

Public Art History Between Broadcast and Digital Media: Comparing *Civilisations* and Smarthistory

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Abstract. As a bridge connecting academic research and public understanding, the dissemination of knowledge in public art history is heavily constrained by media forms. However, existing research often focuses on the internal characteristics of a single medium, and rarely compares broadcast television and digital teaching platforms as two mutually referenced knowledge practices. This study selects the BBC *Civilization* documentary series and the Smarthistory digital art history platform as typical cases, and conducts parallel comparative analysis of the two media forms from three dimensions: knowledge authority allocation, audience participation methods, and interpretive openness. Research has found that *Civilization* relies on the audiovisual production advantages of television media, authoritative host narratives, and linear temporal and spatial arrangements to successfully present art history as a cultural narrative with a sense of urgency and emotional impact, and has an irreplaceable advantage in the breadth of mass communication; But its inherent preference for visual spectacle and smooth editing in media logic leads to structural sacrifices in knowledge depth, and the audience is quickly taken away from the detailed examination of historical conditions, institutional contexts, and academic controversies. In contrast, Smarthistory abandons one-way linear narrative and adopts non-linear navigation, multi-author collaboration, and instructional-oriented interpretive strategies, setting users as active participants to make knowledge more accessible, modifiable, and questionable, thus better aligning with contemporary art history's pursuit of diversity, decentralization, and reflective methodology. This study reveals the theoretical significance of media forms as knowledge construction variables and provides practical references for media strategy selection in public art history projects. In the future, with the intervention of new technologies such as artificial intelligence and virtual reality, public art history will face a more complex media ecology.

Keywords: Public art history, Media comparison, History of Digital Art, Television broadcasting.

1. Introduction

Public art history, as a bridge between academic art history research and the general public, has long been constrained by media forms in terms of knowledge production and dissemination. From print, radio, television to digital platforms, every change in media technology not only changes the presentation form of art history content, but also profoundly affects the way the public understands art, the attribution of knowledge authority, and the allocation of interpretation space. Therefore, research on the dissemination practice of public art history has always been closely intertwined with fields such as media studies, audience studies, and cultural criticism. However, existing research has mostly focused on the internal characteristics of a single media form, such as narrative strategies in television documentaries, interactive design in digital museums, or literary norms in critical writing. There is less direct comparative analysis of public art history knowledge practices driven by different media logics within the same analytical framework [1].

In existing comparative discussions, scholars have touched upon the above-mentioned issues from different perspectives. Television media naturally tends to replace deep arguments with visual drama and smooth editing, which often makes the public art history of television forms more infectious but sacrifices analytical aspects. From the perspective of digital humanities, it emphasizes that the history of digital art is not a simple transfer of traditional content, but rather a fundamental transformation in the process of knowledge organization and understanding. In addition, the role of digital culture in reconstructing traditional institutional institutions, Cameron focuses on how digital technology

responds to public expectations for diverse and modifiable knowledge, and that methodologies must have sufficient flexibility to accommodate differences rather than eliminate them. The above studies provide theoretical resources on different aspects such as television media, digital platforms, teaching practices, institutional transformation, and global perspectives. However, there are few studies that systematically compare broadcast media and digital teaching media as two mutually referenced knowledge practices, especially in parallel comparisons under the same evaluation dimension. The lack of this comparative perspective leads to a lack of sufficient understanding of the institutional advantages and structural limitations of each of the two media forms.

Based on this, this study selects the BBC *Civilisations* documentary series and the Smarthistory digital art history platform as typical cases to conduct a systematic media comparative analysis within the knowledge dissemination framework of public art history. At the theoretical level, this study provides a cross-media comparative analytical framework for the study of public art history, aiming to help practitioners have a clearer understanding of the capacity boundaries and institutional tendencies of different media forms in knowledge dissemination.

2. Broadcast authority

Civilisations seem at first sight to be the more formidable medium as television has always been identified with the ability to influence the popular taste by visual drama, the voice of authority, and the scope of the nation. As public broadcasting does not just involve transmitting information, it involves determining the way culture is to be presented to citizens.

That's what *Civilisations* does. The series makes art history seem urgent and expansive thanks to music, editing, the charisma of the presenters and light jumps in time and space. This is its strength however it is its weakness too. The shape, as Williams and Goulart suggest in their analysis of television aesthetics, tempts us to concentrate on presentation rather than argument and in *Civilisations*, the spectacle of connection at times takes the place of close analysis. Typically, the viewer is swiftly moved from one object to another and is not fully aware of the historical context, institutional context or debates concerning the interpretation of the objects [2].

Yet this very fluidity, while engaging, risks flattening the complexities of art history into a seamless and digestible narrative. The thrill of juxtaposing a Ming vase beside a Renaissance bronze can overshadow the material realities and conflicting scholarly voices that give each work its deeper friction. Viewers are left with an impression of interconnectedness, but they may struggle to recall the specific institutional contexts or historiographical debates that shaped these objects across centuries. In the end, what *Civilisations* ultimately demonstrates is not so much the richness of global cultures as the seductive power of televisual spectacle to make complexity appear simple. That achievement, however spectacular, comes at the cost of genuine historical understanding, leaving the audience entertained yet intellectually underserved.

3. Digital pedagogy

The logic of Smarthistory is very different. It allows audiences to learn from a broadcast sequence by jumping back and forth between essays, videos, and objects and revisiting them as and when necessary. The site obviously claims to be a pedagogical site, where classrooms are not repositories of facts, but are open, and where teaching strategies are shared. It is pertinent to the issue that Murtha Baca and Anne Helmreich have a preconceived notion that the history of digital art should be viewed as a technical process and as a shift in method of scholarship and audience engagement. Simplification as accessibility – there is no such thing as making art accessible, as in radio/podcasts/audiences – the shaping of a medium around the way the audience learns [3].

Smarthistory is not just a Web-based textbook. It takes interpretation as a guided inquiry, and thus, the user is an active participant as opposed to a passive recipient. This participatory model aligns with

broader shifts in digital humanities, where the boundaries between expert and learner become increasingly porous.

By prioritizing dialogue over dissemination, Smarthistory transforms art history into a living practice rather than a fixed canon, encouraging users to construct their own narratives through nonlinear exploration. Ultimately, such platforms demonstrate that digital tools are not merely vehicles for content delivery but catalysts for reimagining how knowledge is co-created, contested, and sustained across diverse publics.

4. Audience and criticism

The contrast between the two writings is acute when the audience is taken into consideration with a critical attitude. *Civilisations* is a show for a mass audience, and as such, it must hold their attention, maintain their attention and be emotional. Sometimes it's quite too quick in explaining it, but it makes the art history culturally significant. Smarthistory, on the other hand, addresses students, educators and other independent learning individuals who might desire the explanation but not to give up the option of doubting it.

Beth Harris and Steven Zucker make it clear that digital art history is situated in the pedagogical model of exchange in the classroom, and interpretive openness rather than unidirectional delivery. This is very similar to “Histories and practices of art criticism and art journalism, in the sense that judgments need to be made visible for both art criticism and pedagogy. It is not a matter of debasing authority; it's a matter of phasing it out, and that's what Smarthistory does. Thanks to various contributors, forms and posts, the argument has been diffused, making it easier to see that art history is not just stated but made [4].

This diffusion of authority in Smarthistory does not weaken the learning experience but rather enriches it by inviting active participation and critical reflection from the viewer. Where *Civilisations* sweeps its audience along a predetermined path of cultural grandeur, Smarthistory pauses to open doors for questioning, revisiting, and even disagreeing with the interpretations offered. In this sense, the two platforms embody fundamentally different visions of what public art education should be: one celebrates the spectacle of cultural heritage, while the other cultivates the practice of critical inquiry.

5. Print legacies

Magazines and print media are also useful in gaining an understanding of the limits of both texts. Traditional print criticism focused the reader on argument, connoisseurship, style and editorial judgment, but it was often founded on restricted access and specialist vocabulary. Smarthistory is analytical, with the seriousness of print and dispels the exclusivity.

In this instance, the postdigital museum, as Ross Parry writes, is useful as it suggests that digital culture does not replace the older institutions but rather that it changes the expectations of participation, authority and access. Smarthistory is a reminder of a postdigital art magazine, in which the boundaries between classroom and archive and the humanities in general are intentionally challenged. *Civilisations*, however, is more like the more traditional sense of cultural mediation in broadcasting: it makes things accessible, but more through cleaning and re-presenting a finished story [5].

This distinction is crucial as it reveals that these two patterns are built on fundamentally different temporal logics: *Civilization* moves linearly from the past to the present, providing a sense of closure and carefully crafted determinacy; Smarthistory encourages horizontal, user-driven exploration, viewing archives as forever open spaces. The BBC series implicitly trusts the authority of a single author's voice, while Smarthistory distributes this authority to numerous writers, different regions, and diverse interpretive frameworks, making differences and temporality visible rather than cutting them out.

6. Public knowledge

The other question is how each text addresses the issue of global art history. *Civilisations* certainly attempts to be outside of the civilisational story that has been explored in civilisational broadcasting in the past, but in a more limited fashion than the broad reach of the program. That desire is not without relevance and the article by Fiona Cameron on digital technologies and the creation of knowledge can be used to understand why: the cultural public increasingly demands from museums and places of learning knowledge that is available in plural, networked and revisable forms. However, plurality of content does not necessarily equal plurality of methods. *Civilisations* brings more of the world, but the documentary is built up on synthesis using the expertise of the hosts.

Smarthistory is more aligned with the unstable, comparative, and decentred nature of contemporary art history in that it allows users to experience the difference without the need to put everything into the same unbroken narrative. This is not to say that Smarthistory abandons coherence altogether, but rather that it locates coherence in the user's own curatorial journey rather than in a single authoritative voice. In doing so, it tacitly acknowledges that global art history is not a puzzle to be solved by assembling all pieces into one picture, but a field of tensions, overlaps, and incommensurabilities that are best explored through juxtaposition [6][7].

Consequently, while *Civilisations* expands the geographic canvas, it still operates within a televisual logic of closure and summation, whereas Smarthistory embraces the very open-endedness that digital platforms make possible—and that contemporary publics increasingly expect.

7. Conclusion

This study systematically compares two typical cases, BBC *Civilization* and Smarthistory, to reveal the structural differences between broadcast television media and digital teaching media in the dissemination of public art history knowledge. Research has found that *Civilization* relies on television as a form of mass broadcasting, and with high-level audio-visual production, authoritative hosts' narrative charm, and linear temporal and spatial arrangement, successfully presents art history as a cultural narrative with a sense of urgency and emotional impact. This form has irreplaceable advantages in expanding public exposure and enhancing cultural attention, which is in line with the classic mission of public broadcasting to present culture to citizens.

However, the expressive logic of television media itself - its inherent preference for visual drama, smooth editing, and emotional rhythm - makes structural sacrifices in terms of knowledge depth: the audience is quickly brought into and out of the artwork, but it is difficult to fully grasp the historical conditions, institutional context, and academic controversies behind the work. In contrast, Smarthistory, as a digital teaching platform, fundamentally reconstructs the logic of knowledge organization.

It abandons one-way, linear authoritative narratives and instead adopts non-linear navigation, multi-author collaboration, open interpretation, and instructional-oriented content design, giving users a position as active participants. This structure not only makes art history knowledge more accessible but, more importantly, it gives it the characteristics of being modifiable, questioned, and comparable, thus better aligning with contemporary art history's pursuit of diversity, decentralization, and reflective methodology.

Overall, both forms of media have their own strengths: *Civilization* has an advantage in the breadth and instant appeal of cultural dissemination, while Smarthistory demonstrates stronger persuasiveness in the depth, openness, and sustainability of knowledge interpretation. If 'maintaining academic rigor while achieving broad public participation' is taken as the standard for measuring the success of public art history, then Smarthistory's digital teaching structure provides a closer practical path to this ideal.

Looking ahead to the future, with the continuous evolution of media technology, especially the emergence of artificial intelligence-generated content, virtual reality/augmented reality immersive

experiences, and social platform short video narratives, the dissemination of knowledge about public art history will face a more complex media ecosystem.

It can be foreseen that the boundary between broadcast-style mass production and digital open platforms will further blur, and a new hybrid form may emerge that combines television-grade audio-visual quality with the flexibility of digital platform interaction. At the same time, personalized learning paths assisted by artificial intelligence, collaborative mechanisms between user-generated content and expert knowledge, and real-time collaborative interpretation across regions and cultures may all become important directions for the next generation of public art history practice.

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