



# MUSEUMS AND SOCIAL MEDIA: MODERN METHODS OF REACHING A WIDER AUDIENCE

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## **ABSTRACT**

The opening of museums to society brought about radical changes in the museum practice, because their goal is not only the viewing of exhibits but a meaningful contact and communication with the public. According to this view, museums are trying to approach a wider audience, providing them with the opportunity of personalized use of information and active creation of content in an entertaining and interactive way. The following study explores various approaches that the social media (Facebook, Twitter, Flickr, LinkedIn) can provide to museums, aiming at a constant communication and interaction with the audience. The vertiginous technological development, the digitization, the dissemination and democratization of knowledge, as well as the systematic information of the public by the mass media, have significantly influenced the museums in the way they promote their activities. The social media can be low-cost communication tools while addressing to a wider audience, as they can provide museums with the opportunity to benefit in many ways from their use, offering them the ability to give prominence to both their dynamic nature and the purpose of their actions. By studying the cases of important museums in Australia, America and Europe, it becomes immediately clear that the social media have already formed a basic communication tool for the museum's exhibitions and for the other traits that highlight the educational and entertaining dimension of their character.

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**KEYWORDS:** museums, social media, communication, participation, audience.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The opening of museums to society brought about radical changes in the museum practice, because their goal is not only the viewing of exhibits but a meaningful contact and communication with the public. According to this view, museums are trying to approach a wider audience, providing them with the opportunity of personalized use of information and active creation of content in an entertaining and interactive way. The following presentation explores various case studies of how museums have used social media, aiming at a constant communication and interaction with the audience.

Today, social media are considered to be the heart of the internet, as they foster and enhance communication, participation, diffusion of information and feedback among users which provides a powerful means of sharing, organizing and finding content and contacts. In addition, social media are organized around users, whereas the Web is largely organized around content (Mislove *et al.* 2007, 1). Among the most popular social media are Facebook, Twitter, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr.

In order to have an account on social media, someone has to create a profile on the platform of their choice, by providing some basic information about themselves. The majority of people who use social media are considered to be youngsters between the age of 15-35. According to the degree of their participation, we can divide the users into three categories (Kumar *et al.* 2006, 616):

- passive users, are those who join the network out of curiosity, but never engage in any significant activity,
- practical users/inviters, are those who created a profile for a specific reason and recruit people to participate,
- active users, who are full participants in the growth of the online social network, and actively connect themselves to other members.

The rapid development of social media and the continuous increase of the number of users have led companies, corporations, organizations and institutions to exploit the applications and the possibilities they provide, with the aim to advertise and promote their products and services (Evans & McKee 2010, 4). Museums are also starting to use social media in order to reach a wider audience, by building an interactive environment that will foster the public to engage in discussion, through sharing information and content.

Despite the fact that there isn't any significant amount of writings and research for museums that use social media, there are plenty of case studies that enlighten us about the utility and the role they play in the communication policy of a museum.

## 2. AUSTRALIAN MUSEUM

The first case study indicates the importance of social media in creating the context of a periodical exhibition, through the constant participation of the audience. The "All About Evil" exhibition concept came to the Australian Museum from the Royal Tropical Institute (Tropenmuseum) of Amsterdam after the success of their exhibition displayed in 2006. The exhibition was built from the Tropenmuseum's cultural collections and included over 900 items, having loans from European collections and private lenders (Kelly 2009, 9). While an interesting topic, it was a controversial one with provocative connotations and potentially graphic subject matter. With this in mind, the Australian Museum did some preliminary work with the audience to gauge reactions to the overall topic, as well as feedback about some of the material that may be displayed (Jensen & Kelly 2009, 20-21).

In order to conduct some further evaluation it was decided to use social media to both engage potential audience and compare this approach to a more 'traditional' front-end evaluation process. In February 2009 an "All About Evil" Facebook group was created, in order to test whether Face-

book would provide a vehicle for discussion on themes and possible content for the audience

(<http://www.facebook.com/home.php?ref=home#/group.php?gid=63750884739>).

Participants embraced the tools of Facebook, even contributing photographs and tagging photos uploaded by Museum staff.

The group proved to be popular, gaining over 200 members in the first three weeks and generating a great deal of activity and discussion between the Museum and members, as well as among members themselves (Jensen & Kelly 2009, 22). According to Lynda Kelly, Head of Web and Audience Research of Australian Museum at that time, the use of social media is proved to be an effective and inexpensive way for the museum to participate in an open dialogue with the audience (Kelly 2009, 9).

### 3. CURRIER MUSEUM OF ART

A similar case study comes from the Currier Museum of Art in Manchester, where it was developed a creative social media and email marketing program to engage with members and visitors, to encourage museum attendance and also to help shape an entire exhibition. In 2010, the Currier's exhibition, *The Secret Life of Art: Mysteries of the Museum Revealed*, provided visitors with a behind-the-scenes look at how the staff cared for, displayed, and stored its 31,000 works of art when not in use. Developed as a "living dialogue" the exhibition was meant to answer the questions museum staff had received from visitors on a regular basis (Stern 2011, The Currier Museum of Art 2011).

Social media was a critical piece of promoting this exhibition and keeping visitors engaged. During the exhibition's opening, the museum asked members and guests to tweet their thoughts about both the opening and the exhibition itself, using the Twitter. Encouraging the opening's attendees to tweet, not only helped build buzz around the exhibition when it debuted in October 2010, it also helped generate

greater awareness of the Currier's own Twitter handle. In addition, YouTube videos, a dedicated blog, and related articles in the Currier's monthly email newsletter, were also developed to round out the physical exhibition (Stern 2011).

In short, the results were astounding. Over the four months the exhibition was open to the public, the Currier Museum grew its Twitter following by 49%, while expanding the number of 'Likes' on its Facebook Page by 24%. Plus, the museum added more than 700 names to its email list (Stern 2011).

### 4. POWERHOUSE MUSEUM

The next case study, points out how social media can extend the authenticity and credibility of a museum by enabling it to maintain a cultural dialogue with its audience in real time. Part of the Powerhouse Museum of Australia, the Sydney Observatory responded to a then-current Web rumor that planet Mars would be unusually close to the Earth. The senior curator posted this comment (Russo *et al.* 2007, 22):

*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).*

Over the next month, one hundred and thirty five visitors of the blog responded to this comment. Some examples of their comments include (Russo *et al.* 2008, 24):

*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 19th, 2006 at 6:01 pm).*

*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.... (Koobakooop Jul 27th, 2006 at 1:26 pm).*

*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].*

It is not insignificant that many of the responses to the Senior Curator's comments credited the Sydney Observatory with providing the "truth" in this matter. This example illustrates how social media can be used to enable a cultural and scholarly dialogue while strengthening the veracity of museum knowledge. The subsequent communication demonstrates how the many-to-many model can enhance both audience interaction, experience and museum authority (Russo *et al.* 2007, 22).

## 5. SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION

Another case study explores how the Smithsonian Institution is using social media to enlist the public in delving into its collections, expanding its research and, sometimes, just adding interesting post-scripts to history. Crowd-sourcing and user-generated content are not new to the Smithsonian. In 1850s, Joseph Henry, one of the Smithsonian's first secretary, enlisted volunteers around the country to gather observations about storms and other weather occurrences and to telegraph them to Washington. This initiative helped the Institution to establish weather patterns and maps, which later evolve into the National Weather Service (Olson 2011, Bray *et al.* 2011).

These days, the institution is embracing social media to involve the public by helping the Smithsonian solve puzzles like identifying some early 20th-century women. In March 2009, the Archives posted eight unidentified photographs from the Science Service Collection on Flickr. Tammy Peters, Supervisory Archivist, wrote a blog post, asking for visitors to help identify these women. By July, 2009, Flickr user, "rockcreek," had identified Elizabeth Sabin Goodwin by citing a link to a newspaper clipping (Olson 2011, Bray *et al.* 2011).

In April 2010, Elizabeth Goodwin's granddaughter, Linda Goodwin, recog-

nized the Flickr photo and contacted the Archives through Flickr, contributing details of her grandmother's life and some of her drawings that allowed Smithsonian Archives to advance its research on the Science Service collection. As blog commenter Penny Richards, summarized, "To see this story go from an image with initials to a full biography with images and living memories, through crowd-sourcing, is wonderful, one of the very coolest parts of the whole Flickr Commons project for me" (Olson 2011, Bray *et al.* 2011).

The results were (Olson 2011, Bray *et al.* 2011):

- Four of the eight unknown women in the Science Service Collection were identified with verifiable sources.
- The Smithsonian Archive's audience was increased
- The Flickr Commons has successfully increased traffic and resources to the Science Service Finding Aid.

## 6. BROOKLYN MUSEUM

The next example shows how the Brooklyn Museum began to evaluate various Web 2.0 sites to see how they could help them create more interactive exhibition content. The Interpretive Materials plan for Graffiti invited museum-goers to 'tag' two designated walls within the exhibition space. This wall was the tipping point for their collaboration, going forward, and the catalyst for building a dynamic interactive Web site (Caruth & Bernstein 2007).

Anticipating that this wall would change significantly during the exhibition's eight-week run, the Interpretive Materials manager planned to take the activity one step further - inviting visitors to track the progress of the "Museum Mural" on their Web site. At the suggestion of members of the Information Systems department, they employed the popular photo-sharing site Flickr, and for \$24 a year (the cost of a Flickr pro account), they could upload new digital images, weekly, taken off the wall. Through the use of Flickr, they realized that they could provide this activity quick-

ly and efficiently, and without the arduous in house development of their own program (Caruth & Bernstein 2007).

Now that they had their Flickr account, they started to think about other ways it could be leveraged. They decided to create another project in which they asked visitors to submit images of already-existing street art from their local Brooklyn neighborhoods. Photos e-mailed to the Museum were posted to their Flickr account throughout the run of the exhibition. In the end, the community established the first-ever Museum archive of local street artists (Caruth & Bernstein 2007).

In addition to promoting the Graffiti exhibition on their own Web site, they got the word out through their MySpace page. Interestingly, one of the local street artists, Ellis G. (Gallagher), who was recorded for their podcast series, had a popular MySpace presence. With Ellis's help on MySpace, the Museum was able to gain good word-of-mouth about the exhibition and publicize the gallery talks. Along the way, Ellis helped the Museum make many friends in MySpace (Caruth & Bernstein 2007).

The plan was a success in terms of sheer numbers, and an even bigger success in terms of mission (Caruth & Bernstein 2007):

- The Graffiti exhibition in Brooklyn Museum was viewed 12,376 times
- 913 photographs of graffiti were submitted on Flickr
- 1,338 virtual drawings were submitted in Brooklyn archive
- The Museum's MySpace page had over 3,000 friends.

Moreover, they had discovered that community on the Web didn't necessarily mean programming on their own site. On the contrary, seeking out audience in their own Web communities (Flickr, MySpace) was even more powerful.

## 7. DAY OF ARCHAEOLOGY

The last but not the least case study underlines the contributory role of the individuals through the use of social media. On

July 2011 two PhD students, Matthew Law (Cardiff University) and Lorna Richardson (University College London), began an online social media experiment with the title Day of Archaeology (Pett 2011).

The Day of Archaeology project aimed to provide a window into the daily lives of archaeologists around the world. The project asks people working, studying or volunteering in the archaeological world to participate, by recording their working day and sharing it through text, images or video via the use of social media. All these submissions were moderated and released through the project's website and disseminated through different social media networks, such as Flickr, Facebook, and Twitter (Pett 2011).

The project had expressions of interest from people working on excavations, scientists working in laboratories, archaeologists talking about how cuts have affected their work, community archaeologists leading workshops and museum educators teaching the next generation about the magic of archaeology. When it was completed, the experiment formed part of Lorna's PhD research and also was written up for academic publication and was used as a model for public engagement at the 2011 Theoretical Archaeological Group conference in Birmingham (Pett 2011).

The resulting Day of Archaeology project demonstrates the wide variety of work their profession undertakes day-to-day across the globe, and helps to raise public awareness of the relevance and importance of archaeology to the modern world through the use of social media. The first ever Day of Archaeology was held on July 2011 and had over 400 contributing archaeologists and due to the success, the project continued in 2012 and also in 2013 (Day of Archaeology 2012).

## 8. CONCLUSIONS

To sum up, the use of social media offer greater scope for collaboration, enabling museums to respond to changing demographics and psychographic characteris-

tics of the public. Recent years have seen more and more museums embracing social media, with particularly the English-speaking countries taking the lead. The examples aforementioned represent a shift in how museums interact with the public, whereas social media could be used to

- develop new models of participation and feedback
- promote museum's activities
- extend the authenticity and credibility of a museum
- shape an exhibition's content.

However, many questions remain for researchers, designers, and practitioners, including (Russo *et al.* 2007, 22):

- How much does the museum invest in revealing knowledge held in the community?
- How far willing is the museum to relax its own authority in these areas of knowledge?
- To what extent is the museum willing to promote community knowledge over its own?

- Wouldn't it be better to target specific audiences?

An additional challenge for museums is to consider the relationship between online and physical visitors, and what characteristics and behaviors may be shared across both.

In order to get a deeper understanding of social media usage among museums, further studies and research are needed. Social media is not just about opening up another marketing channel, but it enables audience's participation in many levels. The study has shown that museums consider and use social media to a high degree, as a means to attract more visitors to onsite museums. Despite the fact that online museum communities for both visitors and professionals are not yet very well developed in general, the examples in this paper illustrate a number of important first steps, whereas personalization will be an important aspect of most such efforts.

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