

Memory Institutions Think Tank on the Post-COVID-19 Landscape

Session 2

DEMONSTRATING THE RELEVANCE OF GLAMS IN A CRISIS CONTEXT— BUILDING CAPACITY AT THE LOCAL LEVEL

Presenter's Discussion Paper

Relevance of GLAMs in a Crisis Context

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Note: The document provided by the presenter has been modified slightly to make it easier to read on the web. The meaning has not been altered.

Dear friends,

Everything I am about to say is based on four convictions:

1. Pandemics are not only biological. They are also sociological;¹
2. Culture is an indispensable component in the reconstruction of post-pandemic societies;
3. The creative economy and the social economy are inseparable (“the creative economy holds the key to a strong Europe recovery”);
4. Finally, in the future assessment of the pandemic, the acceleration of the transition to the digital age must be considered as an asset, since the pandemic has had such a profound effect on consumer habits and lifestyles.

On COVID-19

Global and local, invisible and mediatized, sequenced and endless, immaterial and omnipresent, COVID-19 has been and is still costly in human lives and burdensome in social constraints of all kinds. This is not one more crisis that will just fade away some day. Three months after the virus emerged,

¹ Nicholas Christakis gives a powerful demonstration of this in his latest book, *Apollo's Arrow*.

nearly half the planet entered lockdown and 10 million Americans were out of work. This certainly attests to the strength and speed of the spread of COVID-19 across the globe. Over three months, the number of human hopes stolen, the projects cancelled and the dreams ruined are incalculable. The violence of this assault was matched only by the force of the necessary response and, in people's minds, by the flow of daily statistics about the number of cases, hospitalizations and often atrocious deaths that, over the past 10 months, have made and continue to make the front page of every media outlet in the world. Moreover, according to some surveys, the fear of death haunts the hearts and minds of a third of citizens in many countries.

This pandemic has caused great material and immaterial damage to human societies, including our own, and to the people who comprise them. From the collapse of the economy and its hundreds of millions of victims, to the temporary rescue by central banks and their low interest rates, and the deterioration of the social, psychological and mental health of many, the provisional assessment of this pandemic is extremely serious. The work of reconstruction will be complex and vast in the material and immaterial spheres of the lives of individuals, communities and nations affected by the pandemic, as well as in the minds of the multitudes that it has impacted each day over the past 300 days.

In an enlightening text, the former Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund, Dominique Strauss-Kahn, states that, "the return to normalcy will not be the same as before. Some financial assets will fall to zero because the companies they represent will close in greater proportions than in previous crises."² (translation) The risk of ruin has returned!

Taking stock of this global damage will be difficult. Recovery will be complex and long. The digital push has changed the world of work and the delivery of multiple public and private services. NASDAQ predicts that by 2040, 95 percent of purchases will be made online. Our urban landscapes will be radically transformed. There will be no going back to the pre-existing status quo. We must imagine something else. We will have to rebuild something else, because the immense invisible and incomprehensible that surrounds us, to borrow Marguerite Yourcenar's beautiful expression, is heightened so much by the pandemic: from science to global governance, from human mobility to public control, from vital reciprocity to mental fragility.

I will answer the question raised about the relevance of GLAMs (galleries, libraries, archives and museums) in a crisis—or post-crisis—context, in three parts: their contribution to societal reconstruction; the interest for their constituents in pooling certain resources; and the demands of the digital age and the need to combine economic and social investment, which cannot be considered in isolation.

1. What can be, and what should be, the contribution of GLAMs in the work of imagination and action to respond to the needs of people, and in strengthening and rebuilding common social spaces, civil society, and its indispensable citizen groups and institutions, including schools at all levels?

Collectively and individually, our institutions have considerable means at their disposal: free and generally accessible space, which has become so scarce in our cities; multiple production facilities; and

² "L'être, l'avoir et le pouvoir dans la crise," by Dominique Strauss-Kahn, le Club des juristes, April 10, 2020, <https://blog.leclubdesjuristes.com/etre-lavoir-et-le-pouvoir-dans-la-crise>.

existing resources to assist with gaps in literacy, to light the paths to employment, and to provide guidance on discovering, accessing and benefiting from public services. Finally, the partners in GLAMs have the technological and other means to access knowledge, leisure and culture. Can this set of resources be used differently, better and more strategically to serve the restoration and improvement of citizenship?

Clearly, our institutions each have the duty, in the face of such confusion in so many areas that relate to their missions, resources and capacities, to review all of their services and programming in the coming years to better contribute to this restoration and improvement. Our institutions, as a group, could seek convergences between their services and programs, then enrich them with offerings that they create together.

One might consider, for instance, plans for people in seniors residences, where, when the pandemic was at its worst, the situation was precarious, substantial, terrifying and grotesque, as well as plans for students and educational institutions, who were also greatly affected by the pandemic.

Living together is a huge operation, with its own rites, rhythms, rules, procedures, routes and resting places. Our institutions are at the heart of these processes. The pandemic has slowed, stopped and weakened our operations. Physical distancing, lockdowns, curfews, streamlining of services, restrictions on home and institutional visits, and limits on gatherings, assemblies and meetings—which were until then essential—have governed our personal and professional lives for almost a year and will continue to do so for who knows how long. Millions of hours of conversations and sharing, whether superfluous or crucial, intimate or open, have been and are being cancelled. It will take a great impetus for the immense operation of living together to regain its rites, rhythms, rules, procedures, routes and resting places. According to Michel Serres, the real novelty is the universal access to people through Facebook, to places through GPS, and to knowledge through Google and Wikipedia.³ GLAMs must be part of this momentum.

These contributions would stimulate the consumption of knowledge and cultural products. Some are concerned about anticipated declines. Others point to good performances, such as book sales, publicly acclaimed offerings by artists, and the growing volume of our digital users. Here, as is so often the case, the statistics of some cancel out those of others. However, what seems essential for our country is to maintain and enrich abundant and high-quality cultural production, a continually growing part of which is and will be based on sustainable technological supports. This production is and will be essential for us to live together, as mentioned. We have a role to play in global culture, and this global culture makes room only for those who dare to take it. How can we bring these productions to the highest possible level? GLAMs must be part of this momentum and enrichment.

2. To do so, I would like to suggest, for the consideration of GLAM members, that pooling their production tools to maximize their contribution to this work of imagination and action, rebuilding civil society and its indispensable citizen groups and institutions, including schools at all levels, might be key.

³ Pascale Nivelles, "Petite Poucette, la génération mutante," *Libération*, September 3, 2011, https://www.liberation.fr/debats/2011/09/03/petite-poucette-la-generation-mutante_758710/.

By this, I mean human resources, training, equipment, studios, post-production and marketing. I would argue in favour of pooling our current and future resources through autonomous co-operative endeavours co-managed by our sector. This would allow us to disseminate our collections and show their significance, and it would allow us to have the most efficient equipment at our disposal. Such endeavours would enable us to fully master digital production, given that digital productions are neither an extension nor a duplication of traditional productions. They have their own requirements and call for unprecedented convergence. They belong to a new era in which creation, production and distribution must be envisioned in the context of complementary national and international markets, while also taking into consideration the exceptional amount of competition that now applies pressure to all forms of production. Michel Serres identified this element of universal access as the real novelty of this millennium: universal access to people, places and knowledge. GLAMs must be part of this momentum.

For my part, I see the eventual transition to the post-pandemic period as an exceptional opportunity to think and act together on the conditions for premium digital creation, with a real critical mass capable of holding its own in the global cultural space to which our fellow citizens now have almost unlimited access.

3. Finally, for GLAMs and their members, I would argue for open accountability that includes the inseparable aspects of economics and social factors.

I believe that GLAMs must resume their solid analyses of the past few years, which focused on the economic impact of their activities: varied consumer spending, support for research, technological development and job creation. The resulting arguments can and must be substantially enriched with a detailed accounting of the social, societal and environmental impacts of their activities, including their service offerings and programming.

This integrated accounting could make a difference when approaching granting agencies, financial groups, corporate sponsors, foundations and public authorities, since these organizations will be heavily solicited in the post-pandemic period by major service sectors, such as education, health (including mental health) and seniors residences.

In closing, I would like to suggest for your consideration that the upheaval experienced by our institutions, and the work done to maintain—as best we can—services for our users during the pandemic, should be useful in the post-pandemic period for analyses by public health officials. What lessons will they learn from the current crisis, in terms of both prevention and precaution, as well as the impact of their directives on our institutions, our users, and society in general? GLAMs should ideally be involved in these analyses.

Thank you very much.