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To cite this article: Deborah Agostino , Michela Arnaboldi & Antonio Lampis (2020): Italian state museums during the COVID-19 crisis: from onsite closure to online openness, Museum Management and Curatorship, DOI: [10.1080/09647775.2020.1790029](https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2020.1790029)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09647775.2020.1790029>



Published online: 13 Jul 2020.



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Italian state museums during the COVID-19 crisis: from onsite closure to online openness

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the reaction of Italian state museums to the closure of their physical sites caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, taking the perspective of their online activity on social media. The study explores the type and amount of content published by museums on their social media webpages, as well as the level of online engagement that is generated by their activity. Empirically, this study investigated the 100 largest Italian state museums, showing that, during the weeks of lockdown, their cultural initiatives did not come to a stop but, on the contrary, there has been a sharp rise in online cultural material and initiatives taking place through social media, with museums doubling their online activity. This online evidence has stimulated further reflections on the future direction of digitally enabled approaches to culture and its enjoyment.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 29 May 2020

Accepted 28 June 2020

KEYWORDS

COVID-19; museums; social media; digital technology; digital innovation; culture

Introduction

The unexpected COVID-19 pandemic has forced the governments in Italy and many other countries to enforce the total closure of all non-essential structures and activity, museums included. Museums unable to open their doors to a visiting public have had to take the only option of spreading culture and knowledge through online means. This avenue has caused an acceleration in digital transformation processes, but, rather than through dramatic innovative technologies, it has used a channel at the fingertips of almost everyone: that of social media. Data in fact show that 45% of the world's population has a social media account and social media penetration in Italy is at 42% (We Are Social, 2019).

Museums are now using social media to reach a wider online public, posting virtual tours, interviews with their directors and descriptions of artwork, as well as setting quizzes and running treasure hunts. These initiatives have changed social media from channels of communication into tools for spreading cultural material. The current situation has led to conjectures on whether such initiatives are an effective way to increase cultural participation. It also paves the way to other considerations on the role that social media will play and, more broadly, what part will digital technology have in disseminating

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cultural material during ‘phase two’, when we are still living in close proximity with the virus, and going forward into the post-COVID-19 stage.

This study will start by looking at how Italian state museums are using social media during their many weeks of enforced closure, and will then analyse:

- What are museums doing to spread knowledge and culture through social media at a time when physical sites of culture are closed?
- Does cultural material spread through social media engage the public and, if so, in what way?
- What will the future arrangements be for the public to approach and appreciate culture?

As its reference, this research is based on Italian state museums, where the digital realm has acted as a major element of change to museum management in recent years. Going back to the Franceschini reform of 2014, and more recently to 2018 when the Italian National Museum System was set up, digital innovation has taken centre stage in museum reforms.

The paper is organised as follows. The literature review in Section 2 explores how the digital age has entered museums, examining, in particular, the importance of digital means in cultural participation and the most advanced uses of social media. The specific Italian context is described in Section 3, emphasising the drive to use digital technology as a means to stimulate cultural participation. The study will also explain how legislation has evolved in this time. After presenting the research methodology, the paper will go into the substance of the results, describing the intensity of museum social media activity, the museums’ ability to interact with their public and the future of partaking in culture. The article concludes with some thoughts on the future direction of digitally enabled approaches to culture and its enjoyment.

Cultural participation and social media

Cultural participation has recently caught the renewed attention of both scholars and practitioners (Gross & Wilson, 2020; Stevenson, Balling, & Kann-Rasmussen, 2017). Their interest is connected with the participatory turn (Knudsen, 2016; Noy, 2017; Hetland & Schröder, 2020), where museums are called upon to change their model of interaction with the public and, more generally, with stakeholders. This trend has been further enabled and intensified by digital technologies, in particular, internet and social media, where easy access to mass communication gives any user with an internet connection the ability to interact with others, while, in theory, being visible to millions of users.

Social media have brought about a democratisation of communication, altering the wider context of public participation by empowering and encouraging the public’s self-organisation (Arnaboldi and Coget 2016; Black, 2018). This democratisation process is shaking up the cultural sector, especially for museums, which, until recently, were in charge of all online communication relating to cultural material. There are conflicting views on social media in the museum sector (Booth, Ogundipe, & Røyseng, 2019), but they are a reality and users will be active whatever museums do (Agostino, Arnaboldi, & Calissano, 2019; Belenioti, Tsourvakas, & Vassiliadis, 2019; Waller & Waller, 2019). Several

issues are emerging on this topic. A first critical issue is linked to mediation and authority over content. The democratisation in communication enabled by social media requires rethinking a museum's customary role of mediation, opening up a series of options, from the more traditional mediation to co-creation (Amitrano, Gargiulo, & Bifulco, 2018; Taylor & Gibson, 2017). A second important issue relates to the organisational change necessary for managing social media, which requires new skills and processes (Giannini & Bowen, 2019; Silvaggi & Pesce, 2018). The third and final issue that emerged clearly during the COVID-19 pandemic is for social media to be inserted within a wider user experience, where the boundaries between physical and digital worlds become seamless, according to the new concept of 'phygital' (physical + digital) experience (Ballina, Valdes, & Del Valle, 2019). This study addresses the role played by social media in Italian state museums during the COVID-19 pandemic, highlighting the strength and intensity of social media interactivity taking place online while museums were physically closed.

The study will start with an introduction to the setting of Italian public museums, to help explain the context of the investigation.

The Italian context and the importance of digital technologies in cultural participation

Digital innovation and digital technologies have been a constant element of museum management over the past few years in Italy, where there has also been a strong drive towards digital innovation, including from the point of view of legislation. Museums in Italy had primarily been places where artwork was protected and preserved, but this changed with the Franceschini reform of 2014. The reform highlighted the importance of museum collections as artwork to be admired, enjoyed and learnt from, stating also that museums had to embrace a more open role and 'talk with their public', offering real experiences of knowledge. In operational terms, this new arrangement was achieved by first creating a clutch of autonomous museums and then setting up a nation-wide museum system. The reform's stance on museum autonomy meant that museums were no longer superintendence offices, but institutes with their own identity, finances and statute, as well as their own Board of Directors and scientific committee. The first 32 autonomous museum directors were appointed in 2015. The reform also established 17 regional hubs (in all regions except for Valle d'Aosta, Trentino Alto Adige and Sicily, which have special status), to coordinate the non-autonomous state museums and drive the development of networks among social and institutional bodies in the area. The first phase of the reform soon produced major results (2014–2018) in terms of numbers of visitors and public participation. In 2019, Federculture (the Italian association of companies and bodies managing culture, tourism, sport and leisure operations) reported that the number of autonomous museums had increased by 15% (Federculture, 2019).

The next phase of museum autonomy was to install a national museum network. The purpose of this National Museum System (*Sistema Museale Nazionale*) is to showcase the cultural heritage of nearly 5000 museums in Italy, to present and promote them and their collections through a nation-wide network, first starting with the state-owned museums. Museums wishing to join the national system must comply with minimum standards of quality (Article 1, Ministerial Decree no. 113 of 21 February 2018), which are assessed on a scale from 0 to 10 and take in digital parameters. The Directorate-General for

Museums established a system to connect museums and accredit those with minimum quality standards. The system is paperless and based upon a self-assessment model via a digital platform, which can also be used for subsequent verification and routine checks. The decree approving the system's initial lines of organisation and operation also states that the committee defined under Ministerial Decree no. 113/2018 should be set up and function according to a 'zero bureaucracy' approach. The committee's operations are based upon continuous digital communication between the members, with video conferencing being a preferred method, alongside the routine use of the digital platform to approve proposals.

The digital factor is without doubt what enables this transformation from single non-autonomous museums into a network of participatory museums. While in constant evolution, digital input has consistently encouraged progress as set out in the legislation. The three-year plan published in 2018 (Three-Year Plan for a Digital and Innovative Museum – *Piano Triennale per la digitalizzazione e Innovazione dei musei*) defines the shared guidelines for digitising the various operations and for managing digital projects. The purpose of the Plan was also to simplify museum administration and introduce paperless documents. In addition, with reference to museum-visitor relationships, it set up a reputational monitoring project on a sample of 100 state museums, in order to appraise the public's perception by analysing online user-generated material rather than through customer satisfaction surveys. The focus of this study – to examine the museums' online response during the lockdown – was made possible through analyses of the above kind.

Methodology

The analysis is based upon a reference group of the one hundred most visited Italian state museums, whose online reputation was specifically monitored by the Ministry for Cultural Heritage and Tourism. The museums being surveyed are located across Italy, mostly in the Centre (44% of the sample), with 26% in the South and the remaining 30% in the North. A key element is that 63 of the 100 museums are situated in a provincial capital and 21% of these are in Rome.

In 2018, the Ministry launched a project involving the real-time monitoring of state museum activity on social media and the public's ensuing online response. It also monitored the online reviews of the services being offered, to determine the public's perception of such services. Operationally, a dashboard was created and made available to each museum director and to the Ministry's Department for Museums (www.reputazionemusei.it), where the following data was provided on a daily basis:

- Level of museum activity on social media, such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram
- Level of public interaction with the museum on social media
- Scores given in reviews on review platforms
- Perception of services on offer

The study described here concentrates on the first two aspects being monitored, taking as reference the weeks when museums were in lockdown. In detail, the analysis was carried out on data relating to the period from the 8th of March – the date when

museums closed all their onsite operations – to the 30th of April. The following data were extracted for the 100 museums over that period:

- Average number of daily posts published by each museum on social media
- Average number of interactions for each post carried out by each museum on social media
- Number of daily followers

The data were analysed according to trends over time, in order to investigate the online reaction of museums to the closure of their physical sites, and also in view of inter-museum benchmarking, to identify virtual behaviour and initiatives.

The results of the analyses are given in the following sections, alongside several thoughts about possible situations for the future approach to culture and its enjoyment.

Results: social media responses during the COVID-19 lockdown

How museums use social media

Social media platforms, especially Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, have become the museums' preferred means to spread culture during the COVID-19 lockdown. Museums physically shut to the public were instead open because of their digital tools. And they were not only open, they also saw a significant rise in their online activity (Figure 1).

Figure 1 shows that online activity doubled on all social media platforms as from March 2020 when Italy went into lockdown and every museum in the country was forced to shut (on the 8th of March). On average, museums would publish 25 posts a month on Facebook beforehand, but they rose to 40 in March. On Twitter, the previous 32 posts a month went up to 60 and, on Instagram, they more than doubled, rising from 15 to 33 posts a month per museum. The data then settled at this two-fold increase in value for all April 2020. The figures show the average values, but it is important to note that several museums did

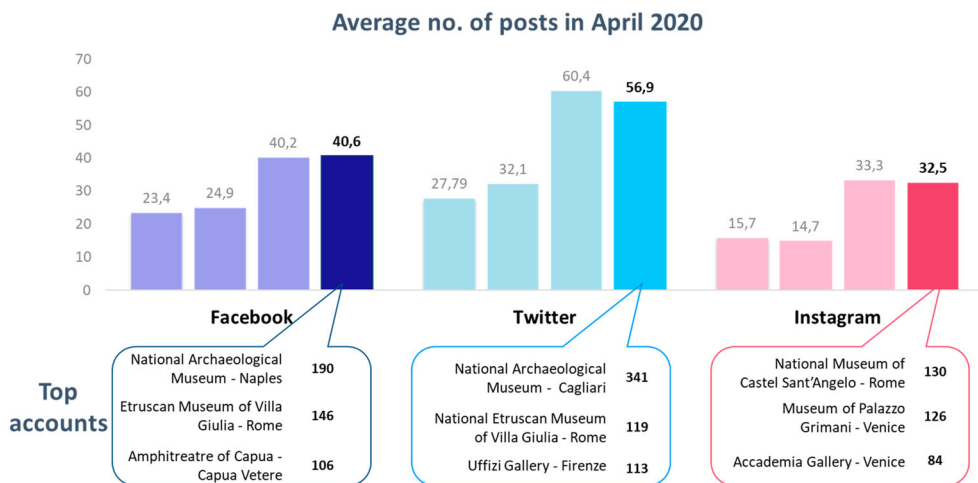


Figure 1. Average number of social media posts per museum by platform.

record peaks in activity. For example, Naples's MANN posted 190 messages on Facebook in April 2020, the National Archaeological Museum of Cagliari sent 341 tweets, and the National Museum of Castel Sant'Angelo published 130 posts on Instagram.

Not only have museums increased their online activity, they have also changed what they are sending over these channels. From mere tools of communication, social media have evolved into tools for spreading knowledge. For instance, some museums are now using Facebook to share information about an art piece and reveal some or other unknown aspects about it. Other museums have arranged interviews with experts or guided tours in the company of the museum's director. Still others have chosen a more 'playful' approach, running virtual treasure hunts among the museum's collections or organising quiz events. The Ministry for Cultural Heritage has also stimulated creativity in social initiatives, joining in with virtual culture-related flashmobs and inviting museums to take part, and these museums have, in turn, galvanised cultural participation. ArtYouReady was the first flashmob organised for Sunday the 29th of March, where users were asked to post photos of their favourite places of culture. ArtYouReady then became a regular Sunday event, followed by other similar virtual flashmobs, such as 'viaggioinitalia' ('journeythroughitaly'), where people were asked to share pictures of the Italian landscape with summer on the horizon.

The main difference between an onsite visit and these online initiatives is that the latter take very little time. They typically only last a few minutes, two or three to read a post about a work of art or at most 10–15 minutes for an interview or a virtual visit. These events also run on a regular basis, where users are invited to meet up every day at the same time and connect to the museum's social platform for a daily dose of culture.

All the different types of material on offer (interviews, discovering artwork, quizzes, virtual visits) set in motion a range of approaches for connecting with the public. The first type is an educational approach, where material is passed by the museum to the user. This is a one-way relationship, proceeding from the museum, and involves things like the storyline for a work of art, an interview with an expert or a tour with the director. The second approach involves asynchronous interaction, and is when the user is handed information or material, but is not required to join in or reply on social media. Treasure hunts and ArtYouReady flashmobs fall into this group. In this case, the relationship flows two ways between museum and visitor, and although instigated by the museum, it requires a (asynchronous) response from the user. Finally, the third approach consists of synchronous interaction, where museum and visitor interact in real time. Here the relationship is two-way but, differently from the previous case, it is simultaneous. This group includes educational initiatives with real-time interaction between museum and students/children and meetings with Museum Friends. The last of these three approaches is the least common, because it involves the need to induce dialogue and interaction at a distance in real time.

Engaging the public

Interestingly, the public's response to the initiatives put on by museums during the weeks of lockdown (March and April 2020) took different directions for followers and for interaction. On the one hand, museums gathered a significant number of new followers, indicating an increase in the public's interest in the rollout of museum initiatives. On the other

hand, the public was restrained in its interaction, which did not follow the same pattern of growth as the followers.

Figure 2 shows an increase in follower numbers for each social media platform in the two months of museum closure. It is clear that Instagram was the platform recording the greatest growth. The follower numbers rose by 7.2% between February and March 2020, and climbed again by 8.4% between March and April 2020. Facebook also had a steady growth, up by 5.1% between February and March and by a further 3.6% between March and April. The numbers were lower for Twitter (up by 2.8% each month).

In general, the data on followers indicate that the public was showing an increased interest in places of culture. However, despite there being more interactions, the average number of interactions per post has remained constant over time, and has even dropped in some cases (Table 1).

The table shows a slightly upwards trend for average number of interactions per post on Facebook. In February 2020, a post shared on Facebook generated 102 interactions on average, while it generated 112 interactions in March and 115 in April. Twitter's pattern was similar, going from 26 interactions in February to 31 in April. Curiously, while Instagram recorded a significant number of followers, the number of interactions fell from 824 in February to 529 in March and then to 520 in April. A growth in followers not matched by an equally intensive growth in interactions could be explained by a gradual public participation. Users may initially decide to follow the museum. They will then observe what is happening on the museum's webpage, and only when a bond is created will they feel engaged and start interacting directly, expressing views and sharing posts.

However, although the interactions only increased slightly, and even fell for Instagram, several online initiatives did generate a peak in user interest. One such case was the first

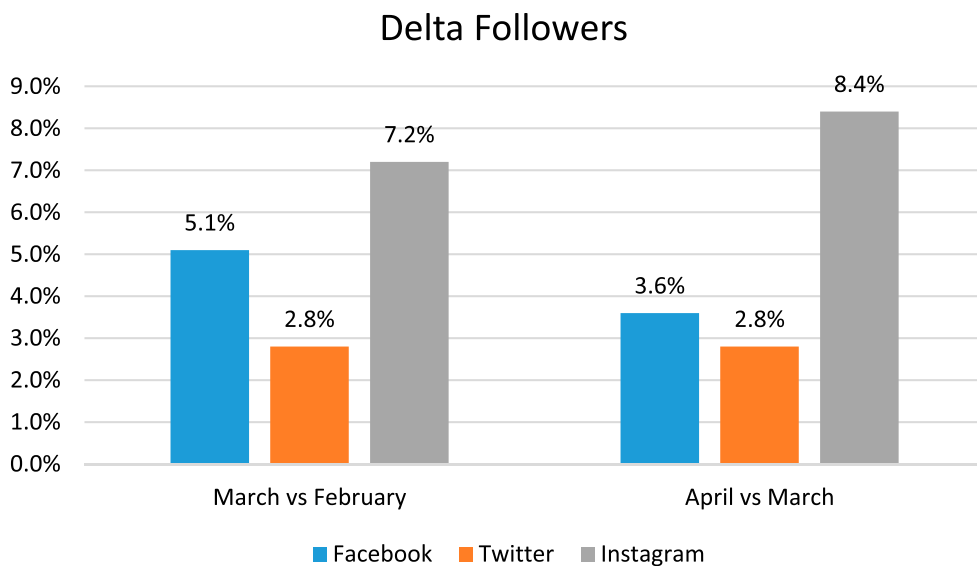


Figure 2. Average monthly variation in followers by platform (%).

Table 1. Average number of interactions per post.

Platform	February		March		April	
	No. posts	Interactions/post	No. posts	Interactions/post	No. posts	Interactions/post
Facebook	1671	102	2018	112	2683	115
Instagram	677	824	1662	529	1594	520
Twitter	1026	26	1993	27	1821	31

ArtYouReady flashmob Sunday on Instagram, which culminated in a peak of nearly 90,000 reactions (in total) against an average of about 20,000 (Figure 3).

These data on the level of the museums’ social media activity, number of interactions and follower engagement open the door to reflections on the role of online approaches during the COVID-19 ‘phase two’, when museums will be cautiously open, with visitor numbers capped.

Towards new models of engaging with culture

The data recorded in the previous section concerning online uses in lockdown have highlighted several elements common to Italian museums across all platforms. In other words, a museum that is more active online is more likely to attract a public (shown by the upward trend in followers), while interactivity is more restrained. The museums’ soaring take up of ‘all things online’ was not fully expected, especially in a landscape of locked up cultural sites. The results presented here are transient, and who knows what will happen when we reach the ‘new normal’ for culture. We can, for all that, take inspiration from our observations up to now and reflect on what the future holds in terms of our enjoyment and appreciation of culture, cultural places and cultural events.

Our first thought relates to the *time* these new-style visits take. Over recent weeks, the museums’ use of social media and the public’s response to their posts has clearly put the

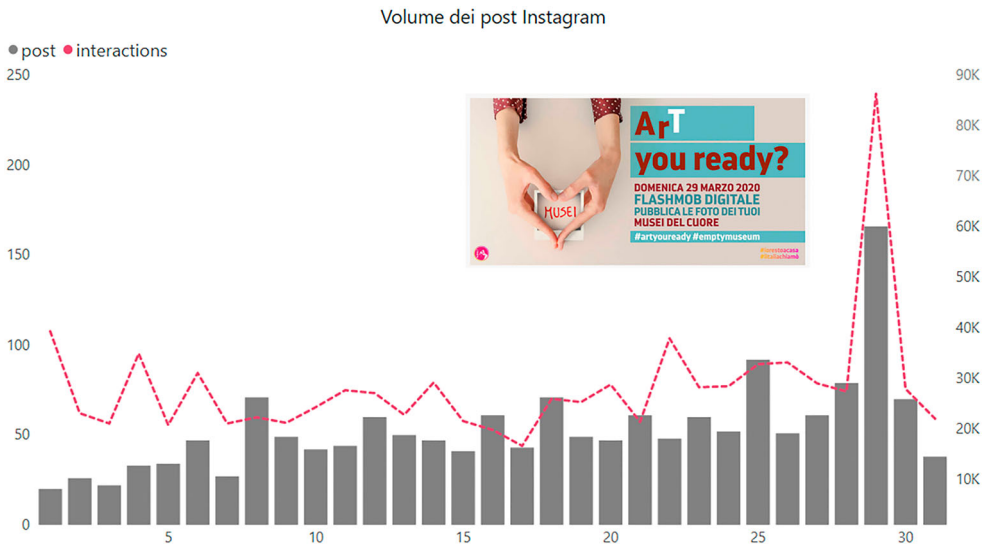


Figure 3. Instagram. Average number of posts and associated interactions.

spotlight on the fact that they have gone up a gear in how they make cultural material available on these platforms. Visits no longer last one, two or three hours, but have become brief events, taking up only a few minutes and following a precise thread. This can mean focusing on an item from the museum's collections which is linked to 'what happened on this day', an interview with the museum's director or with an expert on a specific topic. This change in *time* has paved the way for reflections on whether it will be possible to use our visiting time differently even when museums reopen. We can think of spending a few minutes alone and up close with a work of art, or taking a personalised virtual tour from one's own sitting room.

The second thought relates to the role played by social media in cultural events and visits. While social media have been around in a roughly comparable form for more than 15 years, they played a central part and were essential in offering cultural material during the weeks of lockdown. Before their enforced closure, museums used social media platforms mainly for communication purposes to promote events and initiatives that would take place in the real world. In this sense, we can say that social media platforms were complementary to an onsite visit that had already taken place or was upcoming. Lockdown has caused social media to take over from the museums' own websites and become the tool for spreading information, proposing live streaming, interviews and sharing artwork created through online means. For this reason, we can talk of social media as being a tool necessary to access cultural material. If we look forward, we will probably be facing a physical environment (Ballina et al., 2019), with an increasingly hybrid use of online applications blended with the physical world.

Our third reflection relates to the type of material and content on offer. With the boom in cultural offerings provided by the public sector online at no cost during the lockdown period, virtual visitors have become adept at selecting the right cultural offers for them, those that match their individual interests best. By extension, this can lead to other conjectures on how, in future, museums could propose personalised content to their visitors (whether online or onsite). A big change of pace for museums could be thinking of artificial intelligence systems that, by profiling individual people, could come up with a museum itinerary or selection of artworks that are most likely to mirror their interests. This could be even more the case during Italy's recovery phase, as the country's DNA is intrinsically intertwined with its immense cultural heritage.

Final remarks

This article has explored the role played by social media platforms in Italian state museums during the COVID-19 induced lockdown. A survey of the online activity carried out by the largest one hundred museums in Italy highlighted the fact that museums had and have an intense desire to remain active online despite their physical sites being closed. The results of the study showed that museums have more than doubled their use of social media, they are proposing a different type of material, with online events taking much less time, and their cultural offer is attracting greater interest, shown by the upward trend in followers. The increase in interaction is less evident and could in part be explained by the fact that material may not be interactive (such as the description of a piece of art). The museum's soaring use of online means and material has led the authors to put forward some thoughts on potential digitally enabled models of cultural appreciation that may

arise in the future. We can think of more leisurely visits, more targeted visits, more personalised visits and viewing, and an overlap of digital and physical experiences. We are fully aware that nothing can replace visiting a 'real' museum, but we also know that the forthcoming model of cultural appreciation will necessarily be different and will be strongly rooted in the use of digital technology.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Antonio Lampis is Director-General of Museums at Ministero dei Beni e delle Attività Culturali e Turismo. He held numerous positions in the in the cultural sector, including as Vice President of the Fondazione Teatro Civico e Auditorium of Bolzano, as a Member of the Board of the Biennale Manifesta7, as Vice President and then as a Member of the Board of Directors of the Fondazione MUSEION Museo d'Arte Moderna e Contemporanea, Bolzano. He is the author of numerous publications on regional autonomy, cultural policies and the marketing of art and culture.

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