



## COVER SHEET

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## LOOK WHO'S TALKING

*Social media such as blogs and podcasts can support and even strengthen a museum's voice and authority, write ANGELINA RUSSO, JERRY WATKINS and SEBASTIAN CHAN.*

Major museums worldwide are starting to use social media such as blogs, wikis, podcasts and online video to encourage users to participate in their programs. This represents a shift in traditional museum communication systems, in the ways audiences participate, and in the incentives behind such participation.

Social media facilitate knowledge exchange by taking advantage of 'network effects' and create a new forum through which diverse audiences can participate with museums to explore issues and voice these reflections online.

Existing museum communication systems such as exhibitions, public programs, outreach and education have, for a long time, aimed to provide complex cultural interactive experiences. Social media can be used to encourage audiences to respond to their museum experience and relate this back to themselves, to communities of interest and to the museum itself in ways that are meaningful to them.

Social media are an exceptional platform from which to establish dialogue with and between users, to build relationships with and between audiences, to bring together communities of interest, and to enhance external and internal knowledge sharing. With recent technological changes they are a simple and cost-effective way to enhance and extend audience experience.

### **Participation**

Museums are increasingly open to cultural diversity, local knowledge and popular memory, creating sites in which knowledge, memory and history are examined rather than places where cultural authority is asserted.

Museums and audiences collaborate in the 'making of meaning', whether audiences are local residents who lived through a particular period or students working on problem-based research projects.

This shift has affected the ways in which audiences participate with a museum. In terms of social media, it has resulted in experiments with innovative forms of cultural participation.

There are a number of ways in which museum audiences respond to issues and events they experience in the museum.

Social media are *already* being used to discuss organisations and share knowledge outside of the museum. Social media search tools such as Technorati and Yahoo's Alpha are useful places where museums can eavesdrop on these audience conversations where audiences can discuss their experiences and develop discourses around museum content completely separate to those developed by the museum.

Such conversations can provide valuable insights into the ‘meanings’ that audiences construct from their museum experiences. Increasingly, museum professionals such as curators and educators need to be aware of these conversations. They need first to listen and then to think about whether the audience is seeking to speak with them, whether the museum is interested in engaging in such conversations.

For example, after the launch of a new children’s exhibition space at the Powerhouse Museum in Sydney, audiences began an online conversation about their experiences and exchanged information onsite. These conversations were not only public, but also visible to other visitors using Google to search for the Museum.

As a result of this visibility, these once private conversations can now influence new audiences. They can also be increasingly valuable in determining the immediate impact of new museum initiatives. A mechanism allowing independent response, when combined with traditional audience evaluation, is a powerful tool through which museums can learn about their audiences.

Another development is a desire amongst some audiences to personalise or ‘tag’ content, which allows audiences to add their own key search words for collection databases. Tagging establishes independent taxonomies – or ‘folksonomies’ – that can be used by others to enable a more personalised online searching experience.

Last year the Powerhouse Museum launched its ‘OPAC 2.0 online collection database’, which enables audiences to self-classify the collection to help other non-expert users browse its contents, whilst still offering the Museum’s formal taxonomies and specialist knowledge. This is a best-practice example of how social media can bring together similar assets (collections, activists/protagonists, audiences, content creators) to engage in cultural knowledge exchange. Since its launch, online interest in the Museum’s collection has increased by a factor of 20!

### **Content sharing**

Enabling audiences to share and discuss their common experiences provides an important insight into collections.

For example, the National Library of Australia and Yahoo!7’s Flickr recently collaborated to develop ‘Click and Flick’, a site where individuals contribute their *own* images to the PictureAustralia online image repository. Previously, PictureAustralia had only provided access to images within existing library, archive, museum and gallery collections.

‘Click and Flick’ demonstrates how an institution can incorporate community-supplied digital content, collected and curated via a social media portal. Not only did the National Library acknowledge the value of community content, it went further by privileging and thereby validating community content within its collection.

A step on from content sharing is content creation – the ability of audiences to participate in the development of new content that responds or relates to existing museum collections. There are a number of interesting examples.

With Artmobs, students created podcasts of their visits to the Museum of Modern Art in New York then uploaded them to an independent website where other potential visitors could access them.

In the UK, the Victoria and Albert Museum in partnership with other organisations enabled audiences to upload their special objects and create informal community records describing the history and use of the objects. In some instances, visitors to 'Every Object Tells a Story' subsequently provided extra information, thus creating deep knowledge around these informal collections.

Such content creation projects extend the ways in which audiences participate with a museum. They provide novel online experiences that encourage debate and networking. Importantly, the museum affirms its role in this knowledge exchange by providing tools, infrastructure and content through which audiences can participate and create new forms.

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.

*Social media can extend the authenticity of collections by enabling museum professionals to establish and maintain a cultural dialogue with their audiences.*

### **Incentives**

Some museum professionals are rightly concerned that the authority of the museum is perhaps compromised and the 'authenticity' of information eroded by these new approaches - enabling information sharing, response to issues and the creation of new knowledge and content.

But when social media initiatives are supported by the museum they have the potential to enhance collection knowledge and create communities of interest that support and extend cultural participation. They also help to embed the museum in the everyday life of the community.

Our research indicates that museums can play an active role in encouraging participation – while extending their authority – by actively encouraging knowledge sharing, 'voice', education and acknowledgement.

As the examples above show, acknowledging audience voice can strengthen existing communities of interest and so encourage return visitation and a life-long affiliation with the institution.

With the ability to voice opinions comes the opportunity for the museum to acknowledge the vast informal knowledge held by its audiences while extending its position within the community as a provider of expert knowledge.

A simple example can be found in the Sydney Observatory blog. In July last year the Senior Curator posted a comment confirming that an email describing an up-and-coming astronomical event was a hoax. Over the next month, 135 people responded to this comment, many of them crediting the Observatory with providing the 'truth'.

In turn, the Observatory site is used to ask the community to provide information on astronomical phenomena and to verify other related knowledge and websites – by engaging and promoting the work of amateur astronomy groups, and the general public.

Finally, social media also has the potential to be used internally to break down information and knowledge silos within an institution, to enhance communication between staff, and to redirect organisational objectives.

In the corporate sector much has been made of social media fulfilling the promise of older 'knowledge management; initiatives. Many museums are starting to pilot internal projects using some of the new technological social media tools such as wikis and blogs.

### **Innovative, effective**

Social media use in museums clearly affects participation, communication and incentive.

These examples show there is an innovative and effective role for social media in evolving a many-to-many communication model within the museum while maintaining – and perhaps even strengthening – its voice and authority.

The ability for audiences to share knowledge across trusted online cultural networks will play an increasing role in museum practice.

Our research so far indicates there are strong epistemological reasons for social media adding value to museum programs and that those cultural experiences can extend audience participation in novel and important ways.

Blog:

*Angelina Russo and Jerry Watkins are leading researchers on the ARC funded project 'New Literacy New Audiences' ([www.cci.edu.au/nla](http://www.cci.edu.au/nla))*

*Sebastian Chan is the Web Manager at the Powerhouse Museum and runs one of the museum sector's most eminent blogs, Fresh + New ([www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com/dmsblog))*

Blog:

### **Web resources:**

Powerhouse Museum

[www.powerhousemuseum.com](http://www.powerhousemuseum.com)

National Library of Australia

[www.nla.gov.au](http://www.nla.gov.au)

Flickr

[www.flickr.com](http://www.flickr.com)

PictureAustralia

[www.pictureaustralia.org](http://www.pictureaustralia.org)

Victoria and Albert Museum

[www.vam.ac.uk](http://www.vam.ac.uk)

Sydney Observatory

[www.sydneyobservatory.com.au](http://www.sydneyobservatory.com.au)