Participatory Communication with Social Media

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Abstract   Major museums worldwide are starting to use social media such as blogs, podcasts and content shares to engage users via participatory communication.[1] This marks a shift in how museums publicly communicate their role as custodians of cultural content and so presents debate around an institution's attitude towards cultural authority. It also signifies a new possible direction for museum learning. This article reports on a range of initiatives that demonstrate how participatory communication via social media can be integrated into museum practices. It argues that the social media space presents an ideal opportunity for museums to build online communities of interest around authentic cultural information, and concludes with some recent findings on and recommendations for social media implementation.

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Towards Participatory Communication

Museums are increasingly open to cultural diversity, local knowledge, and popular memory. Social constructivist approaches to communication have helped museums to connect with the memories, identities, and understandings that visitors bring with them (Hein 1998; Watkins and Mortimore 1999). The same approaches have enabled the deconstruction of grand narratives and have affirmed the role of audiences in social learning. These debates have tapped a form of community intelligence and have created

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a path from modernist certainty and institutional centrality, to social networking and demand-driven intellectual engagement with culture. In turn, this has changed the ways that museums respond to the challenge of providing authentic and authoritative information within an increasingly participatory online environment. Museums are now sites in which knowledge, memory, and history are examined, rather than places where cultural authority is asserted (Witcomb 1999; Kelly, Cook and Gordon 2006). Museums and visitors collaborate in the "making of meaning" whether visitors are local residents who lived through a particular time, or school students working on problem-based research projects (Hooper-Greenhill 2000; Silverman 1995). Existing studies suggest that museums enable cultural participants to explore images of themselves, their histories and communities (Falk 2006).

This shift within the museum has resulted in initial experimentation with social media and participatory cultural communication. Social media can be defined broadly as those that facilitate online communication, networking, and/or collaboration. Social software, social networking and Web 2.0 are other terms used to describe tools and platforms that enable similar user interaction. This kind of facilitation is not new. But social media technologies are designed *primarily* as network communication tools (unlike telephone or email, which are first and foremost tools of one-to-one messaging).

Social media applications—including blogs, podcasts and content shares—have been used to facilitate a participative cultural experience by a number of institutions. For example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, creating a retrospective of an avant-garde multimedia group the Residents, posted clips by the finalists on YouTube and invited votes and comments from the public to help determine the final exhibition (LaVallee 2006).[2]

The National Library of Australia and Yahoo!7 Flickr recently collaborated to develop Click and Flick, a site where individuals contribute their images to the PictureAustralia online image repository.[3] Previously, PictureAustralia only provided access to images within existing library, archive, museum and gallery collections. This example demonstrates how the institution can incorporate community-supplied digital content, collected and exhibited via a social media portal. Not only did the National Library of Australia acknowledge the value of community content (as in the MoMA example), it went further by privileging and therefore validating community content within its collection. It is this potential for a deeper interaction with community cultural content and knowledge that sets social media apart from other technology-mediated communication models through which museums work with audiences. As the tools of social media are readily available online, their existence within museum communication programs presents debate around an institution's investment in its own continuing cultural authority.

Online Authority and Authenticity

Authority is derived from the primacy of object collections and the patrimony of the museum in their storage, display and interpretation. It is claimed that the recognized

authority which museums possess within the community provides audiences with the means to interpret history and science, which in turn justifies the use of mediated representations of artifacts and cultures (Thomas 1998). As a result, museums have traditionally followed a model of one-to-many communication in which curatorial expertise is "broadcast" to the community via exhibition and publication. Two-way communication with visitors and communities of knowledge or interest around museums is often the responsibility of non-curatorial staff such as public programs, outreach, or interpretive officers.

This is in contrast with local or community museums, whose collections are usually owned by the community and where the curator often is—or becomes part of—the local community. Although some museums have explored online curatorial communication with communities of interest, the focus of technology-mediated communication remains squarely on the establishment of protocols for content management. This focus is hardly surprising given the considerable strategic effort required to shift the institutional focus beyond restricted in situ collections to distributed, publicly accessible cultural experiences. Yet the MoMA and PictureAustralia examples demonstrate how social media have been used to shift curatorial communication from one-to-many or peer-oriented models to a many-to-many communication model, whereby curatorial knowledge acts as a hub around which an online community of interest can build. However, most museums remain slow to recognize their users as active cultural participants in many-to-many cultural exchanges and therefore social media have yet to make a significant impact on museum communication models, which remain fundamentally one-to-many (Russo and Watkins 2006; Russo, Watkins, Kelly and Chan 2006).

Most major cultural institutions have not rushed to inhabit the social media space, which is hardly surprising. Many commentators criticize the ubiquitous search engine Google for promoting commercially sponsored links in its search results. Similarly, "independent" definitions on the collaborative knowledge base Wikipedia have been criticized for being "paid for" by corporate stakeholders. For example, Microsoft invited a technical specialist to "correct" a Wikipedia definition which was critical of the corporation (Schofield 2007). Proponents of blogs claim that the medium can enable a democratic reclamation of the Web by citizen journalists who can write and self-publish their own syndicated observations free from editorial or political interference (Gillmor 2006). On the other hand, critics cite blogs' freedom from peer-review to dismiss them as no more than informal information sources at best. Indeed, the Web is increasingly populated by a bewildering variety of individual, commercial, and corporate voices. The more these voices clamor for our attention, the harder it seems to find an online destination from which to obtain reliable and authoritative cultural knowledge.

This is not just an issue for museum professionals. A survey of educational Web site usage demonstrated that both students and teachers considered the authenticity of Web content a major concern, with teachers reporting that students often had difficulty judging the validity of online content (Kelly and Breault 2006). We argue that it is precisely because of this lack of reliable online information that museums should engage in participatory communication using social media. The cultural authority of the museum is due in large part to the perception that it can provide authentic cultural knowledge.

The demand for this quality of information online would appear to be clear and present (Watkins and Russo 2007).

This argument extends an earlier proposal, which suggested that if museums did not take a proactive role in the establishment of authoritative Web-based cultural information sources, their audiences would seek cultural information elsewhere—possibly through less reliable sources (Trant 1998). Such a shift in museum communication practice, while initially seeming to undermine the primacy of objects, can provide significant interpretive knowledge. The notion of authenticity as provided by the museum organizes collections of narratives into recognizable and authoritative histories, mediating the relationship between visitors and objects. Social media extend this authenticity by enabling the museum to maintain a cultural dialogue with its audiences in real time. We suggest that this shift in communication practices represents the potential for retaining and extending authority by providing audiences with a voice, allowing them to participate in cultural debate.

A simple demonstration of this argument appeared on the blog of the Sydney Observatory.[4] Part of the Powerhouse Museum, Australia, the Sydney Observatory responded to a then-current Web rumor that Mars's orbit would bring it unusually close to the Earth. The senior curator posted a message: "There is an email circulating in cyberspace saying that the red planet Mars will be exceptionally close on 27 August (2006). According to one version 'It will look like the Earth has two moons'!!! Once again this is a good lesson in not believing everything on the Internet. The email is a hoax" (Lomb 2006). There were 135 responses over the next month, among them:

- Ah, I thought the email was a little too exaggerated to be true . . . . Thanks to the Observatory for setting the record straight and informing the public. [Eve, Aug. 19, 2006]

- Thanks for explaining this so clearly. My six-year-old is still awake at 9:20 p.m. waiting up to see Mars between 10 p.m. and 3 a.m. Tom came home from school on Friday excited about the coming event. I thought it sounded too good to be true, punched it into Google 10 minutes ago, showed him your site, and he's on his way to bed!! [David, Aug. 27, 2006]

- Ah ha . . . it sounded too good to be true and I headed straight on over to the "professionals" here at the Sydney Observatory to set my mind at ease that the email is as STUPID as I thought it sounded! . . . Thanks Sydney Observatory. [Koobakoop, July 27, 2006]

It is significant that many of the blog comments credited the Sydney Observatory with providing authentic information on the matter. A further by-product of the senior curator's posting was an ongoing blog discussion on the Mars subject—without any further formal commentary by the observatory. This example illustrates how social media tools can be used to enable cultural and scholarly dialogue to propagate authentic and authoritative museum knowledge within a community of interest using a many-to-many communication model. It also demonstrates the suitability of social media with low barriers to entry (such as blogs) in communicating with niche museum audiences. One museum blogger—responding as part of a recent survey—recognized: "A blog style format allows

us to have the narrow focus on topics across a broad range of topics that benefits this sort of Internet audience" (Spadaccini and Chan 2007).

One of the biggest stumbling blocks to the practice of opening up museum communication to greater participation by communities of interest or practice could be the unpredictability of such participation. For example, if the museum engages in a collections enhancement project based on community contributions—similar to the PictureAustralia initiative—how can such contributions be authenticated? Furthermore, would a museum communication made more accessible via social media invite the kind of non-authenticated contributions that any Web administrator fears? It may be possible that an institution's willingness to engage in participatory communication—or lack thereof—is already established within its organizational culture. There is also an interesting term that is gaining currency within the social media debate: the concept of "radical trust" in the community, shown by the institution. The term is neatly described as follows:

> Radical trust is about trusting the community. We know that abuse can happen, but we trust (radically) that the community and participation will work. In the real world, we know that vandalism happens but we still put art and sculpture up in our parks. As an online community we come up with safeguards or mechanisms that help keep open contribution and participation working (Fichter 2006).

To those outside of the cultural institution's sphere, it may seem rather curious to be discussing this concept of "radical trust." Inherent within the term seems to be not only the confession of a distinct lack of trust shown by the institution towards the community, but also the admission that any consideration of such trust is regarded as radical. Perhaps the trust required to establish and maintain social media as part of museum communication is rather less radical. For example, the target community for a museum blog may well be measured in the hundreds, rather than tens of thousands. Access and participation can be moderated to a certain degree by compelling participants to use usernames and passwords. Therefore, moderation of community participation does not have to be a real-time, or even a full-time occupation.

Museum Learning

Where and how audiences interact with, create, and share knowledge are critical issues within museum learning experiences. Museum learning theories are intertwined with the notion of "communities of practice" where the importance of learning is not only central to the individual, but also to the process of co-participation within a social context (Kelly, Cook and Gordon 2006; Paris 1997). Lave and Wegner propose that learners should be contributing members of communities and that learning is made possible through involvement with, participation in, and acceptance into a community (1991). Such social learning could be readily ascribed to museum learning. Placing museum learning at the heart of an investigation into social media presents some interesting questions. In particular: what are the opportunities that social media present in being able to meet the ways that visitors want to learn, especially in terms of participation?

Research suggests that visitors to museums seek some type of participative learning experience, usually described as education, getting information, expanding knowledge, or doing something worthwhile in leisure (Hood 1995). Kelly found that museum visitors wanted to engage with complex and controversial topics as long as they could participate by making comments, or talking to museum staff and other visitors (2006). This desired environment can be achieved by social media such as blogs or content shares, with the added bonus of being able to continue the dialogue later in the visitor's own space and time.

A more complex demonstration of the potential application of social media to museum learning program is evidenced at the Cooper Hewitt National Design Museum. The museum's signature outreach Summer Design Institute (SDI) is a one-week workshop that aims to:

- Link design educators to the museum's education program.

- Create a community of educators who share lesson experiences.

- Provide best practice examples of design education and museum learning.

As the flagship educational program, SDI had run for over 10 years and had developed a strong community of educators, designers and professionals, all of whom were connected by their interest and expertise in educating others. Analysis of the in-house evaluations of SDI 2005 found that while participants were encouraged to formulate new educational practices, they felt it was difficult to maintain their newly formed community of practice, as there was no shared space within which to discuss, disclose and promote their work (Russo 2005). This resulted in an enthusiastic yet dispersed group of educators unable to develop a shared understanding of the value of design in their curriculums, or a sustainable program of support.

In 2006, the program was substantially restructured to address these issues and enable long-term scholarly debate to be delivered via the new Educator Resource Center website (ERC).[5] This portal integrates an Internet forum with online video and voting/rating systems. Most content on the ERC is open to all to view and includes 120 lesson plans for all grade levels and subject areas; search facilities for these plans; and curriculum guides, videos, and a bibliography. SDI participants were chosen from existing educator communities who had participated in previous years. Additionally, educators who had developed a relationship through other museum initiatives were invited to participate. As part of the restructure, SDI contracted educators to:

- Create two lesson plans linked to national standards that integrated design into their classrooms.

- Implement design activities in the classroom and participate in data collection and evaluation processes.

- Contribute comments at least bimonthly to the Cooper-Hewitt educator discussion board.

In return, the educators were brought to New York City for a week-long Summer Design In-

stitute training course and were paid a stipend upon completion of all other requirements. Following the initial training, evaluations were carried out with the 26 participants, all of whom contributed responses. The evaluations focused on the communication and new media aspects of the SDI program and showed that educators were keen to develop skills which would link their curriculum development to the museum program. Importantly, they were also keen to develop content which could be distributed beyond the classroom. Most of the participants (25) had experience with digital photography, but less than half (11) were confident with digital video and even fewer (5) with digital video editing. When asked where media content could be shown, participants gave a wide variety of responses beyond the expected Web sites, such as community television and social media sites such as Flickr. Asked how they felt the content they created in partnership with the museum could be used, respondents suggested some of the following:

- A way to connect educators and professionals.

- Research purposes in the education department.

- Emphasize the importance and value of the museum.

- Link communication between schools, designers and educators.

The evaluation of Summer Design Institute demonstrated the efficacy of a structured and highly targeted approach to museum learning that integrates social media. This has reinforced a community of practice (educators) in a trusted environment, with the potential for the resultant outcomes to inform others and provide new knowledge in museum learning.

Conclusion

The ability of an individual or a community to create, upload, and share digital cultural content demonstrates a proven and growing demand for creative expression, the exploration of identity, and cultural participation using social media. By using social media as part of their curatorial practice or communication with communities of interest or practice, the institutions discussed in this paper—as well as a growing number of others—have opened up their previously restricted collections and communications to privilege participation by visitors and audiences. A number of cultural institutions have responded to this demand. Table 1 summarizes the projects discussed in this article.

Table 1. Summary of social media projects and strategies.

Institution	Project	Strategy	Medium
Museum of Modern Art	Residents retrospective	Exhibition curation	Online video
Nat. Library of Australia	PictureAustralia	Collections enhancement	Image share
Powerhouse Museum	Sydney Observatory	Community of interest	Blog
National Design Museum	Educator Resource Center	Museum learning	Forum

These projects represent a shift in how institutions act as trusted cultural online networks; communicate knowledge to the community; and execute their multiple roles as keepers of cultural content with their responsibility to facilitate access to content. The challenges that social media bring to museums demonstrate an enhancement of the traditional one-to-many information transfer model with a more genuinely interactive many-to-many communication model, in which institutions use their own voice and authority to encourage participatory communication with individuals and communities of interest or practice.

It has been argued that museums need to move from being suppliers of information to providing usable knowledge and tools for visitors to explore their own ideas and reach their own conclusions (Bradburne 1998), since increasing access to technologies such as the Internet "have put the power of communication, information gathering, and analysis in the hands of the individuals of the world" (Freedman 2000, 299). Freedman also argued that museums should become mediators of information and knowledge for a range of users to access on their terms, through their own choices, and within their own place and time: "The role of museums in the future . . . lies in legitimizing information and information processes and in being an advocate for knowledge as the province of the people, not the sole property of the great institutions" (303). Research has demonstrated that audiences are seeking these kinds of interactive experiences from museums (Kelly 2006) and that the shift from education to learning has required a refocusing on the visitor or user, not on the delivery systems (Hooper-Greenhill 2003).

Given these arguments, it is proposed that museums could use social media to create or improve popular knowledge-sharing networks, in which cultural participants share images, information, and experiences throughout communities. By promoting user-generated content, museums could enable cultural participants to be both critics and creators of digital culture. Yet the widespread viability and sustainability of social media as tools for curatorial practice, participatory communication, and informal learning in museums, libraries, galleries, and archives remains to be determined. Any successful use of social media tools will need more effort than the download of free software and the hope that someone technically-minded in the organization will implement and sustain a participatory communication program. Any such implementation should be part of a museum's strategic approach to communication that addresses changing cultural communication models; engages communities in scholarly debate and knowledge sharing; and connects audiences to museum content.

Weil argued that museums need to change their views from being "about something" to being "for somebody" (1999). The possibilities offered by social media in many-to-many communication with a range of audiences could be one route by which notions of participation are changed within the cultural sector. To date, our research suggests that participation, communication, and audience incentive will need to be considered together if social media are to provide viable and sustainable opportunities for the museum.

Acknowledgments

Notes

1. According to Wikipedia, "Blogs are websites with dated items of content in reverse chronological order, self-published by bloggers. Items—sometimes called posts—may have keyword tags associated with them, are usually available as feeds, and often allow commenting." Accessed at http://socialmedia.wikispaces.com/ShortAZ. For more definitions of social media see http://nlablog.wordpress.com/2007/08/04/museums-and-web-20/.
2. See www.youtube.com/watch?v=PdKHboldZIA.
3. See pictureaustralia.org/flickrinstructionsforIndividual.html.
4. See www.sydneyobservatory.com.au/blog/index.php?s=mars.
5. See www.cooperhewitt.org/education/erc.

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