

# **TOURISM FACING A PANDEMIC: FROM CRISIS TO RECOVERY**



**edited by Federica Burini**



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**Università degli Studi di Bergamo**

**2020**

Tourism facing a pandemic: from crisis to recovery / edited by  
Federica Burini – Bergamo: Università degli Studi di Bergamo, 2020.  
**ISBN:** 978-88-97253-04-4  
**DOI:** [10.6092/978-88-97253-04-4](https://doi.org/10.6092/978-88-97253-04-4)

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#### **Book's initiative:**

Master Course in *Planning and Management of Tourism Systems*  
Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture straniere  
Università degli Studi di Bergamo

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Progetto grafico: Servizi Editoriali – Università degli Studi di Bergamo  
Università degli Studi di Bergamo  
via Salvecchio, 19  
24129 Bergamo  
Cod. Fiscale 80004350163  
P. IVA 01612800167

<https://aisberg.unibg.it/handle/10446/160699>

# The right of access to culture in crisis contexts

Patrizia Anesa\*

## **Abstract:**

*Over the last few years many scholars have endeavored to raise awareness about the need to protect the right of access to culture, both from an individual and a societal perspective. A profound discussion of the relevance of the right to culture proves to be particularly necessary in crisis contexts, and this study aims to reflect on the fulfillment of cultural rights during the 2020 Covid-19 pandemic emergency, which has considerably affected its realization at a global level.*

*Sketching out interpretive touchstones for the definition of cultural rights, this paper offers some theoretical groundings, as well as the description of some practical exemplary cases which have emerged in the current critical context. More specifically, it discusses the role of digitalization in preserving the right of access to culture. Ultimately, this analysis shows that this current historical moment offers both exceptional opportunities and pressing challenges for the actual protection of this right.*

**Keywords:** *cultural rights, access to culture, digital cultural heritage.*

## **1. Cultural rights**

The notion of the right to culture is intended in this work as referring to the right to access, to participate in, and to enjoy culture, with particular attention on cultural heritage. It is an emerging yet fundamental right, which has progressively gained recognition under international law. More precisely, the 2003 UNESCO Declaration defines cultural heritage as “an important component of the cultural identity of communities, groups and individuals, and of social cohesion, so that its intentional destruction may have adverse consequences on human dignity and human rights”, thus linking the right to culture to a wider conceptualization of human rights. Article 27 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (United Nations, 1948) also states: “everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.” Another crucial aspect to be borne in mind is that the fulfillment of such rights has to take place

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according to the individual's choice, as stated in the UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity (2001)<sup>84</sup>.

Cultural rights cannot be used as a justification to limit other rights enshrined in most contemporary juridical systems. A clear example arising in the context of the Covid-19 emergency is the right to health, whose preservation may appear to hinder the full enjoyment of the right to culture, which has seemingly been neglected by the containment measures adopted globally. At the same time, efforts have to be made to protect and safeguard the promotion of culture and its accessibility, by experimenting, expanding, and developing ways of enjoying the cultural arts<sup>85</sup>.

## **2. 2020: A catastrophic year for culture?**

With the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, many countries around the world have progressively closed access to museums, cultural heritage sites, and monuments, as well as places devoted to other cultural activities such as theaters or music venues, with the cancellation of a large number of events<sup>86</sup>. In this critical context, creative initiatives based on new technology have proliferated against the backdrop of the current profound health, social, and economic crisis. Individuals, communities, associations, organizations, and companies around the world have adopted new digital tools to produce, exchange, visit, access, and share, cultural products, events, and sites.

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<sup>84</sup> In this respect, it should be noted that "all persons have the right to participate in the cultural life of their choice and conduct their own cultural practices, subject to respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms" (UNESCO Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, 2 November 2001, art. 5. See [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\\_ID=13179&URL\\_DO=DO\\_TOPIC&URL\\_SECTION=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL_ID=13179&URL_DO=DO_TOPIC&URL_SECTION=201.html) (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).

<sup>85</sup> These ways have often been considered less valuable than more standard and traditional practices, but are now appearing essential in critical contexts.

<sup>86</sup> This has had enormous social and economic effects on all those operating in the field, but such discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper, which focuses predominantly on how the crisis impacts access to culture, with a specific (although not exclusive) focus on the visual arts.

These processes are not new in that institutions have often digitized their repositories in order to respond to the needs and the expectations of new target audiences (Moens, 2018). Through these practices, cultural products and experiences are dematerialized and can be supplemented by the latest scientific information, as well as by interactive activities. Digitization is also useful in terms of collection management, research, marketing, and for educational purposes.

The diffusion of the Internet and new digital technologies has made the realization of cultural rights available through new ways of accessing culture for several years now, and users have gradually become familiar with different types of digital initiatives. Their evolution during the 2020 pandemic has been particularly significant, from a technological, social, and cultural perspective. Digital heritage platforms, virtual museums, online exhibitions, interactive tours, digital cultural flashmobs, and live stream cultural events, *inter alia*, have burgeoned and have experienced great expansion and profound revitalization.

The crisis context engendered by the current pandemic represents an opportunity for a refinement of these platforms, as well as for a redefinition of the paradigm of access to culture. Indeed, the urgent needs generated by this emergency have given new impetus to the experimentation of ultra-modern communicative tools and have boosted the fruition of these initiatives through a wider platform of potential users. Consequently, people who had not utilized these new forms of cultural access before have found themselves exploring new possibilities, examining new tools, and considering instruments that had, perhaps, not previously been of interest.

### **3. Evolving paradigms**

A virtual experience is not intended to unproblematically replace the physical one, but it constitutes an alternative, complementary way of accessing culture. At the same time, the innovative processes implemented (or expanded) during the Covid-19 pandemic display a series of benefits which clearly contribute to the preservation of the right to culture from a variety of perspectives. Evidently, the initiatives developed during the

crisis in 2020 have allowed people from different sections of society and geographical origin to access cultural heritage that had become physically unavailable due to varying reasons, such as the closure of monuments, tourist sites, and museums, or due to the unavailability of means of transport and the closure of borders.

Beyond this objective, the new initiatives have been beneficial to a series of other users. Indeed, there are several circumstances under which certain destinations may remain precluded to a visitor, who can instead access them remotely. This is the case, for instance, for people with different forms of disabilities, who may encounter difficulties when travelling to certain destinations, especially remote ones or ones that cannot guarantee equal accessibility to all. Also, people on a low income may find it problematic to regularly enjoy cultural visits due to the expense of entrance fees to some of the sites or events which may otherwise be of interest to them. As Shaver and Sganga aptly state, “[r]ealizing the right of everyone to cultural participation requires the elimination of discriminatory barriers, as well as special measures to prevent limitations of geography, language, poverty, illiteracy or disability from blocking full and equal participation” (Shaver, Sganga 2010, p. 647)<sup>87</sup>. Although they may have other objectives as well, some of the current initiatives seem to contribute to the full realization of these rights.

There is still a relative scarcity of literature seeking to theorize the impact and consequences of digital innovations for the enhancement of public participation with cultural heritage in the long term, especially as regards marginalized and disempowered sections of society. Thus, the usage of new tools should be

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<sup>87</sup> See UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), *General comment No. 20: Non-discrimination in economic, social and cultural rights (art. 2, para. 2, of the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights)*, 2 July 2009, E/C.12/GC/20, available at: <https://www.refworld.org/docid/4a60961f2.html> (accessed 5<sup>th</sup> April, 2020) “Non-discrimination and equality are fundamental components of international human rights law and essential to the exercise and enjoyment of economic, social and cultural rights” (art. 1, para. 2).

problematized in that it can represent a form of empowerment, but at the same time it can divide and intimidate.

This study does not purport that new forms of accessing culture can fully substitute the traditional ones, nor does it suggest that advanced tools automatically guarantee an access to culture which is fair and equitable. In this respect, the digital divide (seen from a geographical, social, demographic, or educational perspective) casts a shadow on the very democratic access to culture which digitalization itself aims to enhance. Consequently, such dynamics may even be seen as revealing the potential magnification of inequality in terms of accessibility and equitable public participation. Hence, I contend that detailed consideration of the type and quality of public access to digitized processes should not be discarded in the discussion of how to preserve the right to culture in crisis contexts.

Digitalization is colonizing tourism practices resulting in a radical transfiguration of the experiences that visitors to places of interest are becoming familiar with, as well as the role of professionals. This new paradigm of accessing culture profoundly affects the professional ethos of those operating in the field, to the extent that it may even alter current organizational structures and polarize the ability of the professionals to operate in a crisis context, with some positions having difficulty surviving a completely new contextual framework. Tourism industry roles are changing and are most likely at a pivotal point in their evolution. They are currently trying to keep pace with new stimuli, especially from a technological perspective, while preserving their cultural identity. New professional figures are involved, ranging from engineers to security experts, from privacy specialists to programmers and data scientists, among others. At the same time, the professions more traditionally associated with cultural experiences also need to modify their approaches and develop new competences, thus becoming digital curators, digital guides, digital narrators, etc. Clearly, the processes underpinning these new cultural initiatives are innately interdisciplinary and require the strong collaboration between different fields such as computer sciences, arts, digital humanities, communication, museology, new media, etc.

#### 4. Initiatives

As previously mentioned, due to the Covid-19 epidemic, with millions of people around the world progressively forced to self-quarantine and with numerous countries imposing lockdowns, different institutions, museums, galleries, individual artists, collectives, etc. have promoted new digital initiatives (or expanded existing ones) to make their art available to the public.

One of the main ongoing digital initiatives is the *Google Arts & Culture* platform, which involves over 2000 museums, collections, and archives from all over the world and allows people to access a wide range of images and materials made available by the partners. The initiative was launched in 2011 by the Google Cultural Institute, and the initial partner museums included, inter alia, the Tate Gallery (London), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York) and the Uffizi (Florence).

The activity has progressively expanded and has reached a significantly higher level of popularity during the Covid-19 emergency. Thanks to the platform, users can view selected high-resolution images, take virtual tours, and access additional information. The project is inherently multicultural in that it hosts materials from institutions in over 40 countries and it is available in 18 languages. Any search is customized, as the users can proceed according to specific criteria of their choice: by artist, collection, historical period, geographical location, etc., thus making this approach highly participatory.



Figure 1 – Step inside Italy's museums (Google Arts & Culture)<sup>88</sup>

<sup>88</sup> See <https://artsandculture.google.com/> (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).



The *Google Arts & Culture* initiative does not focus exclusively on exhibitions or art collections in places which are currently closed because of the pandemic, but more in general on different cultural products that some people may not be able to access physically. One example is the section “10 Incredible Locations for Street Art Around the Globe”<sup>89</sup> through which people can enjoy the view of different forms of street art, from Buenos Aires to Melbourne.

In several galleries and museums around the world many exhibitions scheduled in 2020 have also had to be closed to the public. Some of these exhibitions have been made available digitally, as is the case of *Rembrandt and Portraiture in Amsterdam, 1590-1670*, at the Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza in Madrid<sup>90</sup>.



Figure 2 – Rembrandt and Portraiture in Amsterdam, 1590-1670 Virtual tour<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> See <https://artsandculture.google.com/story/iAWxzhmS3pNmLQ> (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).

<sup>90</sup> An online tour though the rooms of the exhibition is available at: <https://static.museothyssen.org/microsites/exposiciones/2020/Rembrandt/index.htm> (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).

<sup>91</sup> See <https://www.museothyssen.org/exposiciones/rembrandt-retrato-amsterdam-1590-1670> (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).

The museum's website allows the user to navigate through the rooms of the exhibition, view selected items, and read the related descriptions and comments.

*ArT you ready?* is an initiative promoted by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism which took place on Sunday 29<sup>th</sup> March 2020 and consisted of a digital global flashmob. Following the hashtags *#artyouready* and *#emptymuseum*, people were "invited to publish the photos taken in museums, archaeological parks, theaters, exhibitions, libraries and archives for the whole day, giving preference to those without people".



Figure 3 – ArT you ready? (Italian Ministry of Culture and Tourism)<sup>92</sup>

The initiative collected images of empty cultural sites with the aim to sensitize people to the fact that although those sites may be currently physically closed, they are still 'alive' and their activity continues. It was also an opportunity to 'bring together' art lovers and to share material, comments, and ideas during the pandemic.

## 5. Discussion: New challenges and opportunities

Cultural practices have inevitably been subsumed by the technological revolution and have metamorphosed. The developments that they have undergone in the last few decades,

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<sup>92</sup>See [https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Comunicati/visualizza\\_asset.html\\_1421405590.html](https://www.beniculturali.it/mibac/export/MiBAC/sito-MiBAC/Contenuti/MibacUnif/Comunicati/visualizza_asset.html_1421405590.html) (accessed 7<sup>th</sup> April, 2020).

as well the current thrust to innovating processes, are altering, probably not only temporarily, the paradigm of access to culture. Transferring an offline product to an online context implies a profound reconceptualization of the cultural experience, and the ways the related narratives are recontextualized have a huge impact on how cultural heritage is accessed. The digital audience is becoming more and more active, and with direct choices in their level of involvement. In this respect, people are also invited to like, share, and comment on the materials they see, making their feedback immediate and visible. Beside fulfilling other objectives, these practices contribute profoundly to creating a wider and stronger community of users, who are united by similar cultural interests.

These participatory dynamics can be seen as a source of empowerment and can contribute to guaranteeing the fulfillment of fundamental rights, such as that of access to culture in critical contexts where the circumstances may lead to its neglect. On the negative side, the perception of permanent availability may discourage careful attention on the part of the user and hinder a more mindful experience. Moreover, the minimization of time and cost to access the material may have an unintended consequence – that of a perception of lack of value of the related cultural products. Instead, it should be kept in mind that digital does not mean perennial and unbreakable, but, rather, digital still means fragile and in need of care. The materials constantly need to be kept updated, and privacy protection measures, as well as defense strategies against hacking attacks, have to be cautiously implemented. In this respect, digital advancements also bring with them concerns regarding privacy, intellectual property, security, and use of data.

New technological methods to enhance access to culture have simultaneously proliferated in different countries, and given the higher level of contextual similarity due to the global crisis, it is desirable that future avenues for research in this field account for contrastive explorations to evaluate the different approaches adopted. The user's experiences in online and offline environments thus need to be further investigated with the aim to include an emic perspective from the audience.

Consequently, we need to move beyond a merely pragmatic approach in order to offer a broader reflection on these new forms of cultural practices from both an ontological and an epistemological perspective, as well as a social one. Although the discussion of the single cases and their practical applicability can be revealing, we need to gain finer abstractions of such cases in order to reflect on this new order of experiences and how it is conceptualized by both the producers and the audience, by adopting an interdisciplinary viewpoint.

The transformation of products or events into a digital format does not merely imply an alteration of the way material is accessed, but also their incorporation within a broad digital and particularly visually-oriented culture. Thus, digital technologies are not simply functional to the cultural experience, but they profoundly shape the essence of such experience (Moens 2018). In other words, the technology is not neutral and it mediates the way we access cultural heritage. Therefore, such initiatives should not be passively accepted as a perfect replacement for other forms of fruition, and constant philosophical and cultural reflection needs to take place. This critical discussion should also involve the wider audience, who should be invited to reflect upon the role of the technology, not only as an instrument but also as a mediator and an interpreter of cultural practices.

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