experience of disabled people, in particular blind and partially sighted visitors, as they create new barriers to access the environment and the collection. On the other hand, the development of accessible digital content and access to online collections offered a positive experience during the lockdown periods, as disabled people could socialise and participate in cultural activities from home.

Museums are now called upon to identify the long-term positive and negative effects of the pandemic on the physical and digital museum experience of disabled visitors. Museum professionals need to work around the clock to ensure that new embodied and digital practices become long-term opportunities to enhance accessibility and inclusion, rather than another insurmountable barrier for disabled people.

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INTRODUCTION

New measures implemented in response to the COVID-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on museums and the cultural sector in the UK and all over the world. The current crisis has given impetus to conversations about access to museum collections both physically and digitally. Museums are re-evaluating their accessibility policies and are looking at new ways to reach out and engage disabled audiences. This paper presents findings from semi-structured interviews carried out from April to July 2020 (during the first UK lockdown) with blind and partially sighted people on their concerns and expectations in light of museums re-opening. It discusses how the pandemic has changed the way institutions think about and provide for accessibility and inclusion. Finally, it includes a reflection on the experience gained throughout the pandemic, and what it can teach us about access, inclusion, and equality of opportunities.

BACKGROUND

In the past 30 years, several research projects and publications have explored how accessible museum environments are for disabled people, and in particular, blind and partially sighted (BPS) visitors. Several projects have looked at the experience of BPS people to identify challenges and opportunities to create more inclusive physical and digital museum environments. In particular, the rise of interest in multisensory museum experiences prompted the re-evaluation of physical access to museums' collections (Candlin 2010; Classen 2017; Howes and Classen 2014; Levent and Pascual Levone 2014; Pye 2007). Studies have re-considered the role of touch in the making of meaning of both BPS and sighted visitors as part of the shift in the value of material culture in the communication of cultural heritage (Candlin 2010; Chatterjee 2020; Classen 2005; Howes and Classen 2014; Pye 2007). Researchers looked at resources like tactile objects, 3D prints, casts, and replicas to communicate material culture properties such as texture, weight, temperature, shape, and size, and to create an alternative understanding of objects and the intangible values that they embody (Cecilia 2021; Kleege 2018).

Similarly, resources like audio descriptions, touch tours, guided tours, large print guides, and tactile drawings have been discussed as accessibility tools to offer BPS people diversified options to visit museums and engage with collections independently or as part of a group (Cecilia 2021; Fryer 2016; Ginley 2013; Hayhoe 2017; Hutchinson and Eardley 2019; Levent et al. 2013). Within a sociocultural framework, Candlin (2010), Kleege (2018), and Hayhoe (2017) argued how being able to visit museums is part of the normalising process experienced by BPS people, as it allows them to remain connected to life before losing their sight and to their previous interests. Additionally, it allows them to maintain a normal level of engagement with sighted people, without feeling excluded by conversations about visual art, cultural heritage, and museum collections (ibid). While the development of accessible resources and inclusive services has been significant, the process to overcome exclusion and to create equality of access practices in museums is ongoing and it requires deep changes at institutional levels (Cecilia 2021; Hayhoe 2017; Levent et. al. 2013; Kleege 2018; Saunders 2014).

COVID-19 AND MUSEUM RESTRICTIONS

The current Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic is having a direct effect on the way BPS people access physical museum spaces and digital museum experiences. On the one hand, we are witnessing a negative impact due to navigation restrictions, new physical barriers, the inability to touch objects, the lack of dedicated assistance, and the difficulty in maintaining social distancing. On the other hand, reports of positive experiences are arising because of the new possibilities to work, study, socialise and participate in cultural opportunities from home, overcoming physical access barriers (Arlow 2020; Hirst and Foster 2021; Low, A. 2020; Low, H. 2020; Scope 2020). This is also due to a renewed empathy towards disabled people, as many non-disabled people experienced several restrictions that are part of disabled people's daily practices for the first time. For instance, 'stay at home' is a concept far too familiar for disabled people. Kleege in 2018 – long before the pandemic erupted – when reflecting on the participation of BPS people in cultural activities like museum visits, wrote:

'Society still sends the message, especially to newly disabled people, that the correct response is a smiling acceptance of one's limitations and a cheerful abandonment of old interests and activities. The underlying advice is to 'stay at home', out of sight and out of mind' (Kleege 2018: 9).

This message has been repeatedly challenged by disabled people, who asserted their self-presence by physically going to museums and by advocating for equal access, resources, and meaningful remote participation. While the 'stay at home' message delivered by the government in response to the pandemic is a health and safety measure (and not something the public is supposed to challenge), it still means non-disabled people have experienced similar access restrictions and physical limitations that are part of the everyday lives of various disabled communities.

POST-PANDEMIC EXPECTATIONS OF BPS VISITORS

While my Ph.D. research project discussed the practice of BPS museum visitors before the pandemic (Cecilia 2021), in light of the current crisis, I decided to create a further layer of analysis and to resume my conversations with some BPS participants, friends and colleagues. The purpose of this was to understand how the pandemic, and the subsequent change of everyday embodied practices due to social distancing, has and will influence the way they approach and use physical and digital museum spaces in the long-term.

Alongside the re-opening of museums in July 2020, after the first UK lockdown, the UK Government and NMDC released detailed guidance to assist institutions (AIM 2020; GOV.UK 2020; NMDC 2020). This guideline looks at accessibility as a mobility issue and mainly gives the general advice to 'consider and cater for access needs' when developing new routes and social distancing systems. However, little is offered in terms of *how* to practically implement such measures. Several organisations have, in turn, released their guidelines and resources for engaging audiences both remotely and in-person in the post-lockdown era (Atkinson 2020; BBC Arts 2020; Byrd-McDevitt 2020; DCN 2020; MDN 2020). Though these resources have been constantly updated throughout 2020 and have started considering the response of visitors to the re-opening efforts, they are still no more than a temporary fix. Museum professionals must intensify their efforts to assess the long-term impact of the pandemic, to ensure it does not undermine the efforts to make museums inclusive, accessible, and welcoming spaces.

My conversations with BPS friends, colleagues, and participants have highlighted some of the negative consequences that the pandemic had on various aspects of the life of BPS people – and museums are not exempt. Findings from my Ph.D. project had already indicated how challenging and stressful the museum environment can be for BPS people. Navigation and wayfinding are among the hardest tasks to perform independently, and there is a growing concern about what it will mean to walk in a museum after the pandemic. Susan,¹ a participant in my Ph.D. research, asked:

'How will it work with social distancing? I can't tell if I'm too close to someone. It has been distressing enough outside. I live in a small supportive community but during the lockdown, I had to come into London for an appointment at Moorfields Eye Hospital. A nightmare. I was called out on the street because I was too close to people! [...] I don't think I can follow social distancing inside a museum. [...] What if people expect that when this is over? It might just be the new normal, how do I do it?' (Susan, 34).

Several participants voiced similar concerns, and they seemed sceptical about how accessible wayfinding guidance offered by museums could be. The main concern seemed to be whether social distancing will leave an impact on how disabled and non-disabled visitors will be expected to behave after the pandemic, and how long it will take to return to a 'normal' pre-pandemic experience. Another major concern regarded the difficulty that BPS people face when judging the correct distancing from other people. Several sight impairments make it difficult (if not impossible) to judge the 2 meters distance. Additionally, guide dogs are not trained nor able to assess the new 'correct' distance. In museums, assessing the correct distancing and positioning in relation to objects and other visitors is part of a set of normative practices

¹ Pseudonyms are employed for all participants to protect confidentiality and anonymity.

and behaviours that experienced visitors mastered long before the pandemic. The difficulties BPS people face in navigating intricate and non-linear museum spaces have been extensively discussed in previous research (Cecilia 2021; Kleege 2018; Rees Leahy 2012). Such difficulties are due in equal measure to their visual impairment and to the complex ways in which museum spaces are designed and organised. The pandemic adds a new layer of difficulty: that of social distancing. Hall discussed the concept of social distancing as early as 1969, more than half a century before the concept started to spread in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. At the time, social distance was described as a 'polite social norm', a normative bodily practice that allows people 'to continue to work in the presence of another person without appearing to be rude' (Hall 1969: 116). As such, social distancing meant that people were not necessarily obliged to interact with someone else present within the same social space. Findings show extensive evidence of the difficulties BPS people encountered, even before the pandemic, when they were faced with the task of maintaining a safe and polite distance between themselves, objects, and other visitors (Hayhoe 2017; Kleege 2018). This is an often taken-for-granted bodily technique in museums, which visitors are somewhat 'expected' to adhere to (Rees Leahy 2012). Social distancing is not a polite option anymore, at least for the time being: it is now a public health requirement and museums can no longer expect visitors to simply 'know how to do it'.

Before the pandemic outbreak, several BPS participants of my Ph.D. project explained they were insecure when approaching objects, due to conservation restrictions and the fear of damaging them. However, at the time all participants expressed genuine excitement at the possibility of touching artefacts. The pandemic seems to have turned this excitement into another cause of distress. Ravi, a participant who stated that he would only visit museums that offered touch tours, claimed that the pandemic has 'totally discouraged' him from visiting in the future:

'Why would I even bother to go if I can't touch anything? Even before I could touch very little. Now it will be impossible' (Ravi, 26).

Julia, an experienced visitor, expressed her worry that museums will struggle to offer tactile opportunities even after the pandemic:

'Accessibility was already not great. What is going to happen? Even if I go back when this is over, will I be able to touch things again? I'm not even sure I want to. How are they cleaning objects? I don't want to touch something that others have touched' (Julia, 46).

Several studies have shown how touch is an invaluable resource for object engagement (Candlin 2010; Cecilia 2019; Chatterjee 2020; Classen 2005; 2017; Ginley 2013; Hayhoe 2017; Kleege 2018; Pye 2007). Tactile experiences, together with other multisensory forms of engagement are traditionally regarded as the main sources to access and experience museum objects (Candlin 2010; Cecilia 2021; Hayhoe 2017; Kleege 2018). Most museums have paused all hands-on activities and tactile exhibits in response to the pandemic. Though it is difficult to predict when it will be considered safe again to touch non-sanitised surfaces, these experiences cannot be put on hold forever while we wait for the pandemic to end. The scientific community is already beginning to reflect on the risk that touching surfaces poses (Goldman 2020; Harvey et al. 2020; Lewis 2021; Pitol and Julian 2021). Following these recent scientific developments, museum professionals, especially conservators, must prepare to experiment with materials and cleaning techniques to be ready to re-start offering tactile opportunities as soon as it will be possible. While certain conservation-related factors (i.e. the damage to objects from hand sanitiser, the difficulty of routinely cleaning and sanitising objects, etc) make it difficult to allow tactile access to original objects, it is possible to start thinking of using other, more affordable and easier-to-clean replicas, like plastic 3D prints or single-use paper replicas.

DIGITAL ENGAGEMENT AND REMOTE PARTICIPATION

Among these concerns related to physical access, however, several participants highlighted the positive aspects of being able to participate in cultural activities from their homes during the lockdown. Anna, a participant and Instagram influencer, explained how she followed online museum activities and programmes with her family, both on social media platforms and museum websites:

'It was good to do that to take your mind off. It really helped. Accessibility wasn't always great, but my family helped a lot. They basically did all the work, I just enjoyed it. Websites should be more accessible' (Anna, 33).

Davide, another participant, casually found through Facebook the opportunity to virtually attend an online virtual reality 360° tour of the British Museum. His enjoyment of that experience led him to try other museum tours at home through the Google Arts & Culture mobile application and his virtual reality headset. London-based blogger and Youtuber Glen reviewed on his popular award-winning blog 'WellEyeNever' the numerous online museum videos and tours he watched and attended remotely. He wrote positively about being able to continue visiting museums from home and described these online resources as 'interesting', 'entertaining' and a 'great opportunity' to learn about history and exhibitions (WellEyeNever 2020). Similarly, other friends and participants reported engagements in cultural activities from home during the lockdown, and the feedback was generally very positive.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

New social distancing rules, one-way navigation routes, and tactile and hand sanitising practices are likely to have an effect on people's embodied behaviour and impact on their engagement in museums, with potential long-term effects. We have become more aware of other walking and standing bodies, and we have adapted to distance our bodies from them. We have started to be conscious of when we touch surfaces, and the need to sanitise hands before touching our faces or other surfaces. Our walking strategies have changed, as has our response to touching objects. The pandemic and the long-term sense of uncertainty risk undermining the independence and confidence levels that experienced BPS visitors had developed. Even more worryingly, they have the potential to create insurmountable barriers that could definitively discourage less empowered disabled people from less privileged backgrounds, to whom museums were already struggling to appeal. The pandemic cannot become yet another excuse to offer disabled people even lesser experiences (Sandell 2002).

The pandemic has proven that remote participation is not only possible, but actually works. Virtual participation – whether as remote working, virtual learning, or participation in social activities – has often been labelled in the past as a fantasy or as difficult to achieve (Ebrahimi et al. 2020; Falkner 2020; Patrick and Barbareschi 2021; Schur et al. 2020). While museums tended to offer some virtual access opportunities, a study by Vocaleyes (2018) on UK museums showed how digital access accessibility has rarely been placed at the forefront of the agenda. And yet, since March 2020, workplaces, universities, schools, museums and other cultural organisations quickly modified their practices to adapt to new physical restrictions and health and safety requirements. Remote engagement and participation, long called for by disabled people, were suddenly a possible and a necessary reality. Shew argued that 'disability-led hacks and long-sought accommodations' suddenly became the 'new normal' (2020). Working from home, learning virtually and going to an exhibition online suddenly became not just a possibility, but the only feasible way during lockdowns. There are several reports of teachers who successfully used the online resources they had previously created for disabled people during the shift from in-person to online learning, or of disabled people, who were already working remotely before the pandemic, experiencing a higher level of inclusion in workplace meetings and decisions than before (Malowney 2020; Shew 2020). Museums have mostly done the same. Resources like 3D models, audio-descriptions and accessible virtual and video tours have been employed to provide enriching, interactive and stimulating online experiences to visitors who could no longer attend exhibitions in person.

The emerging narrative of flexibility and adaptation must acknowledge that the concept of keeping people safe, through remote participation in everyday activities is not something new that emerged with the pandemic. Mainstream employment, schooling systems, academia and cultural organisation have always struggled and often failed to be flexible and inclusive of the requirements of disabled people. They are now paying for their ableism. In the post-pandemic world, which we are currently building, we cannot drop the lessons learned on remote participation only because it will be no longer needed by able-bodied people.

The question we should now ask is: what can museums do to ensure that these new embodied and digital practices become an opportunity to enhance accessibility, rather than create another barrier for disabled people? All museum professionals are now required to act fast to draft strategies that will ensure a safe degree of accessibility. It is time to experiment with different materials, cleaning techniques, technologies, and digital resources. It is time to reach out to traditionally marginalised audiences and effectively communicate that museums are 'places for them', where they can feel welcome, represented, included, and safe. Museums have the social responsibility to look and act beyond the crisis.

Many of the solutions that have been employed to overcome the challenges posed by the pandemic, are the very same solutions that disabled people have advocated for years. First and foremost, the use of audio-descriptions. Originally implemented to provide BPS people access to live theatre, film and television, audio-descriptions are the ideal choice to give BPS museum users access to collections that cannot be touched (Fryer 2016; Hutchinson and Eardley 2019). Audio-descriptive content has been used by museums to engage audiences remotely during the pandemic, as they provide flexible and engaging content that makes up for the lack of physical proximity to objects. While museums normally offer audio-descriptions, they do so for a very limited number of objects. Expanding the available audio-description offer is something BPS visitors have constantly advocated for, usually paired with the possibility of touching objects or replicas. As seen before, plastic 3D prints are made of affordable and replaceable materials, which can be flexible to use and easy to clean. An example of this is how the company Museum in a Box uses small-scaled portable 3D prints of museum objects paired with audio-descriptions to create personalised audio-tactile museum collections for users (Museum in a Box 2021). This is just one example of how 3D prints are adaptable and versatile resources, making them ideal to begin reintroducing hands-on activities for BPS people but also for the general public.

Similarly, other resources like 3D models, virtual gallery tools, video tours and online participatory activities and events have enabled wider participation, while museums have been closed. In most cases, museums had to create or adapt these resources in a hurry and under significant pressure. If such resources had already been more widely implemented and integrated in the mainstream museum offer, as a response to the needs of disabled visitors, the shift from the physical experience to a purely online one would have been significantly smoother during the lockdowns. Finally, as I mentioned before, the re-opening of museums does not mean that all disabled and chronically ill visitors will be able to attend. It is imperative that museums keep the momentum and foster remote engagement and participation, in order to truly offer inclusive experiences.

As seen before, messages like 'stay at home' and 'social distancing' are not new to disabled people. It is time that cultural institutions listen to them and act quickly and efficiently. Museums must learn this lesson and create safe, inclusive and welcoming physical spaces, together with enriching and stimulating digital environments. This will not only be beneficial for disabled people, but for everyone, as it creates cultural practices that facilitate more efficient, more effective, and more financially sustainable responses in normal times and in times of crisis.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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