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In the coming decade, technology will transform museums into a distributed institution (?)

In 1964, Paul Baran wrote his now seminal piece on communication networks in which he describes a process of decentering the control over information exemplified in three network structures that move from 'centralised', 'decentralised', to 'distributed'. This network theory became a key tool in the development of the internet and later on the world wide web. However, this theory describes more than a tool to mitigate in case of 'node failure', indeed, this process of 'decentralising' holds deep political and social connotations which also reflect the historical changes seen in western museums.

For example, a 'centralised' institution reflects the 'encyclopaedic' museum of the nineteenth and twentieth century. Here, information and knowledge are controlled by the institution whose unassailable voice is presented as fact and mediates a monolithic perspective. However, the adoption of 'new museology' or 'critical museology' outlined by scholars such as Peter Vergo and Eillean Hooper-Greenhill suggests a process of 'decentering' the institution. In this case, institutions explored ways of growing relationships with their communities through participatory practices that engage in shared curatorial authority.

However, in her analysis of community engagement or 'decentering' work, Nuala Morse (2014) highlights a common problem found within these projects which she refers to as a 'contributory museum'. In such work, there is a tendency for community engagement to focus too heavily on the benefits for the museum rather than consider what the museum could do for the community. In response to this idea, Morse proposes the 'distributed museum' where a museum 'acts like a connector, linking people, ideas, and projects back into its collections and buildings, and connecting up its collections, ideas, and staff by moving out towards different community nodes' (Morse, 2014, p. 226). In doing so, the museum is a space of circulating that enables value to flow through and beyond the institution.

Morse's research visualises a distributed museum model. Likewise, in my research, I have been exploring this idea but through the lens of web3 technologies. Web3 is founded on the principles of decentralisation and implements technologies such as blockchain, cryptocurrencies, and non-fungible tokens (NFTs). For many, these digital tools have gained associations with speculative financial bubbles, 'cyberlibertarianism', and free market economics. But my interest lies in the way these technologies can go beyond financialisation. Web3 technologies such as NFTs have supported huge productions of wealth and speculation but they can also be used to support equitable structures of finance, governance, and collective action and we see this emerging in the artist community with recent exhibitions such as *Pieces of Me* and Decentralised Autonomous Organisations (DAOs) such as Fingerprints DAO. In this respect, web3 explores modes of digital cooperativism which could support a more 'distributed museum'. At the same time, engaging with this technology also encounters risks, and indeed this shift to distribution highlights questions around ethics, control, and

authority. In my current and future work, I aim to investigate these questions and consider what might a (digital) distributed museum might look like.

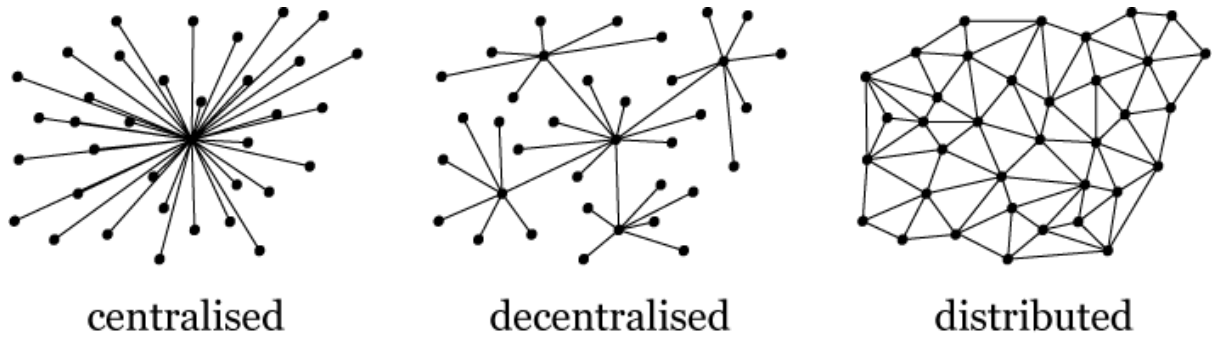


Figure 1 Centralised - Decentralised - Distributed Network Models
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Centralised-decentralised-distributed.png>