The Website as a Virtual Host of the Museum: a Comparative Study

Three National Museums Meet Digital Audiences

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Abstract: The article focuses on analyzing the websites of three prominent national museums in Romania, Bulgaria, and Serbia. These websites are examined within the broader context of the cultural institutions' activities, as they hold significant importance in the cultural infrastructure of their respective neighboring Balkan countries. A comparison table is utilized to establish evaluation criteria for the digital platforms, with a particular emphasis on content.

The article extensively characterizes the sections dedicated to the main and temporary exhibitions, which play a crucial role in facilitating digital engagement with both existing and potential audiences. The chosen approaches for showcasing museum teams and collections are also scrutinized. In addition, gaps and inconsistencies are identified by comparing these websites with others in the museum domain. The evaluation of video materials and digital tours of the exhibitions adheres to the high standards set by modern digital technologies in the cultural sector.

Consequently, the article concludes by formulating three recommendations aimed at enhancing the websites of the national history museums in Bulgaria, Romania, and Serbia. These recommendations are intended to address the identified shortcomings and improve the overall digital experience provided by these institutions.

Keywords: Website; National History Museum; Digital Heritage; Bulgaria, Serbia, Romania

1. Introduction

History museum sites serve a variety of functions that cater to different audiences. One of the primary functions of a history museum site is to serve as a public resource. The site can provide access to information about the museum's exhibits, collections, and educational programs. This information can be used by visitors to plan their visit, learn more about the museum's offerings, and explore the museum's history and significance.

In addition to its public function, a history museum site can also serve an academic function. Researchers and scholars can access information about the museum's collections, exhibits, and archives to support their research. The site can also provide information about the museum's research and publications, as well as opportunities for collaboration with the museum's staff.

The museum website can serve as a gauge of interest in exhibits and team activities. This becomes a reality only when a convenient feedback interface is created.

Existing research provides valuable results from in-depth analyzes of museum audiences through institutional website tools (Walsh et al., 2017).

Finally, a history museum site can serve a communicative function by fostering dialogue and engagement with the community. The site can provide a platform for sharing information, ideas, and perspectives about the museum's exhibits and collections. Through social media and other online channels, the museum can connect with a broader audience and encourage participation in its programs and events (Laws, 2015).

Overall, a history museum site serves as a critical resource for the public, researchers, and the community at large, providing access to information, fostering research and scholarship, and promoting dialogue and engagement. A museum website has the ability to transcend geographical and linguistic boundaries and provide cultural content to the widest audiences. With good design and intelligent management, it can increase the attractiveness of the museum and bring new visitors to it (Ambrose and Paine, 2006).

This article focuses on the websites of three national historical museums in three neighboring countries, namely Bulgaria, Serbia, and Romania. The primary objective is to examine the mechanisms employed in the presentation of cultural content. A comparative analysis is utilized to identify commonalities and differences, including those changes that occurred during the Covid crisis. Particular emphasis is given to the typology of expressive mediums and modes of communication with the target audience. Additionally, distinct national interpretations of the past are highlighted.

The selection of the countries was based on the principle of geographical and cultural-historical proximity. All three preserve outstanding values from Prehistory and Antiquity. Their medieval traditions are connected with Byzantium and Orthodoxy. They were part of the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet bloc. Bulgaria and Romania are part of the European Union, and Serbia occupies an independent place in Europe with affiliation to a number of common structures and initiatives. There are areas of dispute about the past between the official historiographical schools of the three countries. However, they do not dominate contemporary interpretations of history, and this is clearly reflected in museum narratives at the national level.

2. Museums and Their Websites

The National History Museum of Bulgaria (Национален исторически музей на България) was established in 1973 as a representative institution for the preservation of cultural heritage. It has a fund of over 400,000 movable cultural assets and its main exposition is unfolded in a building with a spacious park, built during the socialist period as a residence of the communist elite [Figure 4]. The museum manages several branches in the country, among which stands out one of the Bulgarian sites under the protection of UNESCO - the medieval church in Boyana district - near Sofia (Dimitrov. 2004). The

museum's website was created in 2019 and has most of the features of a quality digital product with cultural content[1].

National History Museum of Romania (Muzeul Național de Istorie a României) became part of the country's public life in 1972, uniting several previously profiled museums. It is housed in the former post palace, located in the city center, where an 8,000 sq.m. exhibition is unfolded. Its rich archaeological collection includes numerous respectable artifacts from ancient eras. The emphasis of the exposition is placed mainly on the modern and contemporary history of Romania. [Figure 3]. The period of socialism is strongly represented with a highly critical assessment of the communist regime (Bădică, 2011). In the period of the Covid crisis and at the current time when the main part of the museum's exposition is closed, the museum website has important communication functions[2]. The National Museum of Serbia (Serbian: Народни музеј Србије / Narodni muzej Srbije) is a representative cultural and scientific institution, established shortly after the liberation the country from the Ottoman rule – in 1844. The museum preserves over 400,000 values that keep the memory of the country's past and culture. It is housed in an old building with representative architecture, located in the center of the capital Belgrade. Its fund includes 38 collections of cultural values of great historical and aesthetic value. Its exposition presents national history and traditions, as well as examples of world masters. [Figure 1]. The team develops fruitful scientific and promotional activities (Starovic et al., 2017). Its site is informative, dynamic, and supported in the two standardized alphabets of the Serbian language – Cyrillic and Latin[3]. The three national museums in the Balkan countries neighboring one another serve crucial public functions that pertain to preserving national identity and bolstering awareness of belonging to a distinguished cultural heritage. They promote the principal historiographical paradigms of the respective national research centers among the general public. Furthermore, the museums' representative exhibits enhance the international prestige of the countries and broaden the notion of their association with the notable accomplishments of European civilization. This approach to public and scientific policy aligns with the customary functions of national museums in other countries (Aronsson and Elgenius (Eds), 2004).

Objectifying the analysis and evaluation of museum websites is a scientific problem of high importance (Kabassi, 2017). Finding accurate criteria for qualitatively and quantitatively understanding the achievements and weaknesses of this basic digital communication tool is key to future improvements in working with museum audiences and stakeholders. The currently available research on the sites of institutions of high public importance for a given country shows that it is necessary to overcome certain stereotypes and even partial digital inertia to improve the work in the sector (Ma and Hu, 2022). In view of this finding, the present article has not only an analytical and descriptive character, but also elements of prescriptiveness regarding the future improvement of museum websites.

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[1] Official website of the National History Museum of Bulgaria – Avaible at: https://historymuseum.org/ (last view: 28.07.2023)
[2] Official website of the National History Museum of Romania – Avaible at: https://www.mnir.ro/ (last view: 28.07.2023)
[3] Official website of the National History Museum of Serbia – http://www.narodnimuzej.rs/ (last view: 28.07.2023)

3. Comparative Analysis of the Three Museum Sites

The museums' websites were created by professionals who incorporated design elements that reflect the cultural content offered by each museum. Basic information is displayed through horizontal banners with drop-down menus. All three sites have an alternative main menu located at the bottom of the first page for user convenience. The Bulgarian and Romanian websites have a black and white color scheme, which creates a sense of professionalism and conservatism. The Serbian National Museum website utilizes pastel tones with gray and light beige backgrounds, and the main banners are black with white text. The main menus are well-designed and feature relevant images to enhance the user experience.

Basic information about institutions is highlighted, including historical overviews with illustrations, information about the buildings and the missions of the museums, as well as contact information. [Figure 3]. Guidelines for access to the buildings, opening hours and prices for the different categories of public are posted in easy-to-find places, with English translations of this information also available. The prices and ways of engaging a guided tour are described in detail, as well as the languages in which this service can be used. The branches of the museums in Bucharest and Sofia are included in the priority menus with information on location, prices, and opening hours. A similar approach was applied to the design of the museums of another Balkan country – Greece (Vrana et al., 2015). The National Museum in Bucharest explicitly notes that the main exhibition is partially operational as the building is being reconstructed. The user encounters a difficulty with all three sites when he wants to find the links to the profiles of the relevant institutions in social networks, as well as links to the sites of their partner organizations. All three sites present the directors with official access data.
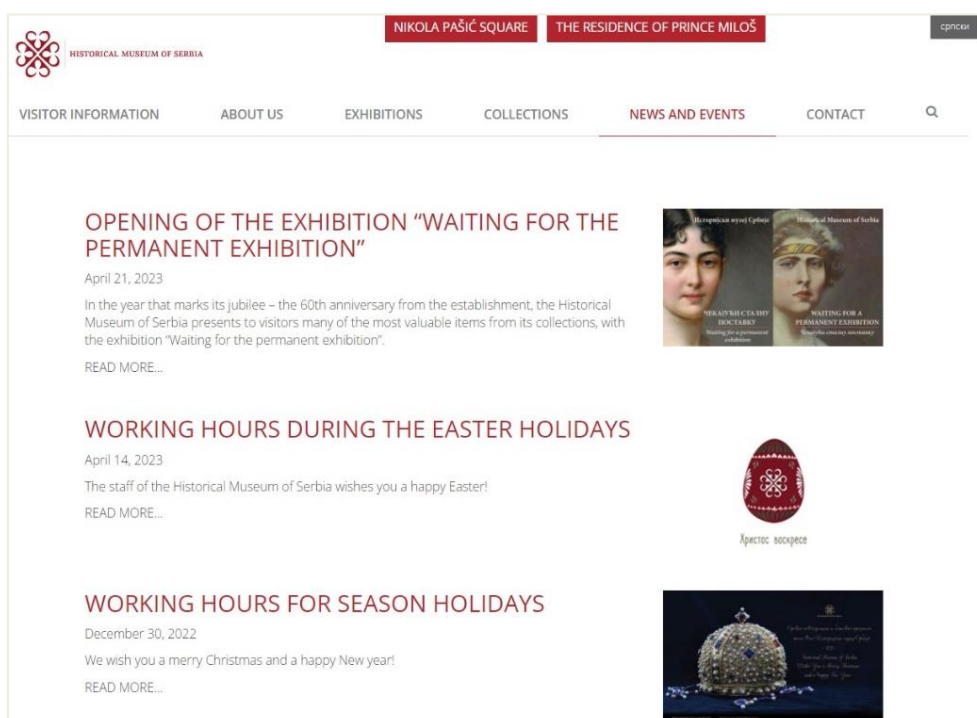

Figure 1: Website of the National History Museum of Serbia – screenshot

The menu with list of the *museum team*, which is crucial for representation and communication purposes, unfortunately, all three observed institutions have a very poor representation of it. The Bucharest Museum provides basic information to the management and PR department, including a full list of full-time positions with salaries, but without personalization, which can be found in the documents sub-menu. The Serbian National Museum has also taken a similar bureaucratic approach. Contact details for department heads are published on the website. The National Museum of Bulgaria, on the other hand, lists the heads of departments with their corresponding telephone numbers and e-mails, as well as a full list of scientific group members, including their contact information.

However, the lack of transparency regarding the specialists working in museums presents a significant obstacle to their communication with other museologists and scientists from the same field. Among museums from countries with similar backgrounds, Estonia stands out as the best example of transparency in this regard, as the composition of the National Museum is presented in full on their cultural organization's website, including names, positions, e-mails, and telephone number . This demonstrates the principle of transparency in everyday work and the importance of a direct connection between museums and the communities they represent and whose heritage they preserve. In addition to the possibilities of direct communication with the audiences, the National Museum of Romania offers a mobile application applicable to the main electronic devices. In the physical spaces of the museums, the websites can be accessed via QR codes.

In terms of *administrative documentation*, the museum in Bucharest is the most open. Links are provided to all the main legal acts on the basis of which the institution operates. Regulations, plans, and financial statements are also published. The National Museum of Bulgaria recently published its annual reports for the last five years - only in Bulgarian. Information on budget and financial management is missing. The National Museum of Serbia also presents annual reports, but only for the period 2003-2016, which is evidence of a non-systematic policy of transparency. Links to some financial plans and reports are empty. Without contradicting the Code of Ethics of Museums created by ICOM (ICOM, 2017), the observed approach is not particularly useful for strengthening the public image of prestigious national institutions. In the context of ongoing work, it is also useful that the three museums publish links to sites of their partners, as well as background figures and texts on current and past projects with cultural and educational content. The strong emphasis of the work on national traditions in art is reflected in one of the projects characterized in detail on the website of the Serbian National Museum - the creation of a catalog of the famous artist Pavle (Paja) Jovanović (1859-1957). Not only is the project promoted on the site, but the resulting book is promoted as available for reading and research (Petrović, 2022).

Each of the three featured sites contains a special menu dedicated to the *collections* of the respective museum. The team of the Romanian National Museum has selected only four collections, each of which is presented with voluminous texts and

numerous illustrations. Special emphasis is placed on cartographic and philatelic artifacts. The contents of a small group of ethnographic museum models have been revealed. The classic approach of the Belgrade Museum inspires reliability. Attractive and significant cultural values from four eras have been selected - Prehistory, Antiquity, Middle Ages, New and Modern History. Short texts refer to relevant cultural and social processes. A tangible preference is given to works of art. The National Museum of Bulgaria cares for 59 collections of thematically structured artifacts. Only 27 of them are described and illustrated on the site. The description strikes a balance between text and vision, with each artefact presented through a quality photograph and brief description. All three museums have not provided links of their digitized objects to any of the major virtual libraries, for example Europeana. This weakness of approach makes museum values less visible in the global digital space. The current museum theory and practice also requires a more detailed description of the metadata of each object published on the institution's website (Regimbeau, 2021).

Museum websites[4]	NHMR[5]	NHMB[6]	NHMS[7]
General data	+	+	+
Contact information	+	+	+
Museum units	+	+	+
Team	-	Partially	-
Documents[8]	+	+	+
Collections	+	+	+
Permanent exhibitions	+	+	+
Temporary exhibitions	+	+	+
News	+	+	+
Events	+	+	+
Educational programs	+	+	+
Scientific journals	+	+	+
Media contacts	+	+	+
Projects	+	+	+
Online tickets	+	-	-
Online museum shop	+	-	-
Affiliate links	+	+	+
Digital library	+	+	+
Mobile app	+	-	-
Short films	+	-	+
Virtual tour(s)	+	-	-
English version	Partially	Partially	Partially

Figure 2. Comparative analysis of the three museum sites

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[4] The existence of content, corresponding to the given criterion is indicated by *a plus sign* (+); its absence is indicated by *a minus sign* (-).
[5] National History Museum of Romania.
[6] National History Museum of Bulgaria.
[7] National History Museum of Serbia.
[8] This criterion refers to the availability of published official administrative documents related to the work of the museum.

The *main (permanent) exhibitions* are presented on the sites of all three museums through a main menu and through corresponding sub-menus. During the process of constructing the electronic platforms, the teams have considered the central role of exhibition in contact with audiences – real and virtual (Dean, 2002). Romanian experts have opted for more extensive descriptions of the three profiled exposures they currently support. A virtual walk in one of them is also attached. In the course of the ongoing restoration of the main building, they could preview elements of previous exhibitions on the Internet, as well as expand the scope of virtual exhibitions and digital libraries with images and descriptions of significant cultural assets. The National Museum of Serbia opens only one page of its website for the main exhibition. The content of its main parts is described there. The illustrations are pictures of individual halls without explanatory texts. The collection principle and the team's bias towards works of art have left their mark here as well. The data on the hall dedicated to Yugoslav art, which is generally little-known outside of Serbia and controversial in content and pathos in the rest of the former Yugoslavia, is essential. The team of the National Museum of Bulgaria has adopted the most detailed approach. Each of the eight permanent exhibits in the main building is described in text and illustrated with photographs. The same applies to the expositions in the museum branches. The content analysis of the targeted segment of the museum sites shows a rather bureaucratic approach to the promotion of the main expositions. The data from the sites repeat many of the texts that are available in the halls. There is a lack of intriguing details and attractive virtual expansions, through which the interest of wider audiences could be provoked. The full bilingualism of these website pages (the respective national language and English) opens wider the doors for international presentation of the cultural wealth of each of the countries.

Figure 4: Website of the Bulgarian National History Museum – screenshot

The current news sections on the websites of the three museums features the *temporary exhibitions*. The Belgrade Museum team exclusively promotes them through Serbian language texts that provide location and duration details. Similarly, the Bucharest specialists take a comparable approach, publishing digital copies of the exhibition posters,

but only in Romanian. The National Museum of Romania allows digital viewing of their latest temporary exhibitions, offering virtual walks or professionally created videos. These exhibits showcase voluminous and captivating photos of showcases and artifacts. The broader digital presentation of temporary exhibitions serves as a precursor to their complete virtualization, a recommendation made by experts during the Covid crisis (Burke et al., 2020) The National Museum in Sofia also adopts this approach, dedicating a section on their website for virtual "clones" of temporary exhibitions. The Bulgarian specialists advertise the exhibition openings with texts, photographs, and location information. Moreover, all materials of this nature on the website of the National Museum of Bulgaria are available in English as well. One common weakness observed in all three national cultural institutions is the absence of a distinct retrospective approach when presenting temporary exhibitions. It would be intriguing for digital audiences to access visual material from events held decades ago, which are predominantly archived within the museum collections.

Current news and events are present with special menus in all three targeted sites. However, they are heavily centered on the institutions' exhibitions and scientific events. Project activities are periodically presented. The possibilities for expanding current information are very high and underutilized. Almost no news is published about the renovation works of the buildings, the maintenance of the museum funds, the conservation and restoration activities. The mentioned aspects of cultural heritage protection are interesting not only for specialists but also for the general public. There are no joint publications with established media, as well as links to broadcasts on television and other electronic media about museum events and values. Neglecting the news pages of the site does not correspond to the new emphasis in the mission of the museum, related to its more emphasized communicability at the local, national, and international levels (Drotner (ed), 2019).

Only one of the three museum sites - the Romanian one - offers the possibility of *electronic purchase of tickets and books*. Museum souvenirs typical of the country are not offered for purchase electronically, but only on site in the buildings of the institutions. There are also no options for paying electronically for some of the services - talks, inquiries, expert evaluations. A good example of a well-functioning museum shop among institutions of national status is the National Museums of Scotland[9]. It offers a wide range of goods and services directly related to the museum's collections and messages. This approach should be a model in the communication policy of all three institutions that are the subject of this review.

In contrast to the offline stores, the *educational programs* are quite densely present on the websites of the three national museums. A particular variety is available on the learning and entertainment platform of the Belgrade Museum. In the "Learning and entertainment" section there is a virtual museum for children and adults, a game application, a presentation of the main educational programs that take place in the halls of the institution. Curricula for classes on topics from the primary and secondary school

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[9] National Museums Scotland Shop – Avaible at: https://shop.nms.ac.uk/ (last view: 28.07.2023)

content are particularly useful. They are not only on historical topics, but also on literary and art history subjects. A special structure - an educational center - has been created for the National Historical Museum of Bulgaria. It has its main menu on the site, where it announces its programs and forms of communication with target groups. The Romanian pedagogues offer thematic classes with objects from the museum's collection, dedicated to significant historical events and personalities. A large number of the more successful lessons have been recorded on videos that are available to Internet audiences. Thus, they can help other teachers to discover the potential of working with original cultural values in their natural cultural environment – museum halls. All videos with educational content are also available on the YouTube channels of individual institutions. The weakest presence with video materials is marked by the National Historical Museum of Bulgaria, which does not maintain a YouTube channel and publishes videos as an exception, but not on its website, but on its Facebook page.

Montenegro	National museum of Montenegro, King Nicholas museum, Cetinje	72 848
	Maritime Museum of Kotor	63 800
	Contemporary Art Centre of Montenegro, Podgorica	25 000
	Museums and Galleries of Budva, Memorial House Red Commune	11 140
	Homeland Museum of Bar	9 599
	Total number of admissions for the five most visited museums	182 387
Serbia	Gallery of the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts, Belgrade	151 276
	National Museum, Belgrade	150 200
	Nikola Tesla Museum, Belgrade	125 950
	Museum of Yugoslavia, Belgrade	123 937
	National Museum, Niš	92 927
	Total number of admissions for the five most visited museums	644 290
Bosnia and Herzegovina (¹)	Historical Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo	68 600
	Museum of Modern Arts, Banja Luka	66 877
	Public Institutions Museum, Sarajevo	51 200
	The National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sarajevo	32 518
	Museum of the Republic of Srpska, Banja Luka	26 900
	Total number of admissions for the five most visited museums	246 095

Figure 5: Culture statistics. Edition 2019. (European Union, 2019: p. 39).

By tradition and by definition, the museum also has *scientific functions* aimed at researching the cultural wealth stored in its funds, as well as the entire sector corresponding to its profile (Gob and Drouguet (Eds), 2021). The main result of scientific research is periodicals, catalogs, and monographs. All three mentioned institutions maintain their periodicals with scientific content. These books are presented on the sites in special sections. These books are presented on the sites in special sections where they are published in full text for use by the wider academic community. Other scientific books are also presented, but only with bibliographic data and short annotations. Promotional printed materials such as catalogs, brochures, flyers, etc. they are not available through the sites – for free download or for purchase. Almost invisible is the profiled scientific work of museums, aimed at the analysis of individual artifacts, at the scientific processing of new collections or at the identification of valuable objects from the past. As part of the main functions of national museums, these activities are extensive and significant for

society. In European terms, however, their promotion through digital platforms is not an accepted practice. More conservative circles consider that the described approach is a form of preservation of the collections. For another part of the collegium, these activities are not attractive to the extent that they would increase the interest of the general public in the processes of cultural heritage protection.

4. Conclusion

On a pan-European level, there is a tendency for museums of national history to decrease their influence, due to the objective processes of globalization. This trend is valid to a large extent in Bulgaria and Romania, where ethnographic archaeological museums or reserves are profiled in first place in terms of attendance. In Bulgaria, for example, the most visited museum is the ancient fortress of the Second Kingdom in the city of Veliko Tarnovo. In Romania, two large open-air ethnographic museums and the Bran Castle Museum gather the most visitors. National history museums are in second and subsequent place in terms of attractiveness. This trend is also related to increasing the attractiveness of profiled museums in the fields of art, technology, ethnology, and archaeology. In the countries of the former Yugoslavia, national museums still occupy a prominent place in the hierarchy of preferred places of memory [Figure 5]. The mention tendency is a normal result of the difficult processes of national and state separation in the region. The outlined trends in visitor interest fluctuations would be overcome in a positive direction if more active and professional work were done on the digital presentation of the national heritage on the Internet. The role of the institutional website in this direction is extremely productive. In this direction, I allow myself to formulate some recommendations for improving the digital content and modernizing the interface of the analyzed three national historical museums – Serbia, Romania, and Bulgaria.
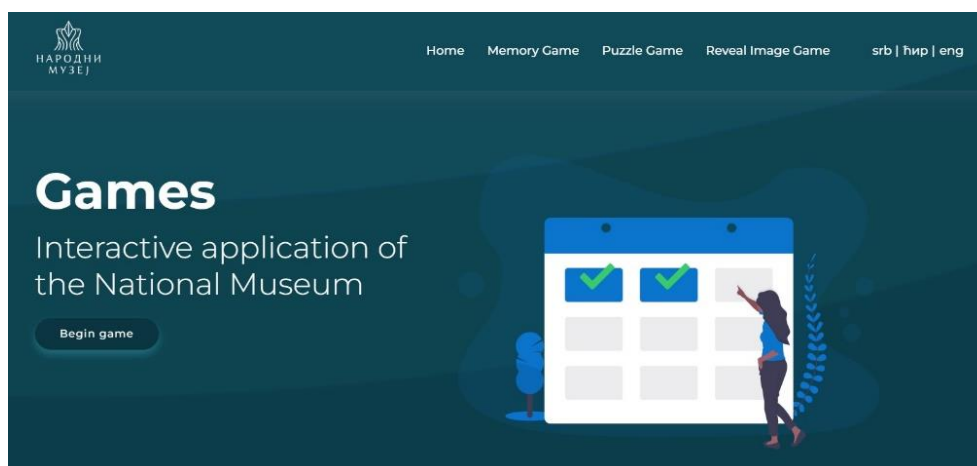

Figure 6: Interactive application of the National Museum of Serbia with access to the games section - screenshot

The *first recommendation* refers to the need to choose a more colorful (in the range of pastel tones) website interface. The black and white contrasts of the digital platforms of the museums in Bucharest and Sofia leave a feeling of reading a classic book and of a

formal attitude towards the public. In this regard, the website of the Belgrade National Museum, developed in the palette of warm earthy colors, is much more attractive. The main menus should also be more user-friendly, with access to the most essential sections on the main page. Official information – staff, administrative documents, links to partners and databases can only be accessed from the menu at the bottom of the main page. The internal connections between the individual sections of the platforms should have been developed to a greater extent. This is one convenience that savvy consumers seek and prefer.

Secondly, the News and Events sections should be much more dynamic, rich, and diverse. From the point of view of theory and practice, the website of the cultural institution is a profiled media that has not only an informational function but is a promoter of the team's work and a channel for feedback to the audiences. The preference of news channels for social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and Telegram) reduces the long-term effect of news feeds, due to the digital transience of social media posts. Regardless of its active presence on social networks, the museum must continue to keep the sites up-to-date and fully reflect the current and long-term projects of the team.
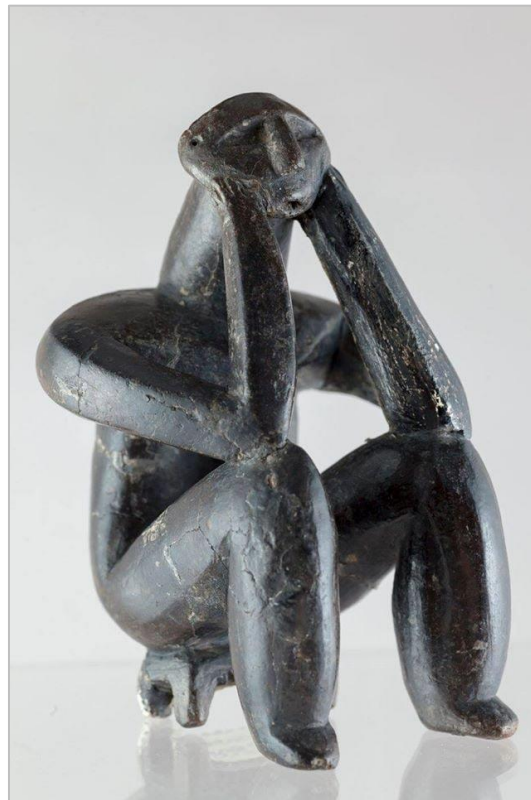

Figure 7: The Cernavoda Thinker – a famous Neolithic statue, Hamangia culture, masterpiece of prehistoric art – part of the cultural wealth of the National Museum of Romania and artistic face of the museum

My *third recommendation* focuses on the challenging yet rewarding task of presenting the museum's "hidden sectors" - cultural values that are not currently on display, including restoration works, applied studies, and scientific expeditions. It is undoubtedly valuable for the audience to be acquainted with the renowned Cernavoda

Thinker, an iconic symbol of the National Museum of Romania [Figure 7]. This exceptional terracotta sculpture, considered one of the greatest masterpieces of late Stone Age art, establishes a direct connection through time, bridging contemporary intellectual aspirations with our prehistoric ancestors who inhabited Europe 6,000 years ago (Bailey, 2005).

However, it is equally important for the public to be aware of the tens of thousands of movable cultural assets from Prehistory, meticulously cared for by the Bucharest Museum, which are stored in the fund repositories and not included in the current expositions and catalogs. Leveraging modern digital technologies, the museum's website can effectively cater to the expectations of both general and specialized audiences in this regard, serving as the primary platform for such endeavors.

Lastly, let us not overlook the fact that the museum is also a place for entertainment. Alongside providing knowledge, the website of the cultural organization should offer interactive games [Figure 6], links to virtual tours, and opportunities to engage in creative activities such as workshops, interest clubs, and various creative events. By doing so, the museum will fully embrace its mission as an inclusive institution committed not only to the preservation and presentation of cultural values but also to their dissemination, reflecting the legacy of past generations and the remarkable achievements of the human race.

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Translation of abstract and keywords into Bulgarian

Резюме: Статията се фокусира върху анализ на уебсайтовете на три известни национални музея в Румъния, България и Сърбия. Тези уебсайтове се изследват в по-широкия контекст на дейността на културните институции, тъй като имат важно значение в културната инфраструктура на съответните съседни балкански страни. Ползва се сравнителна таблица за установяване на критерии за оценка на цифровите платформи, с особен акцент върху съдържанието.

Статията подробно характеризира разделите, посветени на основните и временните изложби, които играят решаваща роля за улесняване на дигиталното ангажиране както със съществуваща, така и с потенциална публика. Разгледани са и избраните подходи за представяне на музейни екипи и колекции. В допълнение, пропуските и несъответствията се идентифицират чрез сравняване на тези уебсайтове с други в музейната област. Оценяването на видео материалите и дигиталните обиколки на изложбите се придържа към високите стандарти, поставени от съвременните дигитални технологии в културния сектор.

Логично статията завършва с формулиране на три препоръки, насочени към подобряване на уебсайтовете на националните исторически музеи в България, Румъния и Сърбия. Тези препоръки имат за цел да отстранят идентифицираните недостатъци и да подобрят цялостното цифрово изживяване, предоставяно от тези институции.

Ключови думи: Уебсайт; Национален исторически музей; Дигитално наследство; България, Сърбия, Румъния

KIN Journal, 2023, Volume 09, Issue 2

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