‘Go Out Museums!’ Museums’ Political Relevance Within the Current Media Environment

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‘Go Out Museums!’

Museums’ Political Relevance Within the Current Media Environment

By

Carolina Betancur Botero

A Mayor Research Paper
Submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies
Through the Department of Communication, Media and Film
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the Degree of Master of Arts at the
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Windsor, Ontario, Canada

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Museums’ Political Relevance Within the Current Media Environment

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September 11, 2019
AUTHOR’S DECLARATION OF ORIGINALITY

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ABSTRACT

At their best, museums are institutions that create transformative experiences for their visitors. Therefore, many scholars and museum professionals have advocated for museums that do not only display narratives through their exhibitions but also take part in social change. This task becomes even more relevant when digital platforms and social media, today’s predominant sources of information as well as prime providers of spaces for social and political interactions, have proven to have negative effects for society. Despite their beneficial outcomes, new media technologies promote commoditization, ephemerality, immediacy and individualism, effects that disturb the sense of solidarity, empathy and sense of community necessary for social justice struggles.

The goal of the current research project is to augment this discussion of the political relevance of museums within the current media environment approaching it from a Media Studies perspective and provide arguments that clarify this perspective’s relevance for museum professionals. Therefore, the research question that guides this paper is as follows: to what extent do media theory frameworks help us understand the political relevance of museums in their current struggles for social justice issues?

To answer this question, this research conducts participant observation during two and-a-half years working at the Casa de la Memoria Museum [House of Memory Museum] in Medellín, Colombia, and a theory analysis in the materialist media tradition. In particular, media theorists Harold Innis, Friedrich Kittler, and Marshall McLuhan were consulted for correspondences between their reflections and the case study of the Casa de la Memoria Museum’s exhibitions MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 [Medellin is 70 80 90] and MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva [Medellin is living memory].
DEDICATION

To Colombia’s museum professionals and activists, who despite the fear and violence, persist in their struggle for a peaceful country. Their sacrifice and conviction inspire me every day to continue acting from the edge of hope.
I would like first to thank the team of the Casa de la Memoria Museum for its openness, support and friendship during the process of this research. I would also like to express my gratitude to my supervisor Dr. Brian Brown for his support, enthusiasm and guidance through the process of my M.A. His thoughtful and valuable advice was also crucial to conduct this research. I would also like to thank my Faculty reader Dr. Michael Darroch and professor Dr. Lee Rodney for their wisdom and confidence as well as for providing me with useful remarks for this process of learning, discovery and creation.

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Finally, I would like to thank all my friends and professors who have listened to me and shared with me their reflections on my research. The dialogues I had with them sparked many thoughts and arguments that became cornerstones for my research.
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‘Go out, Museums! Museums Political Relevance within the Current Media Environment

**Introduction**

At their best, museums are institutions that create transformative experiences for their visitors. Therefore, many scholars and museum professionals have advocated for museums that do not only display narratives through their exhibitions but also take part in social change (Witcomb, 2003; Henning, 2006; Macdonald, 2006; Knell, 2019; Janes & Sandel, 2019). This task becomes even more relevant when digital platforms and social media, today’s predominant sources of information as well as prime providers of spaces for social and political interactions, have proven to have negative effects for society. Despite their beneficial outcomes, new media technologies promote commoditization, ephemerality, immediacy and individualism, effects that disturb the sense of solidarity, empathy and sense of community necessary for social justice struggles (Papacharissi, 2010; Taylor, 2014; Peters, 2015; Berardi, 2017; Freeman, Nienass & Daniell, 2017; Vaidhyanathan, 2018).

However, the task of creating museum experiences that promote social change and a sense of community is not always easy to achieve. Illustrative of this is the House of Terror in Budapest, Hungary, which opened its doors in 2002 as an attempt to commemorate the victims of the Nazi and later communist regimes who were either tortured, kidnapped, or murdered in the building that today hosts the museum. The House of Terror aims at presenting the horrors of both fascist and communist regimes in the 20th century in Hungary so that visitors understand that “the sacrifice to bring democracy to the country was not in vain” (House of Terror Museum, n.d, para. 4). However, Amy Sodaro (2017) criticizes the museum for its disturbing experience and for the irresponsibility of its directors and curatorial team in converting a memory space into an ‘spectacle.’ According to Sodaro (2017)
In a country like Hungary that, since 1989, has struggled with right-wing extremism, ethnic tension (between ethnic Hungarians and Hungary’s Roma population), and economic hardship, perhaps more subtle, inclusivity, and openness should be expected of a prominent public memory institution. (p. 34)

This lack of subtlety, openness, and inclusivity is worsened by the sensationalism the museum draws upon to spur reflection on the regimes’ atrocities. As the director of the museum, Maria Schmits, comments in an interview conducted by Sodaro (2017), the museum team use numerous audio, visual, and interactive technologies in an attempt to engage the visitor and “provoke an emotional, guttural, deeply affective response to the horrors of communism and, to lesser degree, fascism” (Sodaro, 2017, p. 24). Nevertheless, Sodaro (2017) laments that in their enthusiasm to evoke past times and create ‘spectacular memory’ in visitors, the museum team only achieved a heavy-handed exhibition. The museum is too worried about the recreation of fears and sufferings from the past and fails to create experiences where visitors can critically reflect and debate on how to prevent the repetition of the violence showcased in the exhibition rooms. Therefore, The House of Terror, would do right if it uses the past to challenge the current social, cultural and political context in Hungary using more inclusive and polyphonic methodologies (Sodaro, 2017, p. 35). Like Sodaro (2017), I have also felt frustration when I have entered museums of memory as well as contemporary art museums that deal with issues of great social and political relevance, but which fail to generate reflection, debate, or dialogue with their visitors.

My interest in the political relevance of museums was awoken by my experience as the consultant for national and international relations at the Casa de la Memoria Museum [House of Memory Museum], in Medellín, Colombia. This museum is a public institution that aims to contribute to the reconciliation process and cultural transformation of Medellín and Colombia,
drawing upon the memories of the armed conflict that has affected the South American country for more than seventy years (Casa de la Memoria Museum, n.d.-a. para. 1).

Akin to the House of Terror, the Casa de la Memoria Museum (CMM) is a public institution that aims at drawing attention to the atrocities of the past to help new generations avoid repeating them. However, the CMM’s mission goes beyond the commemoration of victims and the portrayal of the atrocities of the armed conflict. The CMM aims at generating a space where voices from different social groups can participate in a dialogue regarding the causes and possible solutions to overcome the history of armed conflict. This is what the CMM dubs as plural dialogue (Casa de la Memoria Museum, n.d.-a). These, among several other reasons, have made the CMM a worthy case study, especially in Colombia and Latin America, and a number of academic documents have been published about it, most of which are in Spanish.

My experience at the CMM, the lack of documentation in English about its exhibition methodologies and processes, and the frustration that I have felt when visiting other memory or contemporary museums that deal with sensitive topics, inspired me to conduct this research to better understand the role museums play in today’s struggles for social justice. Of particular interest to me are the media strategies museums develop to achieve political relevance for their communities within the current media environment. By political relevance I mean the capacity that museums have to unlock the meaning of the cumbersome social, political, and cultural circumstances of their communities (Simon, 2017). Moreover, museums have the means, through their exhibitions and programs, to transform people’s perception of the past and their place in the future by creating spaces of encounter and public discussion around the problems that their communities struggle with every day. Museums can create opportunities to spark in their visitors a commitment to participate in processes that affect their communities.
This debate about the museums’ political relevance and the media they use to achieve their missions is even more timely because in January 2019 the International Council of Museums (ICOM) opened a call for proposal that asked interested parties to participate in drafting a new definition of museums. Since 2007, the ICOM’s statutes understand a museum as a non-profit, permanent institution in the service of society and its development, open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage of humanity and its environment for the purposes of education, study and enjoyment. (ICOM, n.d., para.8)

However, according to the ICOM, the current definition does not reflect “adequately the complexities of the 21st century and the current responsibilities and commitments of museums, nor their challenges and visions for the future” (ICOM, n.d., para. 2).

This latter discussion that the ICOM has opened is broad enough to generate a variety of debates from different disciplines. The goal of the current research project is to augment this discussion by approaching it from a Media Studies perspective and provide arguments that clarify this perspective’s relevance for museum professionals. Therefore, the research question that guides this paper is as follows: *to what extent do media theory frameworks help us understand the political relevance of museums in their struggles for social justice issues within the current media environment?*

To answer this question and complement my participant observation during two and-a-half years working at the CMM, I conducted an analysis in the materialist media tradition. In particular, media theorists Harold Innis, Friedrich Kittler, and Marshall McLuhan were consulted for correspondences between their reflections and the case study of the CMM’s exhibitions.
MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 [Medellin is 70 80 90] and MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva [Medellin is living memory].

The first chapter of what follows presents relevant discussions from Cultural Studies and Media Studies regarding the social and political role of museums. By doing this, I show that, although the discussion of the political relevance of museums is not new, there are some unexplored areas that media theory frameworks illuminate in provocative ways. The second chapter introduces the theoretical media frameworks, particularly the work of Innis (2008), McLuhan (1994; 2003) and Kittler (1990; 1996; 2004; 2010); three of the most important theorists in the materialist media tradition. Also, in this second chapter, I develop an analysis around the connections and differences between these authors as well as underscore how they correspond with the political relevance of museums with respect to the struggles for social justice in their communities.

The third chapter presents the case study of the Casa de la Memoria Museum (CMM), and particularly the exhibitions MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 [Medellin is 70 80 90] and MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva [Medellin is living memory], by which the museum aimed to contribute to the dialogues necessary for fostering a peaceful and empathetic culture in Medellin. These two strategies are analyzed in light of the theoretical media frameworks presented by authors examined in the second chapter.

Finally, and in conclusion, this paper underscores the usefulness of media theory frameworks to museum professionals and particularly those in charge of planning and designing exhibitions, education programs, and communication strategies in the service of social justice struggles. It hopes to raise awareness among museum staff that having an understanding of media’s effects on people provides them with cues to ensuring that the exhibitions and programs they design are not only aesthetically appealing but also politically relevant for the social justice
issues that affect their communities. This gains even more relevance in countries where violent conflicts are still affecting civil society, including Colombia.

Chapter 1

Literature Review.

This chapter interweaves some of the debates and reflections within media theory and museum studies around the museum’s social and political relevance. This is done so as to better understand the connections between these disciplines as well as appreciate the importance of advocating for museums as flexible institutions capable of responding to the social, political, and cultural circumstances relevant to their communities.

Museums and their socio-political role.

The critique of the social and political role of museums was famously articulated by Theodore Adorno for whom the museum was a space that had commoditised the aesthetic experience and reproduced hegemonic narratives as spectacle. As he states,

The German word, “museal” [“museum-like”], has unpleasant overtones. It describes objects to which the observer no longer has a vital relationship, and which are in the process of dying. They owe their preservation more to historical respect than to the needs of the present. Museum and mausoleum are connected by more than phonetic association. They testify to the neutralization of culture. Art treasures are hoarded in them and their market value leaves no room for the pleasure of looking at them. Nevertheless, that pleasure is dependent on the existence of museums. (Adorno, 1967, p. 175)

Adorno criticizes museums as institutions that estrange the visitor from the objects held therein, treating the latter as evidence from the past and failing to see them as useful elements for reflecting upon the social and political circumstances of the Mid-20th century.
However, the museum as an institution underwent major changes only after the May 68’s revolts, when social movements from different spectrums raised together to demand the democratization and de-commodification of cultural, political and social institutions. With the social and political turmoil in the sixties and seventies, some professionals working in the museum field started to advocate for a New Museology (Vergo, 1989), which aimed at re-examining the museum’s role within civil society. Thinkers within this New Museology understood that the act of collecting has a political, ideological, or aesthetic dimensions which should not be taken for granted, particularly with their power to create and transform historical meaning through the curation of their exhibitions (p. 2).

With the foundation of this new discipline, New Museology opposed the old museology, which was

Too much about museum methods, and too little about the purposes of museums; that museology has in the past only infrequently been seen, if it has been seen at all, as a theoretical or humanistic discipline, and that the kinds of questions raised above have been all too rarely articulated, let alone discussed (Vergo, 1989, p. 3).

New Museology was a drastic turn in the history and study of museums because it urged museums to undergo a series of transformations from curatorial approaches to managerial strategies.

Museum directors, curators, and trustees started to revise their collections with a more inclusive perspective, understanding the need to address plural dialogues not only through the display of objects, but also through the creation of experiences. The authors within the New Museology tradition sparked debates about museums as places for people instead of being places for objects, as the modern conception of museums had restricted their role, and which Adorno also found problematic.
Following the *New Museology*, Karp, Mullen, and Lavine (1992) gathered 17 museum professionals to discuss the strategies that museums were undertaking in the early 1990s to help define and represent their communities. Authors participating in this collection argued that museums are “places for defining who people are and how they should act and as places for challenging those definitions” (Karp, Mullen, & Lavine, 1992, p. 4). By providing examples from different museums, Karp, Mullen, & Lavine (1992) revitalized the political role of museums as communicators of meaning and platforms for the visibility of their communities. Therefore, museums could no longer be regarded as neutral spaces. They were transformed into political institutions, organized in the service of their communities.

Duncan (1995) also finds museums as non-neutral spaces. However, she emphasizes that not only do museums always communicate meanings and relate to their communities, but also because their visitors always enact a performance when they participate in the experiences that museums provide. She equates this performance with that enacted in rituals because, through exhibitions, “individuals can step back from practical concerns and social relations of everyday life and look at themselves and their world – or at some aspect of it – with different thoughts and feelings” (Duncan, 1995, p.11). Perhaps because of their likeness to Greek temples, their monumental spaces, the play of lights, or the aesthetics of their objects, museums have the power to make visitors enact a ritual that has the power to transform or ‘purify’ visitors with their experiences.

Duncan (1995) underlines the power that museums have in forming visions of the world thanks to the transforming capacity of their experiences as well as to the receptivity with which the visitor explores the exhibition rooms. But as she later notes, this power is also dangerous when the museum perpetuates homogenizing values, such as Western culture and the predominance of male narratives in museums, reinforcing oppressive stereotypes. For instance, in
analysing the Museums of Modern Art (MOMA)’s permanent exhibition, Duncan (1995) notes the predominance of white male artists and the exclusion of many other voices from the museum space, such as women, indigenous and African-American narratives. Therefore, Duncan (1995) advocates for a museum that offers different scenarios that allow visitors to have a variety of aesthetic experiences that could broaden their visions from the narrow political and economic structures that have thus far ruled society.

Exhibitions in art museums do not of themselves change the world. Nor should they have to. But, as a form of public space, they constitute an arena in which a community may test, examine, and imaginatively, live both older truths and possibilities for new ones. (Duncan, 1995, p.133, emphasis added)

Seen in this light, museums are institutions necessary for ensuring a society conscious of its past and present, but also looking towards the future. Likewise, she understands museums as political spaces in that they create exhibitions that can be inclusive and/or disruptive of hegemonic and deceptive narratives that perpetuate oppressive cultural biases.

Once more, the aforementioned authors understand museums as political spaces in that they can transform people’s perceptions and behaviours about a particular topic, as well as subvert hegemonic narratives. Nevertheless, these authors reflect less on the importance of using this political role of museums for raising their visitors’ awareness regarding the need to participate in future collective decision-making processes, especially those regarding struggles in the service of social justice. Furthermore, these authors do not address the role that museums can play beyond their collections and exhibitions. This vision of limiting the museum’s political role remains prominent in many museum professionals. Although there is a widespread awareness of museums as people-oriented places, the idea of a non-neutral museum that is politically engaged in social justice issues remains controversial (Janes & Sandell, 2019, p. 2).
Lynch (2019) identifies two categories that help to understand the different kinds of strategies that museums can create to be socially and politically relevant. The first category is *performative activism*. This is when museums focus on the content of their exhibitions, emphasizing inclusivity and political engagement with current social justice struggles. In this way, exhibitions would address sensitive topics such as racism, gender inequality, immigration, climate change, or xenophobia. Vergo (1989), Karp, Mullen & Lavine (1992) and Duncan (1995) present arguments that reflect this kind of activism. The second kind of activism is *operational activism*, which is when museums put effort into developing people’s activism through strategies different from their exhibitions, i.e. education programs that disturb previous perceptions or leverage new understandings of the context in which they live (Lynch, 2019, p. 117). The latter envisions a museum concerned with its impact beyond the simple exhibition and dedicated to ensuring that people participating with the museum’s understand the importance of caring and engaging in social justice issues.

This debate between *performative* and *operational activism* has become even more relevant within the museum field in the 21st Century where digital platforms and social media are popular sources of information and providers of space for social and political interactions. They thus challenge the traditional role played by museums as spaces for education, entertainment, and pleasure. Many museum professionals see both digital platforms and social media as important sources that might improve their visitors’ participatory and transformative experience. This potential resides in the fact that they allow the visitor to interact with the content in a way that was previously impossible. However, although new digital technologies offer the potential of improving visitors’ experiences through interactivity and curiosity, their aim is mainly to transmit information to a large number of people. Moreover, digital devices and social platforms promote a rather individualist consumption, one in which the visitor interacts with the device according to
her or his previous knowledge, but these devices do not offer by themselves the possibility to contest the reflections or generate a face-to-face dialogue with other subjectivities. This limited capacity of digital media has proven to bring adverse effects on society that museums should offset with their experiences and strategies. This awareness on media technologies’ discourses and effects becomes a key element for museum involvement in social justice struggles.

The following section explores relevant museum scholars whose reflections and methodologies shed light on the debates that exist within the museum field around the relationship between new ICTs and museums. Likewise, it presents some of the strategies that these authors have suggested so that museums do not lose their social, cultural, and political relevance within the new digital media environment.

**Museums and ICTs.**

A plethora of scholars in the field of art history, cultural, and museum studies have analyzed and written about the powerful impact that museums have in transforming meaning and their active role in social, political, and cultural matters (Vergo, 1989, Karp, 1992; Witcomb, 2003, Hopper-Greenhill, 2005; Henning, 2006, Macdonald, 2006, Knell, 2019; Janes & Sandel, 2019). Since the *New Museology* practice, museums are more aware than ever of their important role within society, not only for the conservation of heritage, but also as catalyzers for social change. Some museums see themselves as flexible institutions, able to respond to the demands of their communities in an inclusive and timely manner.

This flexibility has been tested in the 21st Century by the introduction of digital media. Arguably, in the last two decades all museums around the world have found in these digital media innovative tools to increase their activism and commitment to social justice issues. For instance, it has become a common strategy for museums to start dialogues on social networks around sensitive topics or even use digital devices within their exhibitions to show an
institutional engagement with social, cultural, and political issues. For instance, #MuseumsRespondToFerguson, #Museumsarenotneutral and Museum Workers Speak (Schellenbacher, 2019, p. 381) are all examples of this form of community engagement. However, there are some scholars within the museum field who are sceptical of the social and cultural impacts that these technologically-mediated experiences might have on society.

One of the first museum directors to reflect on the relationship between museums and ICTs was George McDonald, former director of the Museum of Civilization (today the Canadian Museum of History) in Ottawa, Canada. In his essay *Change and Challenge* (1992), McDonald draws upon Harold Innis and Marshall McLuhan, representatives of Canadian media theory, to argue that museum professionals should create processes and experiences that enable visitors to understand their world. McDonald (1992) advocates for museums that help “their audiences to exploit the information resources in the quest for knowledge” (p. 162).

McDonald (1992) uses the Museum of Civilization as a case study to demonstrate the inclusion of digital technology on museums as an opportunity to bring different people together in one space to reflect on common ideas. This approach echoes McLuhan, who introduced the concept of the ‘global village’ to refer to the interconnectivity facilitated by new media technologies (McDonald, 1992, p.160). McDonald, saw that this common space created by digital media is especially powerful because,

[t]he shifts in values, attitudes and perceptions that accompany the technological transition from industrial to information society can make it possible for museums to achieve their full potential as places for learning in and about a world in which the globetrotting mass media, international tourism, migration, and instant satellite links between cultures are sculpting a new global awareness and helping give shape to what Marshall McLuhan characterised as the global village (p. 161).
McDonald sees new media technologies as an opportunity to improve museum experiences and transform them into places where information is available for everyone, regardless of their education level. However, he overlooks the fact that including electronic and digital media could encourage more authoritarian and hegemonic narratives within museum exhibitions providing only linear narratives which the visitor cannot add to or negotiate because the narratives have been fixed in place by the museum. These authoritarian and hegemonic narratives are contrary to one of museums core purposes, as explored in the previous sections.

Witcomb (2003) agrees with MacDonald (1992) in that the relationship between museums and new media technologies helps the democratization of social relations in so far as these media technologies enable a more participatory and active experience for visitors. Nevertheless, she moves away from McDonald’s reflections when she admits that using new media technologies indiscriminately can undercut the possibilities to transform visitors into critical individuals (p. 127). For Witcomb (2003) the arrival of new media technologies displaced the materiality of the object as the main concern of museums. Instead, fostering the creation of narratives and dialogues has become a crucial responsibility that museum professionals should address; making sure that their exhibitions maintain the balance between objects, media, and social relations. This balance, she argues, is crucial because the use of multiple digital media does not necessarily represent a more democratic, open medium of communication (Witcomb, 2003, p.130).

Important to this discussion is the distinction Witcomb (2006) makes between interactive and interactivity, which are constantly mixed up by museum professionals (p. 354). Interactive is the possibility that visitors have for manipulating the objects and experiences portrayed in the technological device displayed in an exhibition. Normally, these devices are installed with the intention to entertain and educate according to previous goals of the museum. However, Witcomb (2006) finds this kind of interactive experience conservative and authoritative. “For example,
interactives might congratulate the visitor when he or she pushes the right button, lifts the appropriate flap, arranges items in a correct sequence, or gives the right answer on a touch screen” (Witcomb, 2006, p. 356)

Interactivity, on the other hand, reflects a process where visitors are self-inscribed in the experience and in which they can start a dialogue with the museum around the message that the latter introduced through its experiences. Therefore, Witcomb (2006) suggests a ‘dialogic interactivity’, one that combines technological interactions, historical interpretation, and dialogue with visitors; an interactivity in which the museum can pose an intended message to visitors, who at the same time could enter into a negotiation with the message or meanings that the museum is suggesting. With this proposition, she is also raising awareness of the negative effects that museums can generate if they allow visitors to create any meaning they want. As she expresses it, “If taken too far, a constructivist approach to exhibition-making can result in an emptying out of meaning and a consequent loss of understanding of community based on commonality of experience” (Witcomb, 2006, p. 359). Therefore, there is a need to include in the museum experience a balance between technology and materiality, one that allows dialogue and empathy with other’s narratives but holds a clear, factual message for the visitor to follow.

As an illustrative example of this ‘dialogic interactivity’, Witcomb (2006) presents the Eternity Gallery at the National Museum of Australia, which combines traditional object displays, touch-screen computers, videos and oral histories (accessed through visitors’ phone) to provide an interactive space in which visitors are invited to consider themselves as part of the “Australian history through everyday activities” (p. 359).

Witcomb’s (2006) idea of dialogic interactivity is similar to the operational activism that Lynch (2019) advocates for. This is because the idea of dialogic interactivity encourages museums to create clearer messages that facilitate the transformation of people’s perception
about their reality, while at the same time providing platforms so that these same visitors can complement this message with their own experiences and reflections. By including these methodologies, museums show their interest in fostering critical citizens.

However, Witcomb (2003; 2006) overlooks the need to maintain the balance between the virtual and the material in an attempt to not only help visitors become more critical subjects, but also to address encounters with others that encourage people to be more empathetic and politically engaged in social justice issues. Henning (2006) presents a more critical and thorough analysis of media theorists in her study of the role of museums in the 21st Century. Henning (2006) argues that materialist media studies (with Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler being three of the major theorists under this framework), is useful to understanding the role of museums because:

First, they allow for media to be thought of as more than a means to move messages across space. Second, they suggest that to consider museums as media would mean paying close attention to their tangible and experiential aspects. Third, they invite us to attend to how the substantial, material form of the exhibition circumscribes and delimits both human activities and ideological content. (Henning, 2006, p. 73)

The connection that Henning (2006) makes between museum and media theory frameworks illustrates a similar approach to that presented by McDonald (1992) and Witcomb (2003; 2006) because in her analysis, she stresses the political role that museums have in creating and disseminating messages aimed at shaping people’s ideas about their world. However, Henning (2006) goes further in her analysis when comparing museums with media technologies such as print, radio, TV, and now digital technologies. She argues that they all have the power to disseminate discourses and transform behaviours when they become the predominant media through which people interact with others and their environment (Henning, 2006, p.73).
Nevertheless, Henning (2006) argues that this political role of museums becomes problematic if it is analyzed considering Walter Benjamin’s reflections around the social, cultural, and political effects that mechanical reproduction brings to human lives. For Benjamin (2008), mechanical reproduction, facilitated by new electronic technologies, has the power to manipulate space and accelerate time in such a way that it distracts people, thus augmenting the ruling class’s ability to manipulate the ‘masses’ more easily (Benjamin, 2008).

Henning (2006) finds that this connection between Benjamin, media theory frameworks, and museum studies is problematic because it suggests that in the intention to be politically relevant, museums can also contribute to the alienation experienced by visitors as a result of their use of technology, effects that the aforementioned authors find contrary to the mission of museums. Therefore, Henning (2006), echoing Witcomb’s notion of dialogic interactivity, states that in order to avoid alienating experiences through the use of technology, it is worth asking what exhibitory forms would be adequate to an exhibition practice which [do] not set out to control or shape visitor experience in order to inculcate certain values, but instead to connect with the lived experience of visitors on a sensory as well as an intellectual level. Perhaps to consider museums and exhibitions as media is less to do with how much technical reproduction replaces artefacts, and more about the extent to which these are spaces capable of articulating lived experience, as well as compensating for it with illusions. (p. 98)

Henning (2006) also suggests that the capacity of visitor-directed searching undermines the mediation of museums in their experiences. This, concludes Henning (2006), could reinforce biases that visitors bring with them to the museum, losing the responsibility that museums have in providing narratives that could challenge people’s perception about social, cultural and
political issues. Furthermore, she states that by prioritizing individual experiences, museums are following the same customizing ideology of the capitalist market (Henning, 2006, p. 311).

Therefore, Henning (2006) favours a kind of museum that creates curiosity in visitors by bringing them closer to the object and narrative that is strange to them. By fostering these kinds of discursive experiences, museums become mediators that help overcome the distances between subjects and the ‘other’. “If museums are to work as contact zones and facilitate these encounters, they might also appeal, as the curiosity cabinet did, to the correspondences, sympathies and resemblances that appear between outwardly disconnected things” (p. 154).

Both Witcomb (2003; 2006) and Henning (2006) are important representatives of the stream of museum scholars who find in the relationship between media theory and museum studies elements to be critical of the use of technology. For both authors, while these technologies bring advantages, they can also reinforce hegemonic and alienating visions. Therefore, both suggest museums use technology to the extent that they allow encounters with otherness, but which do not take over the agency of museums and visitors for creating meaning.

Although both Witcomb (2003) and Henning (2006) recognize the political role of museums, they continue to focus their arguments on a museum that offers experiences for those who visit them, that is, for their consumers. Therefore, their reflections do not suffice for the study of museums’ political role beyond their walls so that they can take part in the social justice issues that are directly affecting their communities, such as poverty, political radicalization/polarization, immigration, xenophobia or armed conflicts.

In January 2019, the publisher Routledge issued two books that compile essays from different museum professionals around the world who, using case studies and everyday examples, locate museums as active spaces in social justice issues, not limiting their functions as
preservers and exhibitors, but as institutions that go beyond their walls to have a more direct engagement with social justice struggles.

The first book, *The Contemporary Museum*, edited by Knell (2019), reflects the challenges posed by the new media environment to social, cultural, and political processes and to which museums must respond. As Knell (2019) notes “[i]n this today, our lives are oriented towards the contemporary like never before. This is the result of the technological revolution that turned the Internet into the primary platform for social interaction. Face-to-face encounters have become secondary” (Knell, 2019, p. 1). This lack of corporeal encounter discourages empathy, which, as the author expresses, is necessary for solving inequalities of race, gender, sexuality, physical, and mental disability as well as xenophobia and political radicalism (Knell, 2019, p. 3). The thirteen authors published in this compilation, provide elements to update the relationship between museums and human rights. Also, they repeatedly call on museums to stop seeing their visitors as consumers or numbers and understand them more as citizens and potential activists for social justice struggles.

The second book, *Museum Activism*, edited by Janes & Sandell (2019) brings these reflections to a more direct point: museums are and should be activist oriented. And although they acknowledge the fact that this idea remains controversial within the museum field, they express the need to rethink the museum’s role in a moment when social media has eroded the idea of trust and agency (p. 5). Janes & Sandell (2019) invited 50 museums professionals to write about the strategies that they are employing in the museums where they work, demonstrating that “[m]useums, as social institutions, have the opportunity and the obligation to question the way in which society is manipulated and governed. Activism also means resistance – the critical questioning and re-imagining of the status quo” (p. 6). Although the editors of both books recognize the challenges that new media play in the social, political, and economic spheres as a
cornerstone in the debate of the current political role of museums, the plurality of voices and cases of studies presented in these books dilute the reflection on the implications that new ICTs have on individuals and on how these new subjectivities challenge the task that museums have as activists within long-term social justice processes. Therefore, there is a need to introduce media theory scholars whose reflections, although not addressed directly to museums, may allow us to better comprehend the type of institutions that are needed to face the negative effects that new media brought to 21st Century social justice struggles.

Chapter 2

Media Theory Frameworks.

New digital technologies have become the predominant media in the 21st Century through which people communicate and interact with others and their environment. These digital technologies bring with them material and technical characteristics that force individuals to adapt their behaviours and mindsets to these dynamics. These changes are reflected in social, cultural, and political spheres.

The effects of media technologies on human experience are of great interest for media studies, particularly for the materialist media studies tradition, with Harold Innis, Marshall McLuhan and Friedrich Kittler being three of the major theorists under this framework. These authors contend that in order to comprehend social, political, and cultural phenomena it is necessary to study the material characteristic of media technologies, which are understood as the vessels through which information is produced, processed, transmitted, and stored. And although their reflections date back to the 20th Century, they remain all too applicable to the contemporary media environment.

The work of Innis, McLuhan, and/or Kittler is referenced to reinforce arguments about the fundamental influence that electronic and digital media have on societies, and particularly the
detrimental tendencies and/or biases that media technologies introduce to social, political and cultural processes. Illustrative examples of these detrimental tendencies are the overload of information, individualization, and ephemerality that social media and digital platforms prioritize in their daily interactions with their users, who at the same time become obsessed with expansion, both in terms of the amount of information they consume and in the number of likes/followers they have. However, contemporary writers have focused less on the reflections that these three media theorists have upon the relevance that institutions of learning, such as universities or museums, must play in order to face the negative biases of media.

The reflections that these media authors make about universities are of special interest for this research paper because, although neither Innis (2008), McLuhan (1994; 2003) nor Kittler (1990; 1996; 2004) address museums directly in their literature, by complementing their conclusions with museum studies, it is possible to comprehend the political relevance museums might have in the current media environment. This interweaving is possible because museums are social institutions that, along with universities, aim at transforming their communities through producing, processing, transmitting, and storing information in forms that have potential to transform people’s behaviours and perspectives, as the authors presented in the previous chapter have already trumpeted.

Innis (2008), McLuhan (1964; 2003) and Kittler (1990; 1996; 2010; 2016) argue that each media, due to its material and technological conditions, introduce specific practices and discourses, which then are expanded beyond their limited confines and into the social, cultural and political spheres.

In particular, Innis (2008) and Kittler (1990; 1996; 2010) dedicate a large part of their works to analyzing the history of media in order to demonstrate how media technologies are intrinsically related to the processes of growth and decay of societies and therefore their influence
in any social configuration. McLuhan (1964) focuses more on the effects that media technologies have on the aesthetic experience of individuals, and particularly the effects on human senses. In this chapter, I introduce each of these authors and their main arguments so that the reader can better comprehend the connections I found between Innis, McLuhan and Kittler and museum studies, particularly on how their stances are applicable to the reflection of the political relevance museums have in the current media environment.

**Harold Innis.**

Innis (2008) was a Canadian economist and historian who dedicated most of his academic life to studying the industrial infrastructure of Canada, i.e. cod fisheries, railways and fur trade, up until the first half of the 20th Century (Watson, 2008). However, at the height of his academic career, he turned his interest to study communications media and their relationship with political and economic structures in society. These reflections on the close relationship between media and society are the ones that converted him into one of the most prominent theorists in media studies. However, it was not until Marshall McLuhan’s constant references to Innis that he became a broadly cited author within the communication field, particularly in Canada.

Innis (2008) was one of the first theorists to note that all civilizations were oriented towards controlling either space or time and that in order to accurately identify and better comprehend these biases it is necessary to analyze what kind of media they prioritize. According to Innis, societies oriented towards space use ‘light’ media that are easy to carry and store. Societies oriented towards space look to expand over the territory and establishing measurable standards that can be evaluated in monetary terms (Babe, 2000, para. 19). Conversely, societies that are oriented towards time see space as a profane place and hold that all social, political and cultural processes are in a state of permanence beyond time (Babe, 2000, para. 23). Therefore,
time-biased societies draw upon non-tangible, yet enduring media such as rituals, dance, songs or poems.

The Roman Empire, for instance, was a space-biased society in that its primary goal was to administer a vast Empire. Thus, using media that were easy to carry across the Empire, such as paper, coins and other written media was essential. Greeks, on the contrary, were biased towards time. They created a communication system underpinned by epic poems so that people could remember information more easily and pass the knowledge on to families through generations (Gasher et al., 2016, p. 44). Whereas one form of media is biased towards the production, processing, transmission, and storage of media over great expanses of space, the other is biased along similar lines according to the dictates of time.

Innis (2008) argues that the dichotomy between space-biased and time-biased society is also visible in the cultural values that each society prioritizes as well as people’s perceptions and their use of space and time. Societies that prioritize time-biased media conceive space as a place that needs to be bounded and protected (i.e., nurtured, sustained). For time-biased societies, space is where the community lives, where its roots are, and how it maintains its connections with the past (Babe, 2004, p. 318). Conversely, space-biased societies facilitate governance and administration over vast territories and help create a common and extensive economy and culture, but are inherently weak in providing historical continuity or a sense of local identity. Moreover, space-biased societies see time as a commodity, that could be instrumentalized and fragmented to improve efficiency and profitability (Babe, 2004, p. 318). Innis saw that only a civilization capable of balancing both space and time biased media could prosper (2008, p.5).

Highly influenced by his background in economics, Innis (2008) concludes that the processes by which media transmit, process and preserve knowledge are highly influenced by the dynamics of the predominant political and economic institutions present in that society,
institutions that always seek to maintain their control over information and knowledge. As Innis (2008) states, all civilizations depend on this monopoly of knowledge to protect and expand their control over their territory and citizens. This monopolization of knowledge, he notes, is present in all civilizations, without exception. Moreover, although Innis (2008) wrote his reflections almost seventy years ago, his description of the capitalist system and its media environment remains applicable to the current dynamic in western culture, which falls under the rubric of space-biased media.

Innis (2008) finds that print, paper, and photography, predominant media in Western civilization in the first half of the 20th Century, were following the same speed and space-biased interests of the capitalist system, encouraging individualization and cutting time into precise fragments suited to the needs of the market, while at the same time encouraging a present mindedness that discouraged consideration of long-term processes (Innis, 2008, p. 140). To regain the balance in society, Innis (2008) saw it necessary to recover the oral tradition because dialogues and discussions inherently involve “personal contact and a consideration for the feelings of others, and it is in sharp contrast with the cruelty of mechanized communication and the tendencies which have come to note in the modern world” (Innis, 2008, p. 191).

Sensationalism, historical discontinuity, and obsession with quantity, as he occasionally referred to in his book The Bias of Communication, were the by-products of a society dominated by spaced biased media.

For Innis (2008), the latter tendencies are possible thanks to the written tradition that facilitates fixation, logic and centralization. Conversely, the oral tradition is flexible, encourages memorization and continuity, paving the way for preserving cultural values over great expanses of time. He notes that the oral tradition, for instance, is the prominent media in religions, which have been able to enforce “cooperation of individuals in the interest of the community.
maintaining group life, and creating lasting organization of society independent of a living leader (Innis, 2008, p. 105). For him, Western Civilization needs to create a similar process for the dissemination and preservation of threatened community’s traditions. Likewise, Innis (2008) acknowledges that media underpinned by orality engages all senses, because they all act together while at the same time stimulating and supplementing each other (p. 105).

Universities occupy an important role in the criticism that Innis makes about the obsession that Western Civilization has with space. Innis (1951) laments the fact that universities were adopting the media biases that the economic and political system have towards specialization, efficiency and individualization, discouraging dialogues and critical thinking in the education system (p. 195). Therefore, he dedicates his final reflections to universities, reminding them of the active role they have in overhauling and revising “the machinery by which they can take a leading part in the problems of Western Culture […]. The universities must concern themselves with the living rather than with the dead” (Innis, 2008, p.195).

This last statement echoes the same claims that many museums professionals have made regarding museums as institutions which need to better respond to the dynamics and challenges of societies rather than of the objects alone. Also, although museums are designed to preserve the heritage and the objects from the past, this role is aimed at providing elements so people can understand them and their importance in the present, becoming more critical of both. As Innis (2008) expresses it, societies can only maintain their balance when they have a culture that is “concerned with the capacity of the individual to appreciate problems in terms of space and time and with enabling him [or her] to take the proper steps at the right time” (p. 88).

To recover the relevance of universities and end the estrangement between these educational institutions and the needs of their communities, Innis (2008) encourages professors to “go to summer schools and link books to conversations and oral tradition, becoming effective
links between the education institutions and the community, between research and the public (2008, p 214). For Innis (2008), universities (and by extension museums) had to encounter communities more consistently by going beyond their walls so as to educate through unmediated encounters.

As shown above, Innis’s (2008) reflections are still applicable. Nevertheless, he wrote in a moment when electronic media was just in its initial stages and when computers were just beginning to be used for more commercial purposes. Innis died in 1952, and therefore he could not witness the effects that electronic and later digital media technologies had on society, most of which he had accurately predicted. Therefore, it is necessary to complement his reflections with other authors who also tried to understand the relationship between society and the media in the mid-20th Century. Notably, the power of the latter to ‘determine’ the destiny of the former.

**Marshall McLuhan.**

Marshall McLuhan is the most famous Canadian scholar, whose quote ‘the medium is the message’ is included in a myriad of academic papers, lectures, and conference presentations around the world. McLuhan brought Innis’ ideas forward into the second half of the twentieth century when computers and the T.V. were in their heyday.

Through what McLuhan dubbed as ‘probes’, he introduced a number or precepts that compellingly embodied the characteristics and effects of media on society. Some of his most famous probes are ‘global village’, ‘the content of any medium is always another medium’ or ‘all media are extensions of some human faculty’ (McLuhan, 1994). The latter becomes a current argument in his books and lectures, in which he argues that new technology has “accelerated and enlarged the scale of previous human functions, creating totally new kinds of cities and new kinds of work and leisure (McLuhan, 1994, p. 8).
For McLuhan, the speed of electronic media in the second half of the 20th Century, i.e. TV, and the possibility to detribalize communities facilitated the creation of a ‘global village’ because people could know about everything and everyone, in a short period of time and at the same time. This phenomenon, argues McLuhan (2003), introduced a constant state of information overload (p. 135) that challenged directly the traditional role that the education system had had up until 1960’s.

With the change in the media environment, underscores McLuhan, education needs to shift its role from teaching traditional disciplines (knowledge) to providing students with critical thinking skills, so that they are able to evaluate the new languages introduced by new media technologies, i.e. TV (McLuhan, 2003, p. 5). He accounts for a kind of education that goes beyond the classroom’s walls and encourages students to be co-teachers, exploring the patterns of the new media environment, pulling out connections and concentrating on one problem, instead of a broad and cumbersome wholeness (McLuhan, 1971). In his words, education must create “a sense of ‘light through’ rather than ‘light on’” (McLuhan, 2003, p.10), that is, education should be a depth-participation process, one in which students become active participants in creating meaning and filling the gaps of their media environment.

This approach to education manifests McLuhan’s closeness to Innis’ reflections on the need to provide students with critical thinking skills that help them “take the proper steps at the right time” (p. 88). In fact, McLuhan constantly explored alternative and multidisciplinary ways to provide a “counter-environment” to help people become more aware of the effects media technology have on the way they perceive the world (Allan, 2017). Illustrative to these explorations, is the collaborative work that McLuhan had with the Royal Ontario Museum’s Head of Design, Harley Parker, with whom he conceived projects around media and the arts.
during the time McLuhan was the director of the Centre for Culture and Technology at the University of Toronto (Genosko, 2017).

However, McLuhan had a rather biological and individualist perspective because he was mainly concerned on the effects that media technologies have on bodies and aesthetic experiences of individuals. This approach sets him slightly apart from Innis, who saw the importance not in the individual nor in the human body itself, but in the broader social, political and economic scaffolding. This difference between Innis and McLuhan makes the former more relevant for the current research paper because more than focusing on how the institutions should respond to the individual human experience, I am concerned in understanding how institutions partake in the struggles their communities have regarding social justice issues.

**Friedrich Kittler.**

McLuhan profoundly influenced the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler (1990; 1996; 2010), for whom McLuhan’s probe ‘the medium is the message’ is innovative and relevant to understanding the discourses, patterns, and pace that all media introduce, and which subsequently transform existing social processes (Kittler, 2016, p. 95). Kittler, however, is less interested in the effects that technologies have on the aesthetic experience of the human body. Rather, Kittler studies media without people. As Peters (2010) expresses it, Kittler is interested in historical ruptures and not the slow sedimentation of social change through everyday practices: he gives us evolution by jerks, not by creeps. He prefers to focus on turning points rather than the long state of play in between the drama (p 5).

This lack of interest in human experience is because Kittler (1990; 1996, 2010) accepts that the subject is always subordinated to the object. That is, like Innis, Kittler believes that to comprehend the social, cultural, and political contexts in a specific space and time, it is necessary to analyze the technology by which a society communicates in a particular space and time. That
is, the prominent media by which people produce, process, transmit, and store information. From Kittler’s (1990; 1996; 2010) perspective, it is technology that determines people’s behaviour.

Highly influenced by poststructuralist authors, such as Foucault and Derrida, Kittler, (1990, 1996, 2010) focuses his studies and reflections on unraveling the discourses behind the networks created by media, understanding networks as the technologies and institutions that allow a given culture to select, store, and process relevant data. Kittler, encompasses these processes with the concept ‘Discourse Networks’ (Kittler, 2016, p. 92), as he named his methodology to inquire into the historical conditions that make media and their interpretations possible:

Who acts as the source that is articulated by texts, and who acts as the processor or interpreter that in turn articulates these texts? Who may assume the position of writer and reader? No more and no less is contained in the term discourse network. (Kittler, 2016, p. 92)

However, Kittler finds that both Foucault and Derrida, as well as poststructuralism itself, limit their analysis of the discourses to the written word, overlooking the fact that literary history is also the history of media technologies (Kittler, 2016, p. 91). Therefore, he finds that information is a technological and not a philosophical concept (Kittler, 2016, p. 92)

Nevertheless, what makes Kittler relevant for this research paper is the application of Discourse Networks to the study of institutions, which he understands as media, in that institutions store, produce, and disseminate knowledge. For instance, in Kittler’s (2004) *Universities: Wet, Hard, Soft, and Harder*, he explores eight hundred years of the history of the University, seeking to diagnose the role that these institutions now play in the 21st Century when computers and California-based tech companies control information systems worldwide.
As Kittler (2004) notes, the first European universities, just after the decay of the Roman Empire and the beginning of the Middle Ages, come into being to become a kind of hardware, that stored, transmitted, processed, and recorded data, essential elements for any media system. Kittler (2004) acknowledges that this role universities had hitherto as a ‘threefold hardware’ – processing, storing and transmitting information – was challenged by the invention of the Gutenberg press and the creation of nation-states, a figure that legitimized the monopolization of the institutions and therefore, of the information systems in the hands of the political power (2004, p. 246). Hence, in the modern era, universities had the role of educating public servants, lawyers, doctors and engineers. For many decades, the University became an institution praying for nation-state survival (Kittler, 2004, p. 246).

Nevertheless, this role has changed in the era of computers, when universities “have finally succeeded in forming once again a complete media system […]. For the second time in its eight centuries, the University is technically uniform simply because all departments share the same hardware” (Kittler, 2004, p. 249). Here, Kittler refers to the fact that computers allow a methodical integration of physics, chemistry, medicine, and humanities. This, in other words, means that cultural studies cannot understand humanity without drawing upon or studying technology:

From now on, the cultural sciences need computer specialists as well as mathematicians on their teaching staffs, and, inversely, the technical ones need historians of science. Just as Hegel’s Geist was only as deep as its explications, today’s knowledge is only as powerful as its implementations. The future of the University depends on its faculty to unite separated notation systems of alphabets and mathematical symbols into a superset (Kittler, 2004, p. 252)
Kittler (2004) envisaged that in the 21st Century computers and the Internet would bring considerable challenges to society because these new technological media process information in a more hidden, inconspicuous and commercialized way than any other previous media (p. 255). He sees as problematic the fact that new technology companies draw upon secrecy to make more profit. For him, making knowledge a secret hinders discovery and innovation. For instance, he states that the monopolization that California-based tech companies have over the computer and the Internet undermine the efficiency of information systems (Kittler, 2004, p. 255).

Therefore, he calls on universities to be at the forefront of this new media environment and help process and transmit the information to the computer illiterate as well as educate new professionals able to improve, deal with, and be at the forefront of these technological devices. These tasks gain even more relevance because “just as in the past neither books nor libraries proved usable without meta-levels of knowledge, now neither algorithms nor databases can do without Wissenswissenschaften (“knowledge of knowledge,” histoire des systèmes de pensée) (Kittler, 2004, p. 255). Here, Kittler underlines the crucial and leading role universities have, for it is in the processing and transmitting of information that prevents societies from being alienated by the privacy, secrecy, and commercialized discourses that new media technologies bring with them.

Kittler (2004) follows Innis (2008) and McLuhan (1994; 2003) in his call for attention to universities as institutions that must understand the media environment and their social, political, and cultural effects to succeed in maintaining the liberating and innovative character of information. Of particular interest is the relationship between Innis (2008) and Kittler (1990;1996; 2004) because these two authors thoroughly study the power that the economic and political system has over the media and how the latter in turn transmit these biases to institutions through the discourses of the material characteristics of media.
Akin to universities, museums are also social institutions aimed at generating spaces and opportunities for people to learn, comprehend, and analyze the past and present of the societies in which they live, as a way to reflect on the actions and attitudes needed to ensure a better future. Although neither Innis (2008), McLuhan, nor Kittler (2004) addressed museums directly, they underscore the importance of institutions to educate people capable of using the media in the best possible way to maintain a sustainable information system as well as preventing people from getting drenched by the power structures that accompany these media technologies.

At first glance, it seems that Kittler (2004) follows Innis’ (2008) argument that there is a need for institutions to be more strategic in how they educate people and how they compensate for the biases of media environments. Kittler (2004) saw that these environments were propelling society to the point where people were not able to be critical and were losing their concern for long-term processes. Moreover, both authors call for institutions that keep up with changes and function as media ‘for the living rather than for the dead,’ using Innis’ words. Nevertheless, Kittler (2004) concludes that

If envious states succeed in persuading the University in general and cultural studies, in particular, to think of themselves as a mere compensation and a mere assessment of the consequences of technology, then eight centuries from Bologna to Stanford will have passed in vain (2004, p. 254).

With this final reflection, Kittler (2004) seems to indirectly – and possibly unintentionally – address Innis’ claim that universities should compensate or balance society. Kittler (2004) criticizes this attitude as somewhat reactionary and calls on universities and other educational institutions to recognize their historical value in the history of humanity and continue with what they have done best throughout the years of media changes. That is, to continue making use of the technological means available to responsibly educate future generations in a more critical,
rational, and empowered way, allowing societies to select discourse networks that are reasonable and helpful for freeing themselves from the commercialization and secrecy of information.

To his credit, Kittler had the advantage of having lived long enough to witness the era of digital media (he died in 2011) and to know the effects of computers in the monopolization of information, something that Innis could only predict. Likewise, Kittler was able to see first-hand the potential of computers and other digital media to generate integration in the sciences, to promote innovation and democratize knowledge. Therefore, Kittler (1990; 1996; 2010) can account for a more optimistic attitude towards the use of new media, which Innis was far more pessimistic about.

However, Innis (2008), unlike Kittler (1990, 1996, 2004, 2010) decides to take a step forward and provide his readers with a more plausible solution to solve the imbalance of the system: the recovery of dialogue as media to process and transmit information as well as the creation of time-biased media that allow people to be more empathetic with one another and with long-term processes, i.e., global warming and reconciliation processes.

Similar to Innis (2008), many contemporary media theorists (Virilo, 2006, Papacharissi, 2010; Taylor 2014; Peters, 2015;; Srnicek, 2017; Bucher; 2018; Vaidhyanathan, 2018; Umoja, 2018) have dedicated their reflections to the effects that the speed and monopolization of the current media environment have on social processes. These authors see as problematic the fact that most media technologies we use every day are mediated by algorithms and thus an algorithmic logic that prioritizes narrow political and economic interests, which then get transmitted to millions of people in a matter of seconds. New digital technologies are more ephemeral, shallower, and more commodified than ever before. Most of these authors agree that
is necessary to slow down the speed in which societies are functioning and draw upon media such as dialogue and arts to help people be more conscious about their realities.

Returning to the analysis between Innis and Kittler, despite their difference in the approach to studying media (Innis (2008) being more focused on political and economic processes around the media and Kittler (1990, 1996, 2010) more interested in the discourses of media technologies) the reflections of both allow to posit an epistemological underpinning that helps understand the type of strategies that institutions like museums must develop to meet the challenges posed by new media dynamics. *That is, in the creation of experiences, museum professionals must pay more attention to the type of media they use, and the discourses media engender as well as those they do not, not only in terms of their materiality, but also in the pedagogy they are biased towards.* One of these strategies is to generate the kind of dialogic interactivity that Witcomb (2003; 2006) cherishes between the visitors and the contents of the museum, where the experience allows a critical analysis of the cultural, political, and economic social contexts in which people live and where a plural and collective dialogue generates awareness about long-term processes.

The purpose of these two chapters is to argue that by combining materialist media theory frameworks with museums studies it is possible to see museums as institutions that function as media in that they produce, process, transmit, and store information in ritualizing forms that have potential to transform people’s behaviours and perspectives. Hence, their relevance in preventing people from forgetting about long-term processes, aesthetic experiences, and cultural knowledge, as well as preparing them to be critical enough not to succumb to the adverse effects of new ICTs, is of the highest order.

In the third chapter, I present the case study of the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90, produced by the Casa de la Memoria Museum (CMM), in Medellín Colombia, which allows the
opportunity to better reflect upon how a museum can apply this media theoretical underpinning to its exhibitions as well as educational and cultural strategies.

Chapter 3

Case study.

As the second biggest city in Colombia, Medellín became in 2004 a host city for thousands of ex-combatants from the recently demobilized paramilitary groups, who, for almost two decades, had partaken in the Colombian armed conflict in their aim to vanish, through ‘social cleansing’, left-wing guerrillas. According to the National Center for Historical Memory, from the 262,197 deaths within the armed conflict in Colombia, a total of 94,754 deaths are attributed to the paramilitary groups (CNMH, 2018).

Therefore, when the national government announced the demobilization of the right-wing illegal paramilitary groups as well as the creation of a legal framework to facilitate their demobilization and reintegration process (embodied in Colombia’s National Law 975 of 2005, also known as the “Justice and Peace Law), victims of the armed conflict, not-for-profit organizations, and grassroots organizations began a dialogue with the township of Medellín to create a series of projects to support the processes around truth, reconciliation, and memory. These strategies were recognized as essential for the transitional justice process that was about to begin. One of the requests was the creation of a memory museum, where victims could share with all citizens of Colombia their memories and prevent new generations from repeating the historical and cyclical violence that for decades have had affected Colombia.

The aforementioned social and political circumstances led the Mayor of Medellín to create the Casa de la Memoria Museum (CMM). In 2006, the Mayor delegated to the established Programa de Atención a Víctimas del Conflicto Armado (Municipal Unit of Victim Attention and
Reparation) the responsibility to formulate this project alongside victims, as well as with social and cultural organizations, to ensure that the new Museum responded to the demands of society.

In 2011, after years of public consultation and political lobbying, the CMM opened its doors as a museum dependent of the Secretary of Culture of the Medellín Mayor’s office. However, understanding its scope and responsibility, three years later, the Museum became an independent entity from the local government, that is, a public establishment with legal status and financial autonomy, though still subject to municipal regulations (Concejo de Medellín, 2015). Today, the CMM is one of the public institutions responsible for guaranteeing the memory and peacebuilding processes in Medellín. For it, the township grants the Museum an annual budget for the development of projects and the operation of the building. In 2018, the CMM received $1,731,500.00 USD (MCM, 2017a). Moreover, the legal status of the Museum as an independent institution allows it to sign cooperation agreements with national and international allies, support that the Museum uses to increase the reach of the projects that help fulfill the CMM’s mission.

This mission is to be a “political, pedagogical and social project, inclusive and representative, which contributes to the transformation of the war logics towards more civilized practices” (Casa de la Memoria Museum, n.d.-b., para. 1). Accomplishing this task is achieved primarily through research, exhibitions, and cultural and education strategies. It is important to note that the director of the museum is appointed by the mayor of Medellín, therefore it changes periodically, according to the political party in power. However, civil society organizations are constantly overseeing each of the CMM’s actions and exert pressure for the continuity of the processes. This oversight helps to ensure, to some extent, that the institution is fulfilling its statutory mission, which was created together with the citizenry. This continuity is reflected in the fact that the CMM continues to lead processes and projects aimed at fulfilling this mission,
even though four mayors from different political affiliations have been in office since the creation of the CMM’s project in 2006.

The CMM understands its political role because of its capacity to influence decisions that affect society as well as its potential to transform people’s perceptions of past, present, and future understandings of the armed conflict. Furthermore, the CMM seeks to encourage visitor’s participation in collective decision-making while having a sense of the importance of understanding that social, cultural and political transformation respond to long-term processes. This political role echoes some of the reflections of the authors mentioned in the first chapter.

For accomplishing its mission and responding to its nature as a memory museum, the CMM understands that by doing exercises of memory it is possible to reflect on the problems that continue affecting society and find solutions for non-repetition. This is what the CMM has dubbed as living memory. To do so, the museum team design and develop exhibitions and programs in an unfinished way, one in which visitor’s memories and experiences are necessary tools to spark further dialogues and create meanings. With this living memory the CMM aims to subvert resignation and the immobility of historical events, while encouraging transformative actions (Casa de la Memoria Museum, n.d.-c, para. 9). That is, the CMM sees that the content it creates can only be complemented with visitors’ backgrounds, reflections and feedback, offering the city a platform for discursive, symbolic, critical and reflexive interaction, to circulate the memories of the armed conflict in the city and the country. These are necessary strategies that contribute to ending the causes of violence (Casa de la Memoria Museum, n.d.-c).

The context so far presented, provides elements to understand why the CMM becomes a compelling case for analyzing how a museum engages in generating transformative experiences that contribute to create dialogues, reflections, and promoting consciousness of the importance of collective memory and community action, drawing upon different media in its exhibitions and
programs, such as lithography, audiovisual material, guided tours, workshops and traveling exhibitions. Moreover, the idea of a *living* and *collective* memory is relevant for social justice processes, in such as it can encourage dialogue, face-to-face interactions, storytelling, and activism. These are processes that are not necessarily promoted by new digital media.

For instance, in December 2017, the CMM opened the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90, as a commitment of the Museum to provide the city with a platform to reflect upon what led Medellín to be the most violent city in the world in 1991 (with 381 murders for every 100,000 inhabitants, most of them charged to the war on drugs) and how it was able to become twenty years later one of the most innovative cities worldwide (Stewart, 2018).

This concern had become even more relevant in the last couple of years when the city became a buzzword in mainstream media because of television/streaming series and movies about Pablo Escobar and the war on drugs that has affected Medellín since the 1980s (i.e. Narcos on Netflix and Loving Pablo). These media might be open to everyone who wants to know about this episode in the history of the city, however, they are consumed in a rather passive way, where the spectator does not have the opportunity to discuss, question, or contribute to the narratives portrayed by popular-culture productions; nor do they have the chance to learn about the social, political, cultural and economic processes that enabled Escobar to become the leader of the most powerful mafia in the world. In other words and in some instances, digital platforms neither promote dialogue that confront those narratives, nor do they show the other face of history: the victims and the hundreds of movements that pacifistically resisted the violence.

Encouraged by the limitations that digital platforms and social media have in providing scenarios for reflections, alongside the urgency to give to new generations new referents different than Pablo Escobar, the CMM opened the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 in December 2017. The exhibition was accompanied by cultural, educational, and academic strategies, all
focused on generating dialogues around the narratives that have built Medellín as a city as well as reflecting on the reasons why the causes of violence remain unsolved. Therefore, more than a simple display of curatorial experiences, the CMM understood these strategies as a set of laboratories in which people could participate and generate content and reflections with the Museum in a more open and participatory curatorial approach.

Furthermore, the CMM has a methodology for planning, development, and activation of experiences that are of great interest for this research. The CMM has a general committee that brings together representatives from all areas of the Museum: museography and curatorship, education, research, public relations and mediation (guides). This committee is responsible for debating the kind of experiences and strategies that the Museum must implement in order to ensure that the museum is fulfilling its mission.

As a public entity, the CMM must document each stage of the development of any exhibition, event or educational strategy as well as the impact they have on people. Therefore, by analyzing the documents produced during the different stages of creation and implementation of exhibitions and programs, it is possible to explore in depth the tensions, debates, discourses, unintentional meanings, omissions, or contradictions present within museum strategies (Mason, 2006, p. 27). In the case of the CMM, there are some documents that the institution generates that are of great interest in this research project.

The first documents are the meeting minutes of the creation process of the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 from June 2017 to December 2017. The CMM has a select interdisciplinary committee in charge of defining the narrative, experiences, objectives of an exhibition and the educational and cultural programs that complement the exhibition. This committee meets every week to discuss how the Museum is going to address a topic. It is in these meetings where the most important epistemological discussions to design the experiences occur.
The second document is the curatorial script of the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70, 80 90. This script explains each museographic experience, not only providing a detailed description of the material characteristics of the exhibition, but also the qualities of the experience the Museum expects to generate in visitors. The third document is the mediation report. The latter is particularly interesting for this paper because it gathers all feedback from visitors of the exhibition into a single narrative, which shows how visitors received the experience, and the reflections it sparked on them. This document allows for a comparison between expected and actual experience and is thus of great interest.

And finally the document that systematizes the project MEDELLIN|ES MEMORIA VIVA [MEDELLIN| IS living memory], by which the CMM took the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 to five different communities in Medellín, as an attempt to include narratives from the citizens of Medellín and allow low-income and vulnerable communities to get access to the contents of the Museum.

I would like to acknowledge the fact that I knew about the existence of these documents because of my capacity as the consultant for national and international relations at the CMM, a position that also enabled me to participate in some of the discussions included in these documents. However, although these documents are digitized, none of them are hosted on any digital platforms accessible to the public, and therefore I had to make a formal request via e-mail so that the museum staff could send them to me. The privilege I had of having worked at the institutions together with the public figure of the Museum (which makes all documents produced by the museum accessible to anyone), facilitated access to the aforementioned archives.

In the next section, I introduce the essential ideas, discussions, reflections and strategies that I found after analyzing the meeting minutes, the curatorial script, the mediation report and the MEDELLIN|ES MEMORIA VIVA report, considering the theoretical framework presented
in the second chapter. This textual and theoretical analysis complements my participative observation during the process of creation and implementation of these museum strategies.

**MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90.**

The CMM understood that there was an opportunity to talk about the history of Medellín in an institutional and responsible perspective which would not only show the causes of violence, but also generate dialogues and platforms for communities to reflect on ways to solve the underlying systemic causes of violence.

For the design of the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70, 80, 90, the director of the museum as well as the curatorial team created a multidisciplinary committee, in which different professionals from the different areas of the museum could participate in the creation of the museographic experiences as well as in the cultural and educative strategies. This decision was made because the CMM was accepting a colossal responsibility in opening dialogues on the most violent decades in the history of Medellín.

In the first meeting of this committee, there were 17 people from the different areas of the museum: two mediators (guides), four researchers, three education professionals, one graphic designer, three curators, a historian in charge of the archives and the museum library, two professionals from the PR area, and one artist who led the workshops of the museum with the community. To make the meetings more efficient and enriching, the committee decided to divide the group into four smaller committees, which would meet every week to develop ideas and bring to the general committee the proposals of the museographic experiences. From early stages, the general committee identified five causes of violence in Medellín and which they though were essential to address in the exhibition. These five causes are: polarization, the constant portrayal of negative icons in mainstream media i.e. *Narcos* on Netflix and *Loving Pablo* (Hollywood film), individualism, inequity, and tolerance of illegality.
Once the committee identified these five problems that the exhibition needed to address, it continued to discuss the design of the exhibition. In this stage, more cumbersome and interesting questions arose: What should be the question that the Museum poses to visitors? How would the CMM collect the feedback that visitors give to mediators about their experience at the exhibition as well as sharing their reflections after visiting it? How could MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 ensure open and plural dialogues within the exhibition and promote critical reflection upon the need to participate as a collective in social, cultural and political transformation? How could the exhibition have a balanced content to generate the kind of reflection the museum wants to catalyze?

After long discussions, the general committee decided on three goals they should achieve with the exhibition. The first goal was that MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 needed to be more than an art exhibition. As one of the participants expressed it in the meeting on September 21st, 2017: “[the museum] must make visible the actions of pacifistic resistance that have allowed social mobilization and political impact. By doing so, the museum can return the question to visitors about their stance in this regard”. Later in this same meeting it is expressed that “[t]his exhibition should lead visitors to recognize the social base that legitimizes the institutional framework. It should generate political emotions, which are useful to create a collective political fabric”. Therefore, the committee decided to treat the exhibition as a cultural and exhibitory platform that would encourage people to participate in the transformation of the city towards one that thrives, and in which all work together to solve their problems collectively and peacefully. Finally, the museum staff agreed that the exhibition should be a device whereby the museum would challenge the hegemonic narrative of the memory of Medellín, promote new reflections, include new testimonies, and introduce questions to citizens regarding the past, present and future of Medellín.
The second goal was the need to provide encounters between stories of the past and the experience of the present, a circular process by which the museum could make visible the differences and similarities of the 70s, 80s and 90s as well as today’s context. This was an essential strategy to draw the visitor’s attention to the need to act in the present to prevent negative experiences from happening again in the future.

A third goal was that MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 needed to call upon collective experience. Therefore, the exhibition had to allow open and broad experiences for group discussion, experiences that had to be written in the plural i.e. *us*. Furthermore, the committee decided that the experiences should lead visitors to understand that the first steps people can take to stop the cycle of violence is transforming their individual actions into collective deeds, as well as generating dialogue with others.

Reading the meeting minutes of the creation process of MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90, I found interesting reflections around the role media and particularly media technologies were thought to play in achieving this goal. One of the participants stated the importance of including a device useful to link the exhibition to the cultural background of the past, a device not sophisticated nor technological, and which could help to reflect the environment in the decades of the 70s 80s and 90s, times when society was not so mediated. i.e. corded phones and typewriters. The committee was interested in unraveling how social ties were sustained before and how the museum team might use a device that allowed them to recreate what was involved in, for instance, long phone conversations between two people. One of the participants asked to the committee: “How do we make people talk? We must enable these different forms of relationship without technological mediation, because before the 70’s and 90’s people had more opportunities of encounter”. This concern echoes the reflections that Innis and other contemporary authors have also stated about
the loss of dialogue or face-to-face encounters with the introduction of the electronic and digital media technologies.

With these three goals in mind and after two months of discussion, the committee defined that MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 had to be a cultural exhibition and laboratory platform to re-discover the different faces of the city that overlap, cross, distance and approach, through a plural interaction with Medellín, its territories and inhabitants. MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 was conceived as a space to visit Medellín in an unfinished and changing story, which visitors and the museum would build together through a living timeline, a living memory; a possibility to remember and imagine the repression and the explosion of the 70s, the blindness, the fear and the perplexity of the 80s, and the awakening of the 90s. This platform was also seen as an invitation to generate a collective exercise of memory and reflection/dialogue in the present that contributes to the resignification and overcoming of the violence that have affected Medellín and Colombia for decades. (Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2017-b, para. 3)

The museographic experience.

As a result of the multiple discussions and reflections within the committee, the result was an exhibition that provides visitors a useful tool to generate questions and reflections about the history of Medellín. To do so, the museographic strategy contemplates a chronological journey through the seventies, eighties and nineties. This chronological journey was designed according to three objectives. The first objective is the possibility that the public build their own memories during the historical journey and find their own place within an unfinished story. With this first methodology, the CMM reflects the open-ended experiences that museum professionals such as Witcomb (2003; 2006) and Henning (2006) suggest in that they allow visitors to partake in the creation of meaning. The second objective is the possibility of the of visitors to challenge the events of the past from the present, transgressing the idea of a linear and unchangeable time. And
finally, the need to name events, remember victims, and build new references to achieve comprehension of processes different from the imaginaries created by mainstream media.

For the purpose of this paper, I will describe five experiences of MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 and that shed light on how the museum’s curatorial, cultural, and educational strategies can become relevant for the transformation of subjects and how they can use media to address social justice issues.

The first element that I want to refer to is the graphic timeline that the exhibition starts with (See Appendix A). This timeline displays the most important and relevant facts that happened in Medellín from 1970 to 1999. It is a collage of images of Medellín during these decades that helps the visitor witness the transformation of the city from a rural landscape to an urbanized metropolitan area, from a calm and small town, to a violent metropolitan area in the 1980s, when the Medellín cartel started off. Then, the timeline finishes with the chronology of the 1990s, when the city struggled to re-establish itself through community and cultural initiatives as well as the increase of urban infrastructure. With this experience, not only does the museum offer a context of the historical process that the city experienced to become what it is today, but it allows the visitor to re-know the different faces of the city that overlap, as well as an opportunity to understand the historical process that Medellín has undergone as an unfinished and changing story.

The second element of importance is a wood cube installed at the centre of the exhibition room. On each of its sides there is an experience related to the memory of the city during the seventies, eighties, and nineties. The first side has the testimonies of women from the 13th commune of Medellín, who tell the visitor how they built the neighbourhoods with their own hands and through joint work with the community (See Appendix A). This, these women say, had to be done because the state forgot them and therefore, had not provided them with public
services necessary for their well-being. In this experience, the memories are contained in audio recordings. The visitor must put on headphones to listen to these testimonies while facing a photograph that crystalizes the moment that each woman is telling. This is an intimate moment during which the visitor listens to the testimonies of these women.

Next to this experience, there is a simulation of a living room where the visitor can sit and read a photo album located on a side table. It is an album created by the local artist Silvana Giraldo (See appendix A). Here, Giraldo (2017) tells the story of her family who had to move from the countryside to the city in search of opportunities, but once settled, had to face violence in multiple forms. Nevertheless, the album narrates the daily life of an ordinary family in Medellín that illustrates the voices of different generations who tell their memories of living in the city at the end of the seventies until the end of the nineties. It is an album that highlights the neighbourhood, the community, and the family as a place of refuge. With this album Giraldo (2017) notes that violence can silence life in multiple ways because at times it takes out the voice of the city. This violence is spread by media, and leaves other memories hidden, other stories of what is lived on the street and inside households absent. The ordinary Medellín citizens, battered or transformed, have also found displaced their notion of street and of public space and how to put them into play in their daily lives. With the inclusion of this album and the disposition of a living room, the museum reminds visitors of the role of family memories, and particularly of the dialogues that happen inside a household, which becomes media to know more about Medellín, while at the same time portraying families as scenarios where it is possible to resist violence.

On the third side of the wood cube, there is a red table with a typewriter, elements that are attached to a blue panel (See appendix A). This panel follows the same collage style of the aforementioned timeline. In this experience, visitors see the photography of the march of The Red Carnations, which took place in 1987: 3,000 people paraded through the streets of Medellín
holding red carnations to protest against the violence that stained the streets of Colombia with blood (Restrepo, 2017). Four of the social leaders who led this march, Héctor Abad Gómez, Pedro Valencia Giraldo, Luis Felipe Vélez and Leonardo Betancur, were killed before the end of that month by illegal right-wing armed groups. The images of these social leaders appear in the upper part of the panel.

Here the visitor is invited to use the typewriter and write a letter to either the youth, the government, politicians, students, grandparents, friends, social leaders or to the violent actors and then insert their letters into a red box next to the typewriter. Periodically, mediators and museum staff take out the letters, sort them out according to the recipients, and send them to social groups related to them to encourage social, cultural, or political processes happening in the city. The motto that accompanies the experience Letters to is particularly relevant to this paper in that the museum uses it as an inspiring phrase to encourage visitors to take an active role and join their voices to those of social leaders who are struggling against violence. The quote states “in the face of violence and injustice, we declare our position, we shout aloud the value of life, we awaken the indolent and we name the absent”

Using a typewriter requires a clarity of mind and thought before starting to type because once a key is pressed, the ink cannot be erased from the paper. This act, therefore, demands a greater dedication to the development of ideas and feelings than entering similar thoughts into the tablet for instance. In other words, this requirement is no longer found in digital media, where any word can be easily eliminated or replaced.

In light of the guiding quote that contextualizes this experience, the act of providing comment is particularly interesting for the museum’s political relevance because anyone who decides to write knows that they leave their words in support of a collective struggle, which is even graphed in the part that the visitor sees. Likewise, it is an invitation to participate in a
collective that opposes violence as a method of solving problems or obtaining achievements. The images, the colours, the typewriter, and the idea of letters as media for producing, transmitting, and storing messages to a collectivity provide alternative media from digital technologies through which visitors of different ages can participate, engage in and activate their role as citizens for the defense of human rights. Echoing Kittler (1990, 1996), this experience provides a compelling example of the powerful discourses that material characteristics of media can achieve in the visitor experience, as well as the key role they play in the creation of alternative pedagogies for addressing social justice struggles. Moreover, this experience encourages the visitor to spend time, sit down and think what he or she is going to say, because what is written in the typing machine cannot be erased. Likewise, what is written will not immediately reach a number of receptors but will become an archive, a document that others sometime in the future will read. In Innis’ words, this is a time-biased museum experience.

This powerful experience is acknowledged by the museum, and therefore it places one mediator in the room and who is prepared to start dialogues, pose questions and offer reflections with the person or groups who are interacting with this experience.

In the fourth side of the wood cube, the visitor finds the entrance to get inside the cube and watch a microfilm, directed and produced by Carolina Calle, a university student from Medellín. This microfilm narrates the story of Diego, who has lived half of his life in a cell. He entered prison when he was twenty years old: young, single and illiterate. Eighteen years later, Diego returns to freedom. Nevertheless, he finds a city that although its surface has changed, it is still a prison city. Here the Museum incorporates the youth into the narrative. A youth broken by the lack of opportunities and the violence of the city. A reflection on the lives of many young people who were broken by the lack of opportunities and the violence of the city. But here there are no voices or dialogues, only lines that explain in brief words the history of the man that the
visitor is seeing. A story without sound, without a voice, where the visitor only sees the images of Medellín through Diego’s eyes

The mediation strategy is another compelling example of the kind of approaches that museums can take in order to ensure dialogue and reflection in visitors. Mediators are the guides in the museum, but in the CMM they play an active role in the exhibition in that they are the ones who engage and interact with visitors. As stated above, the experiences that the Museum creates are not finished, but instead they are seen as catalysts for further visitors’ reflections and interactions, through which the experience is completed. To ensure that this interaction happens, mediators have within their functions to approach visitors to ask them about what they have seen, what has most attracted their attention, or whether they knew about the facts, figures, or social leaders shown in the exhibition. These mediators not only describe the experience for those who do not know how to use the typewriter, for instance, but are called to engage in conversations that allow visitors to reflect on and process the information they have just received.

By having a person who remains in the room to approach visitors, the Museum demonstrates that it is concerned with generating dialogues and encounters, and that gives time to people to know more about the history of Medellín. This allows them to obtain a broader picture of what has happened to the Colombian city as well as new positive references of individuals and social and cultural organizations that have not hidden or escaped, but are in the city resisting, working with people, and contributing to social transformation. Even though the city still suffers from different kinds of violence, its citizens have survived; as the last experience of the museum expresses it: “We survive.”

It is important to note that the CMM is a museum that stresses mediation as primary media to generate dialogue with visitors, because it understands that it touches on sensitive and cumbersome topics that could spark disagreements, sorrow, and conflicts on visitors. By drawing
upon the human component instead of technological means for mediation (i.e. audio guides), the CMM manifests its concerns to provide visitors with dialogic reflection and co-creation *in situ* so as to build new representations and referents to inhabit the city as well as encourage visitors to have a more committed participation in social justice processes.

Arguably, technologically mediated audio guides are useful for ensuring that visitors understand the information portrayed at the exhibition, however, these devices discourage people from starting dialogues with others in the room. More than providing information, the CMM looks for critical thinking and active participation on the part of its visitors. The above reflects on what authors in the first and second chapter argue when they expressed that it is through dialogue and active involvement of people that institutions can accurately address the current social, cultural, and political challenges.

**Visitors have the last say.**

Annually, the mediators provide to the director and all museum areas a document in which they describe the interactions they had with the public, the feedback they received from visitors and guided tours, and in which they give recommendations for future exhibitions. Due to the theme of the exhibition, both foreigner and local visitors come to the Museum with several prejudices, expectations, and imaginaries of what they know about Medellín. Therefore, as the mediators expressed, many visitors were greatly surprised that MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 does not focus on Pablo Escobar, but provides information and spaces for conversation and reflection about the social, political, economic, and cultural contexts that led Medellín to become the capital city of drug trafficking. Nevertheless, it was found that the exhibition achieves its intentions when there is a mediator who talks to visitors, asks them questions, attends to the message of each experience, dialogues, and listens to the curious and excited visitors. Conversely, visitors who did not have this kind of interaction or who did not participate in guided tours, expressed
their difficulty in understanding the meaning of the exhibition or were not able to create the kind of reflection expected by the Museum.

Moreover, mediators found that generating collective reflections in visitors was not as easy as they thought. Many visitors who participated in the guided tours or who talked to mediators did reflect upon their individual actions, but mediators had to generate further dialogues so that people could understand themselves as important subjects for the history of Medellin. It took longer to reflect from a collective or community sense. Also, mediators found that the exhibition evokes shared memories connected by a sense of individuality. That is, people remember what happened to their families, share their own experiences and commit to be a better citizen. Nevertheless, it is less common to generate an immediate reflection on the need to participate in collective action to transform the city. Surprisingly, different findings were found in the project MEDELLIN | ES Memoria Viva, which took the same exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 to other territories of the city while it was exhibited at the Museum.

**MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva.**

MEDELLÍN | ES Memoria Viva (Medellin is living memory) was a joint project between the CMM and the Empresas Públicas de Medellín Foundation, (EPM Foundation), a Colombian public services group, who, with the support of the Alliance for Reconciliation Program of the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and ACDI/VOCA, took the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 to different urban and rural neighbourhoods of the city. One of the reasons that inspired this project was the need to generate a space of dialogue and encounter with communities who did not get access to the content that the Museum was portraying within its walls. This was either because of the economic limitations to go to the Museum, or their lack of time to visit it, or simply because they did not know about it.
The project prioritized five of the sixteen communes in Medellín: *Manrique, Doce de Octubre, Popular, El Poblado and San Cristóbal* (See Appendix B). These territories were selected according to two criteria. First, the physical space available and suitable for holding the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90. For it, the alliance with the EPM foundation was essential, because it manages public cultural centres around and above the water reservoirs from the municipal aqueduct, called Unidades de Vida Articulada (UVA). The second factor was the need to include a plurality of dynamics so that it was possible to consolidate different forms of narrating the same city and therefore providing a more complete and sharper picture of Medellín.

After six months touring through the five communities, the project interacted with 4321 citizens from different ages and social groups (Indigenous people, Afro-descendants, children, adolescents, higher education students, professors, social leaders and elders). From this figure, 723 were random visitors, 2677 participated in guided tours and 921 participated in more than 80 workshops. It is worth pointing out that 60% of the beneficiaries were children, and although this population was not initially the targeted group, they became current visitors and participants in the activities proposed by the project (Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018). Their curiosity, their stories, and experiences were compelling for the findings and reflections of the exhibition, which will be further described in the last section of this chapter.

For this traveling exhibition, the educators and curators of the CMM selected the experiences that had shown to be most potent in creating dialogue and sparking reflections and curiosity on visitors to the first iteration of the exhibition. They thus took into consideration the feedback received by the main exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 (which had been opened for four months at the moment of the formulation of the project MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva). Therefore, they decided to reproduce, with the funds of the project, five experiences: The 70s 80s and 90s timeline, Cartas A (letters to), Sobrevivimos (We survive), Arma tu Barrio (Build your
neighbourhood) and a map of each territory that could leverage more participative dialogue around the memories of each community.

Furthermore, the project team created four strategies to activate the travelling exhibition. The first strategy was to use social media to communicate to stakeholders and people at the targeted communities about it. Therefore, the three institutions, EPM Foundation, Casa de la Memoria Museum and ACDI/VOCA activated their social media accounts with images and e-cards about the exhibition and its activities. Moreover, a microsite was created dedicated to hosting all information regarding the exhibition project MEDELLIN|ES MEMORIA VIVA.

The second strategy was to offer, through the exhibition, a first-person encounter between the content and the random visitors from the different territories, who voluntarily and spontaneously approached the exhibition. In this case, the mediator who was at the exhibition provided general information while at the same time probing the previous knowledge visitors have and their interest in participating in further dialogue. The third strategy was the guided tour. For it, the dialogue became the primary tool, encouraging people to ask questions and reflect upon the content of the exhibition. Also, the guided tours included didactic activities that allowed people a more accurate reading of the museographic experiences and its various devices. The fourth strategy was the creation of workshops, thought as playful and dynamic activities, for which the intention was to generate formative and reflective experiences about Medellín in the 70s, 80s and 90s through the creation of art objects.

The final report of the project provides interesting and relevant findings for this research paper. The first one is that for the communication strategy, social media showed to be less effective than the meetings with community organizations and leaders. This because most of the groups participating in the guided tours and workshops were those that were previously arranged between the CMM, the EPM Foundation and the institutions in the territory. Social networks
worked more to communicate what was happening to stakeholders, but social media was not an effective strategy to attract people to the exhibition. Furthermore, social media was less efficient in generating people’s commitment to participate in activities that lasted more than one hour.

The face-to-face encounters with professors and principals of the educational institutions as well as the leaders of cultural processes present in each territory was the most successful communication strategy for the project. Many teachers in the educational institutions showed their interest to know the exhibition and take their students to it in an attempt to better understand the history of their city, thus enabling their students to experience other spaces outside the classroom.

The second finding shows that workshops were the most effective strategy to create critical thinking on participants and nourish the dialogue around the past, present and future of Medellín. In each workshop, participants expressed their stored emotions either through their artistic creations or through participating actively in conversations. One of the participants of one of the workshops expressed:

*The exhibition not only allowed me to know a lot about the history of Medellín but also in attending one of the workshops I managed to heal many of the things that cause me nostalgia and pain when remembering those past and violent times and I had them stored long ago, but all this serves to reflect and learn from mistakes* (Translated quotation included in Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018, p. 29).

Guided tours showed to be effective within the youth, because they underlined the importance of fostering interest in young people so that they knew historical facts, addressing key concepts such as reconciliation, justice, truth and reparation; topics that focused on influencing their actions and helping to encourage the non-repetition of the violent events that took place in the city. The youth who participated and interacted with the exhibition recognized in turn the
importance of speaking of historical memory to recover and evoke the events that have been forgotten over decades. The dialogues that emerged with the adolescents gave an account of how the travelling exhibition was a way for young people to empower themselves and provide them with more in-depth conversations and reflections around their commitment to participate in the social struggles of the city. For instance, it was common for mediators to listen to young people highlighting how the lack of interest and ignorance in the memory of the city had a close relationship with the lack of inclusion of the history of Medellin in their curriculum (Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018, p. 53). Similar to this argument, one of the visitors wrote,

*It is difficult to see how little by little our city has been responsible for erasing the memory, for avoiding being called ‘the children of Pablo Escobar’ or the ‘children or drug trafficking’. Instead, the city should assume that it happened to us, but that we do not recognize ourselves there anymore. This is the importance of these places [the travelling exhibition] that are responsible for perpetuating and resignifying the memory of our city* (Translated quotation included in Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018, p.56).

Cartas A (Letters to) was the most successful experience. As the final report stated, some of the students of the educational institutions close to the exhibition came back to the exhibition after their classes so they could have enough time and write their letters on the typing machine. For instance, a middle-school student who attended the exhibition had the initiative to write a letter to politicians, using the typewriter. This letter reflects some of the thoughts and feelings of the students after participating in a guided tour through the travelling exhibition:

*Why so afraid to educate the people? We all have the right to know the truth; there were better solutions to continue resisting the problems of the urban militia and drug trafficking. There are other forms of resistance to violence: sports, art and education. We want to ask you [politicians] to have better public management and use the economic*
resources of the city for a better social investment, as it is to eliminate poverty, help industrialization, support education and public health so that people can have a better quality of life. We all have to keep our ethical values so that they can endure over time. Values such as respect, honesty, solidarity and commitment (Translated quotation included in Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018, p. 100)

One of the educators that participated in a guided tour with her students also wrote:

*We write to the political leaders who have destroyed our country to tell them that we are not defeated by their violence and that we, the youth of this country, fight pacifistically. We are willing to know the history and teach it, giving an example of what we want to be and how much we have to give ... So many years of violence have disarmed the world, but we come with all the strength and conviction to move forward* (Translated quotation included in Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018, p. 86).

These and more testimonies are documented in the final report of MEDELLÍN|ES Memoria Viva in which the feedback from all participant reflects the success of the project: it created a city-wide dialogue based on the generation of trust, recognizing and legitimizing community processes and activities that try to resist the urban violence in Medellín. Likewise, it was possible to generate reflection on the new generations about the past of Medellín and its validity in the present, giving them alternative media to understand their role as active members of society for the construction of a better future for the city

**MEDELLÍN | ES Memoria Viva** was a project that managed to include in the city-wide dialogue young people, adults, and elders. Nevertheless, 60% of the visitors were children, who’s perspective was not well accounted for in the planning and formulation of this project. Therefore, one of the most surprising learnings for the team was that involving children in an exhibition space of sensitive but essential issues for the city, was a significant achievement that fostered in
them feelings and reflections. For instance, after participating in one of the workshops of the project, one child expressed to one of the mediators that he did not want violence in his country. “I want to contribute to the construction of a better society and this [the craft object he created in the workshop] will be a small symbol that will lead me to this change. I am just a child, but I want to set an example for others to see that the change is from within, I do not want to see more sad images” (Casa de la Memoria, 2018, p. 129).

Furthermore, by reading the report, it is possible to observe that the combination of different media used in the project, such as visual media (exhibition), writing letters in the typing machine and audiovisual material (Letters to and We Survived) and the dialogue created in the guided tours and workshops, participants were more aware of the historical process that Medellin underwent to become the most violent city in the world. Likewise, they knew about new positive references, i.e., social leaders in the eighties and the cultural processes in the nineties. Also, the travelling exhibition created encounters for dialogues and for listening to what the community wanted to say about their memories of the city’s most violent decades.

As the report states, MEDELLINES Memoria Viva broadened the imaginaries of the city and transformed feelings of anger, sadness, frustration to hope. It fostered awareness of the past, self-reflection, confidence and commitment to actively participate in the transformation of the city towards one more peaceful, respectful and which could guarantee a dignified life to all communities (Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018).

Conclusion

Theorists of the materialist media tradition hold that media are not neutral. Instead, media hold biases, potentials, and limitations that have a significant impact on all social, political and cultural spheres. Of particular relevance are the reflections that Innis (2008), McLuhan (1994, 2003) and Kittler (1990, 1996, 2010, 2004) introduced to this discussion as they highlight the
urgency for museums, as social institutions, to perform a critical assessment of the media they draw upon for their exhibitions, educational, and cultural strategies. Here, I argue that by doing this, museums can be more effective in generating transformative experiences in which people become more critical of their realities as well as encouraging a sense of empathy and community, thus empowering them to alter the direction of their collective futures. These values are of great importance for today’s social justice struggles. This task gains relevance in a moment when, as shown in previous chapters, there is widespread concern for immediacy, ephemerality, and the commodification of virtual spaces, lack of time as well as scarce concern and commitment in long-run processes.

The analysis of the documents of the Casa de la Memoria Museum (CMM) in its different stages proved useful methodologically to connect theoretical analysis with a case study. Through this case study it was possible to witness the many discussions, debates, adjustments, intentions, omissions, and contradictions that the design and implementation of a politically relevant exhibition takes into consideration. Furthermore, these documents become themselves time-biased media in that they archive relevant discussions around the past and current media environment as well as the challenges posed by the new technologies to generate the precious dialogues and debates that the CMM team had from the earlier stages of the design of the exhibition. Therefore, it was compelling to find that many of the tensions and concerns that were presented in the meeting minutes reveal similar reflections and questions of those that media authors posit, particularly Innis, McLuhan, and Kittler.

Likewise, the comparison between the resulting curatorial intention and the documents generated by the mediators was illustrative. By making this comparison, it is possible to understand that the initial intentions of the museum are not always met and, therefore, that the museum must have in place a constant process of (re-)evaluation of the impact of an exhibition to
make the necessary adjustments while the exhibition is open, thus ensuring that the experiences are as transformative as possible for visitors. Otherwise, it would be a lost opportunity for the museum to address relevant social, political and cultural reflections, as Sodaro (2017) suggests with her example of the House of Terror in Hungary.

The aim of the CMM, through both MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 and MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva, is to generate individual and collective reflection upon violence as well as to promote dialogues across the city about a past that is still present. To achieve this, the museum team created multiple sensory experiences to broaden visitor’s knowledge and reflections on the history of Medellín while leveraging conversations between visitors around their experiences, feelings, thoughts and commitments for the future of the city of Medellín. This inclusion of memory and the creation of cross-generational dialogues in the museums’ experiences reflect Innis’ (2008) bias towards the oral tradition, which he saw to be essential to recover the balance in society.

Despite the use of different discourses through a variety of media within the exhibitions – collage, photographic images, audio-visuals, typing machine – the case study presented showed that dialogue with mediators and other citizens proved to be the most effective means for creating the kind of collective reflection that the CMM wanted to generate between people. Nevertheless, it is essential to note that museums that are concerned with being socially and politically relevant should not rely merely on dialogue or mediation for achieving their intention. As a matter of fact, this can be a critique for both MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 and MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva, particularly the former.

Relying merely on the role of mediators is not sustainable for the museum, in terms of management and visitors experience. Museums should ensure that even those visitors who do not interact with mediators understand the information and the message that the museum wants to
send. I argue that by analyzing the media they use at the exhibitions in light of media theorists presented in this research can be of great help. For instance, Kittler (2016) encourages his readers to ask about “[w]ho acts as the source that is articulated by texts, and who acts as the processor or interpreter that in turn articulates these texts? Who may assume the position of writer and reader?” (p.92). Perhaps, the answer of these kind of questions can facilitate the discussion to achieve more effective dialogical interactivity.

Furthermore, the experience of MEDELLINES 70 80 90, shows that, for creating critical reflection and a sense of community, dialogue by itself does not suffice. Mediators of the exhibition expressed that it was difficult to achieve this kind of collective reflection. The travelling exhibition MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva plays a crucial role in demonstrating that, when a museum goes beyond its walls and decides to engage with the dynamics of communities within their territory, it is easier to create dialogue around collective actions. Innis’ (2008) words resonate in this analysis: he encouraged professors to go to “summer schools and link books to conversations and oral tradition, [the professors themselves] becoming useful links between the educational institutions and the community, between research and the public” (Innis, 2008, p. 214). The statement mentioned above, together with the experience of the CMM, shed light on possible strategies that any museum concerned with its political relevance can draw upon. That is, museums interested in creating critical thinking around social and political issues that also look for generating a sense of community and activism in its visitors should take into consideration the processes by which they are able to create experiences that circulate outside the museum walls, as well as to think of experiences that produce cross-generational dialogues.

However, I want to note some problems that arise with the latter conclusions. First, when a museum opens channels for dialogue, it is necessary to ensure that it has professionals capable of channelling the multiplicity of reflections and turning them into opportunities for self-
reflection. It should not limit the scope of discussions in terms of plurality. Rather, museums must ensure that there is a means by which participants can generate commitments to society. What are important are not merely encounters, but the processes that result from them. The latter reflects what Innis (2008) and Witcomb (2003) state when advocating for the inclusion of dialogues and oral tradition in institutional practices.

Another limitation I found while conducting this research is that for the museum it is difficult to measure its impact in terms of its relevance to transform active subjects in processes of social justice or to ensure visitors engage in social actions in their communities. In fact, the question of how to measure the political relevance of museums is a shared concern among museum professionals and one that this paper falls short in responding. However, the reflections of Innis, Kittler, and McLuhan elucidate on a possible solution. Museums by themselves do not achieve people’s transformation without the support of other social institutions, and particularly educational institutions, including universities. In their capacity to carry processes of greater continuity than museums do, educational institutions can follow up on the actions that museums inspire on their visitors. That is, museums could achieve a better comprehension of their political relevance if they continue generating long-lasting partnerships with educational institutions, i.e. high schools and universities, understanding them not only as alternative centres of research and instruction but as allies for the education of critical and empathetic citizens, committed to the social justice problems of their communities.

Museums are politically relevant when they understand that their exhibition and strategies create experiences that are not exhausted or terminated within their walls. That is, museums are politically relevant when visitors take the reflections sparked at the museum to other spheres of their life. Likewise, if these concerns are channelled through educational processes, in classrooms and other academic spaces, the alliance between museums and universities achieves a
transformative power. Furthermore, this research showed that, in order to achieve political relevance, it would be useful for museums to think of their mission as a modified version of the oral tradition. This means that the reflections generated by their experiences allow intergenerational dialogues as well as include the past as an element on which to reflect the present and build the future. Also, by thinking it from this stance – an ‘Innisian Stance’ perhaps – museums might also help their visitors understand that the problems of social justice are not solved overnight but require continuous effort so that others can finally see their resolution in the future. This intergenerational cooperation has proven to be the most beneficial process for humankind.

As presented in the introduction, the International Council of Museums (ICOM) has opened the discussion around what should be a museum definition that better respond to today’s social, cultural and political challenges. Therefore, I want to dedicate my final words to suggest a museum definition that echoes the reflections that this research sparked on me: museums are non-for-profit institutions for the generation, preservation and transmission of plural, open and cross-generational dialogues around the political, social, cultural, economic and environmental processes from the past and the present, processes that are embodied by tangible and non-tangible heritage. They are institutions able to create aesthetic experiences that allow individuals and communities to reflect on new ways for building together better and sustainable futures.
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APPENDIX A

MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90


Timeline of Medellin in the 90s (2017). Casa de la Memoria Museum. (Photo: Casa de la Memoria Museum)
Wood cube in the middle of the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES 70 80 90 (2017). Casa de la Memoria Museum. (Photo: Casa de la Memoria Museum)


Territories impacted by the project MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva (Snapshot of the video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=M3JC2JGUT3M)

Letter to politicians. Experience: Letters to. (Casa de la Memoria Museum, 2018, p. 100)
A high school group participates in one of the workshops at the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES MEMORIA VIVA. (Photo: Casa de la Memoria Museum)

A student writes a letter using the experience ‘Letters to’ at the MEDELLIN|ES MEMORIA VIVA exhibition. Casa de la Memoria Museum. (Photo: Casa de la Memoria Museum)
Participants of a guided tour walk the streets of one of the communities that hosted the exhibition MEDELLIN|ES Memoria Viva.
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