CHAPTER SIX

GLOBALISATION, THE COMMUNITY MUSEUM
AND THE VIRTUAL COMMUNITY

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Introduction

At first sight globalisation and community seem to be at odds with each other. The rapidly expanding cultural and economic globalisation of the last decades is often seen as a main cause of the disruption of local social structures and the “disembedding” of stable long-term relations between people and their histories, their local economies and their surroundings. Labour intensive industries are transferred to low-wage countries, supranational political institutions - such as the European Union - gain major influence on local regulations and policies and a global industry of mass media and popular culture invades local cultures and traditions, depriving them of their distinctive local characteristics. As Dutch sociologist Abram de Swaan puts it: “The variety of supply of goods increases worldwide, but that supply of goods - in all its variety - tends to be the same everywhere. That is the law of globalisation.” (De Swaan 1989).

Following on these observations, it is often assumed that globalisation is a threat to local communities, especially when we understand globalisation as part of modernity. Moreover, communities would be reactive to globalisation and its intimidating manifestations of individualisation and differentiation (Castells 1997). In that case, the attempt to preserve communities could be seen as a reaction to the “break-up of stable social institutions and continuity of the life-world” (Delanty 2003, 164).

On the other hand it is assumed that globalisation stimulates the formation of various new sorts of communities. As globalisation is understood as the transformation of time and space (Delanty 2000), removing obstacles of distance and time, new opportunities for “community
without propinquity” arise (Calhoun 1998). One recent development in the world of interpersonal communication linked to globalisation is the increase of Computer Mediated Communication (CMC), which manifests itself in the rise of the Internet and other digital technologies. The rise of CMC is both a result of globalisation, particularly the influence of multinational corporations and transnational computer networks, as well as a stimulator of globalisation. The influence of CMC on national and international social interaction and communication patterns is considered to be so strong that some have begun to talk about “virtual communities” (cf. Rheingold 2000), or about “culture of real virtuality” (Castells 2002), or even about “convergence culture” (Jenkins 2006). The development of the so-called “social web”, has particularly entailed numerous new ways of communication corresponding to the idea(1) of community.

However, community tends to be interpreted in many different ways and there is a lack of clarity about what communities are exactly. Are the communities that are said to be endangered by globalisation the same communities as those that are said to be created by it? Or, are there different community types that respond differently to macro-sociological and -economic development? One way to answer these questions is to look at the ways in which cultural institutions – which are often inclined to function in the interest of communities – serve their communities and how they react to a grand phenomenon such as globalisation. An analysis of community policies of museums is an effective means to achieving this goal, as museums are increasingly attentive to the well-being of all kinds of communities.

Since the emergence of the New Museology in the nineteen seventies numerous museums have shown a particular interest in representing and serving the needs of local communities, resulting in the birth of the concept of the community museum. Nowadays the term community has gained much popularity in the museum sector, it has even become a “buzzword”, according to museologist Elizabeth Crooke (Crooke 2006, 170) Museums appoint community managers, community curators and community communication professionals. Strengthening community bonds seems to be a fitting strategy for museums to fulfill governmental demands for greater social relevance on the one hand; while on the other hand community policy is a means to keep up with competition in the culture and leisure industry, creating loyal audiences who identify with the museum.

It is interesting to compare two examples of best practice in museum-community relations in which different concepts of community are practiced and in which the effects of globalisation are differently perceived.
The first case is the Creusot-Montceau Ecomuseum (France), which was developed in the nineteen seventies and eighties and which was a good example of a museum that interpreted community as threatened by globalisation.

The contrasting example of the formation of a CMC community presented here, is the virtual community of the Brooklyn Museum in New York. This community has come into being only recently and has been already lauded in the museum world as a fine example of online community building. By comparing these two different types of museum-community relations I will examine the responses of these museums to the effects of globalisation and their understanding of the position of their communities in a globalised world.

**Le Creusot-Montceau - a local community?**

In 1976 the French museologist and retiring director of the International Council of Museums (ICOM) Hugues de Varine, wrote in UNESCO’s *MUSEUM International*: “Instead of being there for the objects, museums should be there for people.” (de Varine 1976, 131). According to de Varine the traditional museum had become too elitist and/or had got too much involved in the commercial tourist market. The concept of the museum had to be revised in order to reposition it in the midst of society. To achieve this goal de Varine proposed a new kind of museum, or more precisely, introduced a new vision of a museum capable of serving the whole population of a nation, region, city or town. This new museum would be a non-discriminatory, democratic and relevant information centre and public meeting place, in which all members of a certain social community could participate and in which they would feel represented. The most important purpose of the museum’s work would be to “communicate”, or to engage in “community activities” (de Varine 1976).

The collection of the new museum should be universal and of interest to the “general public” and “the community”. So, the museum’s exhibited objects should “[r]elate to real life and introduce all the objects and elements of information necessary.” (de Varine 1976, 138). A community could not be served by one large museum in the centre of the community’s biggest town. That would be an obstacle to the socio-economically marginalised groups in society to come and visit the museum. De Varine’s proposal, therefore, was to install a network of decentralised local museums or to organise museum activities close to the people in various community centers. Moreover, the museum and all its activities should be free of charge, as people should not have to pay for the exhibition of their
own culture (de Varine 1976, 139). De Varine’s museum would be an open-minded, client-centered and receptive community institution. He envisioned his museum “[a]s an intelligent instrument which provides us with answers to our questions and problems.” (de Varine 1976, 141). These questions and problems would be real-life questions and problems of “common” people. That is why de Varine’s museum could be described as an object bank in which all relevant objects of everyday life would be collected, researched and exhibited: “[a] question is asked and the bank replies.” (de Varine 1976, 141). The community museum had to be regarded as a network in which different museum disciplines and museum types would be integrated. The influence of the museum curator would decrease, because the people themselves had to be in control of their cultural centers in which new cultural forms would be created, social relations would be stimulated and solutions would be provided to everyday problems (de Varine 1976, 141-143).

De Varine’s ideas were more or less realised in Le Creusot-Montceau Eco Museum Project in the late nineteen seventies. In those years the region of Le Creusot-Montceau-les-Mines in the east of France, had to deal with severe economic and social changes that were part of a declining rural Europe and the moving away of heavy industry as a consequence of an economically globalizing world. The region’s economy and social life had depended on steel-industry, coal-mining and stock-breading since the eighteenth century and was one of France’s biggest industrial centers. The collapse of the manufacturing empire led by the powerful Schneider family, which started with the untimely death of the last male descendant, Charles Schneider, in 1960 meant the end of the rule of the Schneider dynasty. The new management conducted several reforms in 1970 which included the passing of Schneider’s possessions to the Le Creusot municipality. Among these were schools, churches, houses and the Château de la Verrerie, which had been the Schneider residence since the nineteenth century. In order to harmonise this icon of industrial paternalism with a new civic function, the local government decided to turn it into a museum thus offering the Le Creusot population ownership of the power base of their former rulers. Museologist and art collector Marcel Evrard, was appointed the museum’s first curator. Evrard’s first attempts to build a conventional museum proved to be impossible since the remaining Schneider family members took all their possessions with them when leaving the chateau. It was then decided to adopt the idea of the ecomuseum, which was on the rise in that time. The many ecomuseums emerging in France during the nineteen seventies mainly focused on rural areas and, – inspired by nineteenth-century open-air museums – considered
a large array of objects, buildings, natural environment, folklore and traditional crafts to be part of the museum.

Evrard asked for the assistance of Hugue de Varine in launching an ecomuseum which was to be regarded as “[a] means for development for the population”, which would enable them to cope with economic, social and cultural change. (Debary 2004, 125-126; Evrard 1980, 227). In 1993 de Varine would summarise the motivating force behind the museum as follows: “The aim of the museum was clear. There was serious unemployment in the region and morale was very low. Something was needed to make it possible for the local people to achieve some kind of common purpose and to use the past, with its successes and its disasters, as a way of discovering a new future.” (de Varine 1993, 3).

Although the museum was named Ecomuseé de la Communauté Urbaine de Le Creusot-Montceau-les-Mines, Evrard and de Varine would later admit that the term ecomuseum was mainly adopted to fit in with recent museological developments and governmental policy (Debary 2004, 128). De Varine c.s. declared the museum to be a community museum, which implied in their vision that the museum would cover the whole of the Le Creusot-Montceau-les-Mines area and that all its inhabitants, apart from being the museum’s visitors, would function as curators and critics, with the help of some professional museum employees and researchers. The museum professionals were expected to “[l]ive in symbiosis with the population” and to “[n]aturally be as discreet, modest and approachable as possible” (de Varine 1973, 246). The museum’s collection would consist of all the objects within the community’s perimeter. Naturally, in practice it proved to be impossible to actually collect and preserve objects of all 150,000 inhabitants. However, the basic principle was that it considered “[a]n object simply as part of a whole, as part of a human social, cultural or natural unit”, and the idea of the museum artifact enshrined in an aura of geniality and uniqueness was rejected (de Varine 1973, 245). The museum should be there for its people and not for its objects (de Varine 1976).

Following these intentions the objects and stories on display reflected everyday life in an industrial urban region and the relation of its inhabitants with their natural environment and economic and cultural history. Exhibitions covered themes such as “memories of industry and technological culture”, “workers”, and “men and birds” (Evrard 1980, 230).

As part of making exhibitions about the community’s history and researching the social processes going on in the region, the museum staff started seeking interaction and contact with the population, because the true purpose of the museum was to communicate and to initiate
community activities (de Varine 1976, 138). Decentralised committees, the museum’s antennae and out-stations throughout the whole region, had the task of gathering information about community life in order to be able to organise local exhibitions in co-operation with the local population. Several work teams initiated community gatherings during which local people talked about their daily life and their worries, memories and hopes. Then, the work team asked them to collect stories and objects that related to the topics discussed and prepare a local exhibition about these. Finally, the exhibition, which lasted for a month during the summer of 1974, was realised by the museum staff and numerous people from the community and was visited by local inhabitants and people from nearby villages (Jeannot-Vignes 1976). In this way the museum staff not only initiated “[e]xhibitions on important themes concerning the life of the community and its environment”, they also carried out “[a] survey of the whole community” (de Varine 1973, 247). These “important themes” consisted of memories of daily life in the Le Creusot area in the past, visions on the area’s future, the practice of and relation between old crafts and industrial work, folk art and local traditions (Jeannot Vignes 1976). Besides, exhibitions such as the one described above, were a means to make visitors aware of the balance between industry and its natural surroundings. Moreover, the museum tried to bring people themselves together, “[i]n the midst of things belonging to them, for a sort of festival whose theme was their own history” hoping “[t]o change the owner’s attitude to his property” (Jeannot-Vignes 1976, 167; de Varine 1973, 246).

The Le Creusot-Montceau Ecomuseum proved to be very influential in the museum world. Artists and museologists form all over the world visited Le Creusot to examine the museum’s daily practice. The museum’s methods are said to have been revolutionary, the active involvement of the local population in the exhibition process unique. Through the specific aim on the current and acute needs of the Le Creusot community and the straightforward social agenda the museum was – and still is – an important source of inspiration for museum professionals worldwide (Davis 1999, 67).

A victim of modernity

The community of Le Creusot played an essential role in de Varine’s and Evrard’s ecomuseum. But how did they define the Le Creusot community? What kind of community did they think Le Creusot was? The answer to that must be that they saw the Le Creusot community as a victim of modernity and its globalizing dimensions. The people of Le Creusot had
relied economically, socially, maybe even psychologically on an industrial imperium that had defined the region’s identity since the eighteenth century. The downfall of this regional superpower set in motion the social-economic decline of the whole region. De Varine and Evrard spoke of an economic paternalism that had to be overcome. And although de Varine stated that he wanted the Le Creusot community to “[m]ove from paternalism to modernity” (Debary 2004, 126), it is safe to say the economic dominance of the Schneider industrial dynasty itself was a prime example of modernity. The sudden step from a dynasty-led still early modern, parochial world into new social and economic structures dependent on all kinds of global developments, was a shift, to use Anthony Giddens’ terminology, from maybe not even high modernity to late modernity, (Giddens 1991).

In his influential writings on the effects of modernity on social life, Giddens understands globalisation as part of modernity, stating that modernity is largely defined by the interconnections between the two extremes of the global and the local (Giddens 1991). Although other scholars like Gerard Delanty – who has written on both community and globalisation (2008) criticise Giddens for this vision on globalisation and claim that modernity is a result of ever expanding globe encompassing processes and trends – thus ending up in a “chicken-or-the-egg-dilemma” –, many common elements in-between globalisation and modernity may be observed here: both have a disrupting influence on local social structures and transform conceptions of space and time. Delanty states that next to causing a transnationalisation of the world market, “globalisation is as much about the search for community” (Delanty 2000, 82). Moreover Delanty and Giddens agree on the fact that globalisation - whether globalisation is part of modernity or the other way around - increases feelings of uncertainty and that the world has become paradoxical and directionless. The processes of change that modernity and globalisation entail produce feelings of insecurity and anxiety. Because modernity and globalisation cause social and economic structures to become very fluid and open to continuous change, the danger of crises often loom on the social horizon (Giddens 1991, 184) . This constant possibility of crisis gives rise to general feelings of uncertainty that can not be stowed away as far as possible, not even on an individual level (Giddens 1991, 184).

These feelings of insecurity caused by the effects of modernity are often linked to the concept (and lack) of community. Since the birth of modernity social thinkers have been worried about the decline of community. The fast pace in which modern developments took place and the emergence of a rationalised and individualised society would have
entailed a disruption of the continuity of the daily life of traditional (pre-
modern) communities (Delanty 2003). Feelings of insecurity are
associated with this decline of community, as communal life would
provide people with clear daily routines, heavily embedded in long-lasting
socio-cultural traditions and attached to a fixed identity. Community,
therefore, is about “[s]eeking safety in an insecure world” as Zygmunt
Bauman shows (Bauman 2001).

Providing a sense of safety, that is what the Le Creusot-Montceau
Ecomuseum project is about. The Le Creusot community had to be
safeguarded from the excesses of modernity and the Le Creusot-Montceau
Ecomuseum attempted to counteract the social-economic void caused by
the sudden de-industrialisation of the area. In order to cope with the
challenges of a modern, globalised society the Le Creusot community had
to be empowered by using the past, “with its successes and its disasters, as
a way of discovering a new future” (de Varine 1993). A return to the
region’s history and its traditions would provide the community with the
tools and the identity needed to be secure in an insecure world.

It is hard to tell whether the Le Creusot museum experiment succeeded
in reaching those goals. Most of the credit de Varine and Evrard received
from other museum professionals, applauding their success at involving
the local community in the museum’s organisation (Davis 1999, 66-67). It
remains unclear, however, whether the museum actually succeeded in
fundamentally improving the region’s morale and preparing the
community for a post-industrial economy. Anthropologist Octave Debary
claims that the museum’s main influence was felt in the collective
mourning process following the disintegration of the industrial economy.
The museum assisted in that mourning process, which is exemplified by
the 27,400 visitors of the grand Schneider exhibition in 1990: finally the
Schneider family itself became a museum exhibit, symbolizing a past that
would never return and that now could be forgotten – literally: nowadays
the museum is a more or less conventional ecomuseum that seems to have
stood still in time and has become a museum of itself. “This may be the
museum’s real success: it has succeeded in becoming useless and deserted.
The museum ended up being abandoned in turn, leaving only the objects
behind as sole keepers of the remains of history.” (Debary 2004, 131).
Brooklyn Museum - a global community?

In 2005 the influential internet entrepreneur Tim O’Reilly wrote a seminal article called “What is Web 2.0?” (O’Reilly 2005). In this article O’Reilly observed that a change was taking place in the organisation of the world wide web and in the way producers and consumers were relating to each other. In the words of the renowned sociologist Manuel Castells: the balance of the interacting and the interacted was restructured (Castells 2002, 406). Instead of the traditional one sender-to-many-receivers communication - where the one sender normally would be a multinational corporation, a national government or a large broadcaster - users and consumers were now able to speak back to senders, let them know their personal preferences and inform other users and consumers about their experiences and opinions. With the arrival of Google, eBay, Wikipedia and Amazon an “architecture of user participation” was designed in which “users added value” to the product or the experience (O’Reilly 2005).

Moreover, many users started communicating with each other, ignoring the traditional senders of information by starting their own information networks such as blogs, facebooks and peer2peer networks. In short, web 2.0, also called the social web, can be characterised as egalitarian, participative, democratic and social. The web functions as a democratic platform where anyone can create, criticise and consume their own and each others content. It is a non-authoritarian virtual environment, non-local, and potentially even global, by and for people who want to share, and therefore a virtual community. The social web makes it possible for people, due to its technological design, to initiate and participate in conversations about any chosen topic. Instead of just consuming content, people are able to actively participate in the production, distribution and reception of content, with the result that an astronomical number of virtual communities have emerged around any thinkable topic.

Nina Simon, a now very influential museum consultant, has embraced web 2.0 ideology, began her own weblog “Museum 2.0” and has become a much sought-after keynote speaker. Simons goal is to use the typical web 2.0 elements, such as user participation and interaction on a open-source platform, in both virtual and non-virtual museum setting in order to stimulate visitor participation to encourage active discourse amongst visitors (Simon 2007, 257). To achieve this goal museums could obviously begin to use all the digital and virtual applications the social web offers. However, Simon’s advices is to implement the organisational principles of the social web into the museum itself. What people can do on the website, they can do on site in the physical museum too, seems to be her credo. The
potentials of web 2.0 can be applied in real life, she says (Simon 2007, 262).

Simon advocates user participation in exhibition design by letting visitors exhibit their own objects, letting them directly comment on exhibited objects (through new media or simple bloc-notes) and stimulating social interaction among visitors and museum professionals. To reach substantial user participation, Simon proposes a hierarchy of social participation that a museum could follow in order to reach a higher level of visitor involvement (see figure 1). Level 1 is the traditional museum model, in which the museum speaks to the visitor and the visitor cannot speak back. The following levels represent increasing possibilities for visitors to interact with the exhibited content and each other about the exhibited content, until level 5 “we in museum”: visitors are regarded and behave themselves as a collective reflecting on the exhibits, communicating with museum professionals and interacting with other museum visitors. For this, both online as well as on site technologies can be used, resulting in a museum community that interacts in a virtual environment, as well as in a physical museum.

Figure 6-1: A Hierarchy of Social Participation Based on Web 2.0.
As seen on www.museumtwo.blogspot.com
There are several examples of museums that have succeeded in creating their own museum community consisting of people from all around the world. One of the most well known examples is the virtual community of the Brooklyn Museum in New York. As an art museum the Brooklyn Museums mission is to be a community and visitor centered museum, acting as a bridge between the collection and each visitor’s unique experience and “[a]ims to serve its diverse public as a dynamic, innovative, and welcoming center for learning through the visual arts” (Caruth & Bernstein 2007). Observing social developments on the internet, the museum decided to extend its online activities and to build an online community within and around the museum walls, embracing social web technologies and applications.

The museum manages to include its audience in the museum’s exhibitions and activities by integrating Facebook, Flickr, Twitter, Wikipedia, blogs and podcasts in its online communication. The Brooklyn Museum Facebook group counted 26,000 members in November 2010 and in the same month the Brooklyn Museum had 2,500 Flickr contacts, next to 128,000 followers on Twitter. Recently the museum won three “Museum and the Web 2009 Best of the Web Awards” in the categories Best Overall, On-line Community and Exhibitions (Museums and the Web 2009). Moreover, with these web 2.0 applications the Brooklyn enables online visitors to interact with the museums collection and exhibitions, to share personal photos and artworks with others and to give direct feedback to the museum activities. The museum tries to respond to its members as much as possible and stimulates active participation of its audience. “The museum must fully commit to being in the community and offer content that people care about. When creating a platform for discussion, it must be sure to listen to what visitors have to say and respond when necessary”, according to the Brooklyn’s Chief of Technology Shelley Bernstein (Bernstein 2008).

An important aspect of the Brooklyn Museum’s virtual community are its 1stfans. 1stfans pay $20,- per year after which they are able to participate in special events held at First Saturdays. At these events 1stfans get to meet artists, museum employees and they can co-create exhibitions and works of art with them. Another important element of the 1stfans project is that people get the chance of meeting other people with similar interests. As Nina Simon expresses during an interview with Brooklyn employees Will Cary and Shelly Bernstein: “1st fans is an attempt to turn the impersonal engine of museum membership into a relationship-based, community-centered interaction for two specific museum audiences.” (Simon 2009). These two audiences consist of the people actually attending
at the First Saturdays and members of the online social media outreach, the Brooklyn’s virtual community.

**Le Creusot’s and the Brooklyn’s communities compared**

As a virtual community, the Brooklyn’s online community differs at certain points from Le Creusot’s community. The first obvious difference is that a visitor’s contact with the museum’s collection for the great part takes place on the internet. Hence the physical object plays a less important role and the boundary between “real” and “virtual” diminishes. Where de Varine states that the object, the “real thing”, provides an antidote which enables “the man in the street” to put up with “economic, social, political and cultural alienation” caused by “a two-dimensional world of comic strips and television” (de Varine 1976, 134), Castells argues that all real reality is virtually perceived and that there is no separation between “reality” and symbolic representation (Castells 2002, 401-403). “Thus, when critics of electronic media argue that the new symbolic environment does not represent ‘reality,’ they implicitly refer to an absurdly primitive notion of ‘uncoded’ real experience that never existed.” (Castells 2002, 404).

Another difference is that at Le Creusot’s community the preservation of the collective was the first imperative. De Varine started at the needs of the community and then figured out what was best for the individual. The Brooklyn, on the other hand, takes its first community steps in a globalised and virtually mediated world consisting of numerous individuals and then proceeds towards the formation of a community. This corresponds with Simon’s model of social participation. Simon starts with “Me” and only on the last level “Me” is totally replaced by “We” (Simon 2007). When O’Reilly reaches his most communitarian position when praising the “architecture of participation”, he continues emphasizing that collective value and knowledge is an automatic byproduct of “selfish” interests. Sharing of knowledge is a result of the design of web 2.0 software and web applications - hence architecture of participation - and not a result of community volunteerism.

The difference between the two types of communities might be understood by the dichotomous distinction between “thin” and “thick” communities (Delanty 2003, 171; Turner 2001, 29). De Varine’s museum community can be seen as a thick community in which the members share much with each other, often on a face-to-face basis, for a very long time. The Brooklyn’s virtual community, on the other hand, can be seen as a thin community, based on loosely organised networks of numerous
individuals, who can be separated from each other in space and time. The sense of belonging is based on shared interests and modes of communication and due to “[t]he strong emphasis on the self […] there is a weakening of a commitment to others” (Delanty 2003, 184). On the one hand these virtual communities stimulate inhibited discussion between multiple strangers who have multiple weak ties with other strangers. The cost, on the other hand, is the “[h]igh mortality rate of on-line friendships, as an unhappy sentence may be sanctioned by clicking away the connection - for ever.” (Castells 2002, 389).

The thick-versus-thin distinction enables us to understand the differing stances on the effects of globalisation. A thick community, as Le Creusot’s, is referred to by Zygmunt Bauman as a “closely knit community” (Bauman 2001). Closely knit, or thick communities, consist of members sharing a long mutual history and intense interaction. Its members are born and will die in the same place and expect to live their lives in the proximity of more or less the same people. It is these communities that are mostly suffering from the disrupting influences of globalisation and modernity. In such a context “decline, “demise” or “eclipse” of community are often heard phrases (Bauman 2001, 48). The Brooklyn’s community, however, amongst other virtual communities, emerged from an already globalised reality and instead of attempting to secure it from globalisation’s influences, it makes use of it apparatuses and technologies to bring people together. In contrast with the Le Creusot community, these people freely choose or leave the Brooklyn community and the decision to join the community is motivated by specific interests that were developed beforehand: interests in social media and art. This can also explain the striking difference between the attitudes toward commercialism and modern marketing techniques. De Varine, for example, adopts a more or less socialistic position when stating that the community museum “[s]hould not at any price be party to the treatment of culture as a market commodity;… it must refrain from commercial practices and from collusion with the world of finance.” (de Varine 1976, 143). O’Reilly on the other hand judges the world of commerce more mildly and even incorporates business models in his system, just as the Brooklyn Museum. Although it states that community is much more important than marketing (Caruth&Bernstein 2007), it embraces novel marketing techniques in order to construct a community. In other words, for de Varine commerce and marketing are by-products of modern globalisation, but they enable the Brooklyn Museum to dynamically fulfill its mission.

In conclusion, we have to nuance the distinction made between the Le Creusot community - thick and reactive to globalisation - and the
Brooklyn’s community - thin and a result of and therefore embracing globalisation. The Le Creusot-Montceau ecomuseum itself was related to an international movement of initiating community development. De Varine argues that the development of the Le Creusot-Montceau community museum took place in an international network of museum professionals (de Varine 1993). Also the statement that the Brooklyn’s virtual community is a result of globalisation can be nuanced. Of course, the international digital network around the Brooklyn Museum would not have been possible without the internet and its social media, but at the same time the Brooklyn’s virtual community is merely directed at the local population of Brooklyn itself. Most of the virtual community’s members come from Brooklyn and use the museum’s virtual community as a means to come into contact with other art lovers or to be involved in the museum’s activities (Bernstein 2008). The transformation of a globalizing medium in a stimulator of local can supplement face-to-face contact and encourage organizing around common agendas for action. “It can provide a powerful new channel for connections among people already linked by residence or engagement in a common organisational framework...” (Calhoun 1998, 381).

**Conclusion: Constants of community**

In the above I stress the main differences between the Le Creusot and the Brooklyn community in order to exemplify the different stances toward globalisation. What should not be forgotten here, of course, is that Le Creusot started in an era when the web did not exist yet. The difference is that de Varine's concern was the well being of the community with the museum as means to that end. For the Brooklyn the community is a means to promote its own well being, to put it a bit cynically. However, it should be added here that there are a few common characteristics that can be observed when people use the term “community”.

Firstly, although he stresses that communities exist in many forms, Delanty also mentions that all communities have one common concern: belonging. People become part of a community as a means to become part of a greater collective or to come into contact with other people who share the same interests. With Le Creusot this concern with belonging is clearly visible. De Varine and Evrard initiated the community museum in order to boost the regions confidence, by making clear that its inhabitants not only lived in an economy but also in a culture with a unique history. And although the sense of belonging is less obvious with the Brooklyn’s virtual community -a cynic might even say that it is all about modern marketing
(Caruth & Bernstein 2007)- a post-modern and individual version of belonging can be ascribed to the Brooklyn’s community members. “In this case what is stressed is less community consisting of ties and obligations than community in terms of constructing identities.” (Delanty 2003, 182). The Brooklyn’s community members use this membership to exhibit their own personal tastes and maybe even their identities by gathering round the Brooklyn Museum.

Another similarity is that “community” is often referred to as something that has been lost, and that has to be recovered. Besides that “community” is often used in opposition to the authority of a central power, like the nation state, or to modern social phenomena like industrialisation, individualisation, commercialisation or globalisation.

These notions of community can be seen at both thick and thin (virtual) communities. The community museum of Le Creusot opposed the traditional authoritative power of the all-powerful curator and the elitist, exclusive art museum. Initially a sense of loss of community due to industrialisation and individualisation is embedded. Virtual communities, in their turn, oppose to all-powerful website moderators and commercial software corporations like Microsoft. “...a single monolithic approach, is no longer a solution, it’s a problem.” (O’Reilly 2005). We might say that people in virtual communities try to recover some sense of community that is lost in everyday life, or as an antidote to the anonymous, individual character of the Internet. Communities also provide a feeling of belonging to a larger collective. Also in this case the de Varine’s community museum and O’Reilly’s web 2.0 show some similarities. As de Varine thought that the community museum had the task of improving the sense of collectivity among the people living in a community, he also was aware that it should imply something more and deeper than a group of people who happen to be living in the same place (de Varine 1993). And, as O’Reilly has it, that an essential part of the social web, on the other hand is “harnessing collective intelligence, turning the web into a kind of global brain...” (O’Reilly 2005).

The third constant of community can be found in the fact that participation, democratisation and egalitarian relations play important roles. At Le Creusot, for example, inhabitants of the region were invited to actively participate in the museum’s activities. They were able to “co-curate” exhibitions, their own personal possessions became part of the museum collection and the museum curators had to do away with their traditional cultural authority. The same can be observed in the Brooklyn Museum. Visitors are invited to let themselves be heard; museum employees, using social media applications, try to be as accessible as
possible and the organisational aspects of curating an exhibition and preserving a collection are made transparent.

A striking fact is that all these common elements might be perceived as positive. Despite increasing individualism “community” is good. As Bauman says: “Words have meanings: some words, however, also have a ‘feel’. The word ‘community’ is one of them. It feels good: whatever the word ‘community’ may mean, it is good ‘to have a community’, ‘to be in a community’.” (Bauman 2001, 1). This may be one of the main explanations why community practice and policy have gained so much popularity in the museum world over the last few decades. Communities offer museums convenient target groups and at the same time it is convenient for museums to call their target groups communities. On the whole, it seems that “community” could become a “feel-good” synonym for any kind of group that exists inside the museums reach. Community is the ultimate concept to unify a museums mission with its market, especially in a globalizing world, in which fears of alienation and anonymity still prevail.

However, it remains important to clearly define what a cultural institution as a museum understands as a community. Different concepts of community may result in different museum policies and different stances towards influential phenomena as globalisation. In the above we have encountered two museums that are lauded for their community approach and are deemed to be leading examples of good community policy. However, when confronted by globalisation, it turns out that there are fundamental differences between their respective interpretations of community.

What can be learned form these examples is that it is not enough just to claim that a museum is involved in community development and community policy. Especially in the case of such an influential phenomenon as globalisation, museums have to be aware of the profound differences between various community interpretations. And, obviously, different community types may and do have contrasting reactions to globalisation. Finally, museum community policies turn out to be seriously determined by the choice of definitions and interpretations of the concept of community that are used. “Thick” community definitions may lead to a policy of safeguarding a community form from what De Varine considered the disrupting effects of globalisation. “Thin” community definitions, on the other hand, tend to more loose community approaches and a more relaxed attitude toward the effects of global information technologies.
Globalisation, the Community Museum and the Virtual Community

Bibliography


