Enacting Engagement Online: framing social media use for the museum

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Abstract

Purpose: The purpose of this paper is to highlight and reflect on the increased use of social media in the museums sector in the UK and beyond. It explores the challenges of utilising such media for institutions steeped in discourses of authority, authenticity and materiality.

Design/Methodology/Approach: Arguments are illustrated using examples of practice and policy from across the museums sector, and are informed by critical theory. In particular, Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis is used as a means for understanding and articulating the current use of social media by museums.

Findings: There is currently a gulf between the possibilities presented by social media, and their use by many museums. This leads to forms of frame mis-alignment which can be intensely problematic. It is crucial that museums increase their understanding of the frames within which such activity is being encouraged and experienced.

Research limitations/implications: The paper does not offer a comprehensive mapping of social media use by museums at the current time. Rather, it uses notable examples to foreground a number of concerns for exploration through further research.

Originality/Value: The paper calls into question the naturalised discourse surrounding social media use in the museums sector. It calls for a re-appraisal and re-framing of such activity so that it might more genuinely and satisfactorily match the claims that are being made for and about it.

Keywords: Social media, museums, collaboration, participation, frame analysis.

Paper type: Research Paper

Introduction

Changes in the conceptualisation of 'audience' have had a profound influence across the cultural sector, not least within those organisations which have historically been synonymous with authority, authenticity, and the project of 'nation'. Museums are a case in point here. Since the advent of the 'new museology' in the 1970s[1], there has been a desire to re-script both

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[1] See Vergo 1989 for more on the new museology movement.

the traditional audience/visitor encounter (most recently in terms of 'experience'), and also the demographic of that visitor (with some success).[2] Conceptualisations of 'heritage' have also undergone significant upheaval, with material and artefactual heritages increasingly recognised as problematic for ignoring the polysemous, contested and controversial nature of interpretation, and intangible and e-tangible heritages taking their place on the world stage.[3] The authority of institutions and their monocular narratives, perhaps even their physicality, have come under threat as questions are asked about the nature and uses of heritage.[4]

As a result, museums have been forced to look again to their audiences; to implicate them in the practices and processes of history 'making', to engage, consult, collaborate and, crucially, listen. As a part of this endeavour, there has been an increased emphasis on dialogue, conversation and even democracy.[5] Perhaps unsurprisingly, the 'tools' often tasked with facilitating such exchanges are various social media.[6]

Michelle Henning, in her book, *Museums, Media and Cultural Theory* explores the traditional museum and what she calls the 'acts of attention' demanded by and within it:

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[2] Traditionally, as has been noted time and again, the museum visitor could be typified as well-educated, middle-class, white and crucially 'versed in deciphering the museum code' (Burton & Scott, 2003. See also Duncan and Wallach, 1980; Bennett, 1995). More recently, it has become accepted within the profession (although not unquestioningly or universally) that this has to change. Widening a museum's appeal however, is no mean feat given the recognised sexism, racism, and Eurocentrism within 'traditional' collections[2], and the reluctance of some members of the public to cross the (oft-intimidating) physical threshold into buildings that still maintain architectural nods to their 'civilising' Victorian function. The historical development of the Museum – architecture, patronage, form and function - is detailed in Tony Bennett's *The Birth of the Museum,* 1995. See also Hooper-Greenhill, 2000.

[3] See UNESCO's Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage at http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich

[4] See Smith, 2006, also Cameron, 2008

[5] In the space of the museum there is now an active encouragement for people to express their evaluative judgements of experience through comments cards, opportunities to 'tag' exhibits and sign guestbooks (this of course is language we become familiar within social media contexts also).

[6] One does not have to look far to see investment in the *potential* dialogue that such media so seductively promise. Social media are proving increasingly popular. Some UK examples: a trawl of flickr reveals the London Transport Museum flickr Scavenger Hunt, groups hosted by the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British Museum and the National Media Museum; the latter of these examples also have their own Twitter feeds alongside the Science Museum and the US Holocaust Museum; blogs found their way into museums practice a number of years ago, most frequently hosted by an enthusiastic curator, such as at the Manchester Museum, the National Museums Wales, Hertford Museum, the National Maritime Museum and National Museums Liverpool; facebook also seemingly has a role to play at The Manchester Museum, the Manchester Jewish Museum, the Leeds City Museum and the National Football Museum.

> By privileging original meanings and acts of attention, the museum can end up with a renewed authority over its audience, establishing a very didactic relation to them. It would seem to suggest that only certain acts of attention are valid, and that those forms of attention are only available to some people. (Henning, 2006)

Implicated in this are firstly, the monocular 'authentic' totalising text of the museum and the primacy of the object, and secondly, a lack of representation of all people(s) within the museum narrative and its audience. Museums, themselves broadly comparable to other forms of mediation, have been similarly implicated in the politics of representation; in this analysis, a comparison with conventional forms of 'broadcasting' seems most fitting.

Of course, social media problematise this traditional reading, activating and actualising the re-conceptualisation of museums promised in the new museology. Designed to complement and extend the work of organisations, such media take the museum outside of its architectural bounds, and, in their very virtuality and immateriality, begin to put the story centre stage; recognising and even embracing subjectivity.

It is no surprise then that museums have seen various forms of social media as a natural complement to the work they are doing on site; populating, indeed colonising, such spaces with great haste and some abandon. In so doing, museums are both responding to a perceived demand for different forms of engagement, and exploring the possibilities that such moments of engagement, however facilitated, represent for audience development, marketing, personalising their offer, and seeking to 'prove' their vitality, diversity and relevance. As we will see, this exploration is not without its pitfalls.

The wider shift towards multi-directional many-to-many communication is seen to result in systems modelled upon the 'conversation' rather than the lecture; dialogic, democratic, and free of barriers to entry (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Bowman & Willis, 2004; Gillmor, 2006). This analogy suggests the interchange made possible by new technologies, and the rhetoric suggests something of an inevitability in the 'transformation' they engender. I wish to argue that in the museums sector there is currently not enough debate about how these conversations are being framed and facilitated. As a result, their use-value (for both the organisations and the users) remains questionable. As museums are being increasingly conceptualised as 'forums' and recognised as 'contact zones', places traditionally of

imbalance, asymmetry, and often disempowerment, talk of 'democracy' is now rife in the rhetoric. However, my own research into participatory projects across cultural institutions has shown that in practice the historical and embedded nature of those imbalances can render even the best conceived and facilitated projects problematic when assessed in terms of democracy and ownership (see Kidd, 2009; 2011).

In this article, I demonstrate and problematise museums' uses of social media by analysing the frames within which their use is currently being configured. It will be seen that even as 'the museum' covets and articulates a move from a broadcast model of communications to a social media model, the current use of such media more often than not neutralise, contain and flatten its promise. This paper pursues a 'social informatics' understanding of this phenomena. That is, according to Steve Sawyer, a trans-disciplinary 'socio-technical perspective' (Sawyer, 2005: 9) where 'context matters' (ibid: 10). My approach is both empirical and critical, using a number of examples of practice identified through extensive online research to contribute to debates about how (and indeed whether) recent developments in museum communications might be widening the scope of dialogue, the range of voices taking part, and even contributing to a healthy questioning of the museum as a widely accepted authority.

Articulating the frames

In their invitations to the public to 'join them' in social media spaces, museums evoke a number of different frames which will be analysed in the following sections. It will be seen that these frames largely serve the agendas of the institutions, not least dictating a set of measures for 'success' which have little to do with the nature, vibrancy , tone or 'use-value' of their users' contributions.[7]

Frame analysis is an approach which allows for an unpacking of the assumptions inherent in the discourse of a 'schemata of interpretation' or 'frame' (Goffman, 1974: 21), and with that the power relationships at work in exchanges.[8] According to Greg Smith, '[f]rame supplies the sense [or context] in which a strip of interaction is to be taken' (Smith, 2006:62), thus,

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[7] 'So far, museums have been overly focused on what they themselves might get from social media systems, not on understanding and nurturing their dynamics' (Russo and Peacock, 2009)
[8] See Goffman, 1974 for a detailed overview of frame analysis, and a number of more recent publications from Social Movement Studies and Media Studies which have developed the approach further (Snow et al. 1986; Benford & Snow, 2000; Steinberg, 1998; Entman, 1993)

revealing the ways in which social experience is understood involves looking both at the *organisation* of the activity alongside its *perception*. In organizational research, it allows us to begin to analyse whether the frames being projected by an institution match the frames within which users organize and understand their participation; 'the individuals' framing of activity establishes its meaningfulness for him[her]' (Goffman, 1974:345). Noted social movement theorist David Snow has used a number of frame analysis techniques in order to locate 'successful participation' in movements, including one that will prove useful in this analysis; 'frame alignment' (Snow, 1986). Such a condition can only be achieved when both the organizing frames (say, of an institution), and the interpretive frames (say, of its users), are aligned, and 'successful participation' relies, at least in part, on its achievement.

The interpretation of frames is of course fluid, ambiguous, subjective and not necessarily conscious; an activity influenced by a number of invisible factors, not least individual 'entry narratives'. Nevertheless, such an analysis allows us to understand how texts, events, objects and situations are processed cognitively in order to arrive at meaning (Johnston, 1995:218).

I use frame analysis here to fulfil at least three goals. Firstly, to establish the prevailing logic which underlies the use of social media in the museum. Secondly, to critique that logic, holding examples of practice up for scrutiny. Thirdly, I use it to situate the activity within a wider discourse about the role and purpose of the museum.[9] It will be seen through this analysis that a more sensitive, appropriate and considered framing of social media use might result in more fruitful and challenging participatory endeavour.

Three organising frames for social media activity have been identified and will be used in the analysis namely, the Marketing Frame (promoting the 'face' of an institution), the Inclusivity Frame (related to notions of real and online 'community') and the Collaborative Frame (perhaps the most problematic). Analysis of all three of these frames is underpinned by reference to the frame of the social media application itself; the forms of communication and assumptions that are fore-grounded in the medium. Whether that Technological Frame, as we might call it, is mastered, misunderstood or subjugated is key to analysing whether and if 'frame alignment' is achievable, or even (always) desirable.

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[9] For more on how frame analysis might be used in order to explore the workings of organisations, see Douglas Creed et al. 2002.

The Marketing Frame:

The use-value of social media for the museum is perhaps most easily (and least imaginatively) understood through the frame of marketing activity.[10] Providing a useful addition to the museum's paper and other online publicity, social media seem an obvious way of informing people about upcoming events and exhibitions.[11] In this way, it is hoped, the *reach* of an institution's publicity grows amongst, between and around individuals and communities in social media spaces.

An example of such practice is the sector-wide Follow a Museum Day campaign on Twitter, 1st February 2010 (see Figure 1).[12] By the 1st of February no less than 138 institutions in the UK had a twitter feed, each using the campaign as a means of widening their communities of 'followers' and informing people about upcoming events. In a deft move recognising changing patterns of publicity, influence and trust, the rhetoric shifted; 'we want *you* to spread the word about museums on Twitter' [my emphasis]. Originally conceived by Jim Richardson (of www.museummarketing.co.uk), it is perhaps no surprise that if one now searches for the Follow a Museum Day 'hashtag', a significant proportion of tweets found come from organisations advertising upcoming events.[13]

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[10] See museum marketing texts by Rentschler, 2007 and Kotler, 2008 for example.

[11] Anderson et al carried out research on museum YouTube posts and found that overwhelmingly, for their sample, content was principally promotional (Alexander et al, 2008)

[12] http://www.followamuseum.com

[13] There was some criticism of the campaign (naturally via Twitter), not least from Kids in Museums' Dea Birkett who highlighted the revealing quirk in semantics that meant museums were asking to be 'followed'; requiring their authority to be affirmed yet again.

[Figure 1: Follow a Museum Day on Twitter]

This is then a marketing endeavour of sorts, an important activity for any museum, but one that in Twitter can undermine the medium's emphasis on relations and being social. It might be said that the experience of the event does not match users' expectations and understanding of the Technological Frame; that organisations using Twitter within the Marketing Frame directly undermine the users' interpretation of the medium, indeed, seeks to subjugate it entirely. Understanding is thus compromised and frame alignment perhaps less likely a result.[14]

As in the example above, social media sites are increasingly being charged with the task of giving museums a recognisable face; seen as an extension of their branding activity. In the pursuit of 'relationship' development and 'community' building it has been tempting to make the causal link between increased 'face' and increased patrimony, dialogue, and involvement, as in the following quote from the web developer, Kevin Pfefferle; 'By giving individuals a real, personal connecting point with a previously "faceless" institution, those who interact with the museum on these networks feel more involved' (Pfefferle, 2009). Feeling 'involved'

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[14] Although it is increasingly recognised that much activity within social media spaces could be categorised as commercial.

is of course not an inevitable outcome of such engagement, especially if frame alignment has been compromised. More importantly, as Shelley Bernstein, Chief of Technology at the Brooklyn Museum (in New York), queries, in practice, 'How do you give an organisation a face?'[15] Is the face of an institution the face(s) of the professionals who work there? Or is it appropriate to 'create' a face which an institution and its staff unite behind? The latter may be the more obvious response, but the personal temper of communications in social media spaces can expose such a methodology, rendering organisations open to accusations of disingenuity. The relationship between face and voice is also important here. Just as individual visitors (online and offline) are complex, with multiple identities, agendas and affiliations, so too are museum professionals. If museums express an interest in multiple voices and perspectives, then we might reasonably expect to find evidence of that in their social media spaces: Can the museum have multiple voices too?

The frames of social media interaction between communities and individuals have often been built, notionally at least, in terms of 'friending', 'fandom' and 'following'. These rather charming ways of describing relationships between individuals and institutions are of course deceptive. The 'rules' of engagement, the (principally) unwritten contracts relating to the transactions that take place on sites, tend to be clear to those versed in deciphering and utilising a particular social medium, but it becomes very apparent when these norms and forms of etiquette are unknown or misunderstood. As Jim Richardson notes, this is not uncommon in museums practice:

> Right now Twitter is full of museums broadcasting events listings and press releases and in doing so they make themselves both as brands and institutions seem distant and uninviting. It is obvious to the communities who exist in this space that these institutions just don't get it.

> A quick search finds many museum Facebook pages which lie out of date, because someone just doesn't have the time to keep updating it. I would argue that this is more detrimental to the brand than not having a presence there at all. (Richardson, 2009)[16]

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[15] See Shelley Burnstein's museum blog at
http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/community/blogosphere/bloggers/author/bernsteins/ for details of projects and ongoing debate.
[16] See for example the following exchange from the National Media Museum's Facebook wall, an exchange which was not acknowledged or responded to by the museum:

Wall Post
Has anyone else had trouble contacting the NMM? I have booked tickets online for Avatar but I need to speak to them about my order. I have emailed them twice with no reply and been kept on hold for over 10 minutes several times - on different days - and can't get to speak to anyone. Are they always this bad?

A whole strand of consultancy has recently sprung up around the use and impact of social media for museums work.[17] As yet however, the advice and debate being generated misses opportunities to explore ways of aligning the Marketing Frame more honestly (and creatively) with user's experiences of (and within) the spaces of the technology.

The Inclusivity Frame

One of the larger claims that is being made about the increased use of social media is that it helps build and sustain communities of interest around an institution: 'Museums interested in building community and audiences have quickly realized the potential of these new technologies and attitudes' (Grabill, Pigg and Wittenauer, 2009). Inclusion, community, access and representation have been buzzwords in the museums sector for some time, and there is hope that social media will fit that brief also.

However, it is evident that communities do not establish and sustain themselves; just because one has a blog, Facebook page or YouTube channel, it does not necessarily follow that an active, vibrant and ongoing community will dialogue there. Moreover, there is no certainty that this dialog will be sizeable. It has been shown that much of any interaction and exchange which occurs within an online community (and certainly any content creation) will come from a soberingly small segment of potential and actual users. As Alexander et al found in their research into YouTube, much of any dialogue that might be elicited, invariably comes from a small number of contributors (or active community members):[18]

> It appears that overall, museum videos generate a small number of comments, and that the dialogue is not universally as active as the term "social Web" suggests, at least not at this stage and in this format. (Alexander et al, 2008)

January 5 at 11:42am
Comment [from another user]
I have tried loads of times they are rubbish [sic]
January 20 at 10:11am

[17] See for example www.museummarketing.co.uk, and also speakers at various events run by the Museums Association or the Group for Education in Museums.
[18] See also Russo and Peacock, 2009: 'While the 'architecture of participation' potentially allows users to upload, comment, tag and blog, very few do.'

It is probable that many of the claims made for the potential of community (as has historically been the case for emerging media networks such as MUDs and later Second Life)[19] are romaniticised and inflated:

> there is a strong belief within the museum community that this functionality has brought about dramatic changes in the ways knowledge is shared, created, and co-created, as well as in the ways that visitors interact not only with the museum but also with each other. However, museum professionals largely agree that most of these claims are speculative or based on anecdotal data. (Grabill, Pigg and Wittenauer, 2009)

It is not helpful to ignore or even downplay the potential for widening and hosting community online, but rather it should be recognised that such outcomes are never an inevitability when launching into social media spaces. Exploring and thinking carefully about how to maximise on this potential is thus a key part of strategising for social media.

The Australian Museum in Sydney has a Social Media Strategy that might serve as a useful start-point here. The document is interesting not only because it is one of very few publicly articulated strategies outlining the precise intent and assumptions behind a museum's use of social media, but also because it elucidates much of the discursive work behind its inception.[20] The goal of the strategy is straightforward, yet ambitious; 'To inspire the exploration of nature and cultures through sharing; engaging; building relationships and influencing, while adapting our organisational culture' (The Australian Museum, 2009). Interestingly, there is a transparency about work to be done at an organisational level also. This goal breaks down into a number of aspirations which include 'creating ambassadors', 'encouraging and growing communities', shifting to a model of 'many-to-many communication' and 'creating shared meaning with audiences' (ibid). This is no doubt then a participatory endeavor; one that tries to extend and relate back to the on-site work of the institution. The museum now hosts a number of separate blogs which try to make that link, whilst making a distinction between the needs of different kinds of 'visitors'. There is one for teachers, another for visitors, one hosted by the youth ambassador of the museum, and another explicitly for editorials and opinions. What is interesting to note is that the museum is itself being transparent in its assessment of its use of social media through another of its

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[19] See the section on Community in Trend, 2001for more on the claims made for virtual communities.
[20] The strategy can be found at http://australianmuseum.net.au/blogpost/The-Museums-Social-Media-Strategy (Accessed March 2010)

blogs, the audience research blog. Transparency such as this can help to align the organisational and user frames in ways that more genuinely lend themselves to inclusion and community, and that can even begin to impact on on-site activity.

For example, at the Powerhouse Museum (also in Sydney), reflection on the various activities and conversations taking place on their flickr site has begun to impact upon the rules governing the use of cameras on site (i.e. in the Museum). It is astonishing how many museums do not allow photography within their exhibitions (somewhat counter-intuitive in 2010), but, following two years of experimentation with the commons on flickr, the Powerhouse has relaxed its policy, recognising 'that taking photographs whilst out and about, is an important part of the experience for visitors' (Chan, 2010). Visitors are then encouraged to visit the flickr site and join in various activities, completing the communications loop (ibid.). We are then starting to see (some) museums respond sensitively and dynamically to the challenge of online community.

The Brooklyn Museum has also been negotiating how to encourage activity within social media spaces. The answer, for them (and a very successful one at that) has been to accept and embrace more readily the 'norms' of such communities:

> … the more we thought about YouTube, the more we came to believe that content created by the museum might not be as engaging as content created by others. Asking for visitor-created content seemed to be more in sync with the YouTube community. (Bernstein, 2008)[21]

Here, recognition of the messages, functionalities and assumptions implicit in the Technological Frame (and users' understanding of it) has led to a more nuanced and considered response to the challenge. What the Brooklyn Museum has recognized is that selections about which social media tools to 'invest' in of course in themselves shape and articulate meaning also.

Although initiatives are fairly new in this area, and the communities themselves remain somewhat allusive, what emerges as important is reflexivity in the practice. Having

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[21] There are a number of fascinating projects at the Brooklyn Museum which creatively explore the challenges of social media, and indicate great reflexivity in practice. The Museum is seen as something of a pioneer in the museums sector in this regard (see Bernstein, 2008)

conversations (perhaps with users also) about what 'success' looks like in such activity, being flexible in its implementation, and making sure the content is dynamic and interesting are all crucial to encouraging and enabling more genuinely participatory, dialogic and inclusive spaces.

The Collaborative Frame

A third possibility for social media use has increasingly become apparent, one which enables people to co-produce the narratives of the museum in ways which are (potentially) more radical and profound. Not surprisingly, reference to collaboration and co-production sits quite comfortably alongside the increased currency of social media initiatives within the museum sector. The frequency and intensity of community consultation, and the growth of the Community Advisory Panel or Youth Panel, for example, attest to the rise of collaboration in the wider rhetoric of the museum. Here I will look at two uses of web 2.0 technologies which are organised (and understood) within a Collaborative Frame; story-making and crowdsourcing. Through these, the importance of frame alignment will be most apparent.

Story-making initiatives have existed in more static forms online for some time, and involve asking members of the public to offer re-presentations of themselves, their communities, and their multiple heritages using information technology as a filter. Such projects collect a wealth of information (or 'content') in the form of autobiography, video, digital stories and other personal 'artefacts' that constitute a yet to be explored value in terms of source materials. The premise behind such projects is a desire to fill gaps, to archive for posterity that which might otherwise be lost, and to re-think collaboratively where value lies in the museum.

Examples of such projects in the UK include the Museum of London's *Belonging*, Manchester Museum's *Collective Conversations*, Luton Museums Service's *Luton Voices*, the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum's *Queering Coventry*, Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives Service's *Bristol Stories* and the Royal Armouries' *Memories*. These practices facilitate the re-telling of narratives about artefacts, heritages and even the institutions themselves through participatory endeavour. More often than not, the resultant 'outputs' are then hosted by institutions online (often in social media spaces), but there is rarely any curatorial or other guidance on how they might best be approached, accessed, assessed or made 'useful' once they are there. The speed

at which institutions can amass such 'content' currently outstrips their ability to reflect on it, archive it, and ascribe it use-value. As such, there is a danger that the promise behind such endeavour - that all of our heritages and interpretations have a place within the museum - is not met, and worse, that the story-makers feel exploited or exposed. The web is seen, in such instances, as a natural home for content that has been made by or in collaboration with the public (or 'amateurs'), even as the premise of the projects is a more genuine re-appraisal of the museum's absences, and a change in the way history is 'made' by the institution. In the museum itself, very little changes as a result.[22]

There is a broader and more troubling aspect which becomes evident in this analysis. Museums, for all of their responsiveness to the new museology, notwithstanding their concentration on access, diversity and multiplicity, are struggling to negotiate and accept the challenge to their authority that the project of 'becoming social' entails. Such forms of story-making of course have their place within the function and future of museums, but a frame analysis reveals that there needs to be more honesty in the framing of their potential, especially if alignment is to be achieved.

One way in which the desire to collaborate is beginning to be explored in more reflective and potentially challenging ways is through crowdsourcing (see Howe, 2008). Here, tasks are out-sourced to members of the public via the web in order that they may become involved in two of the core activities of the museum, namely curating and archiving. In the case of the Brooklyn Museum's *Click* project in 2008, members of the public became online curators of the eventual exhibition, making their own individual analyses or 'evaluations' of artistic works.[23] A total of 3,346 individuals were involved as 'evaluators', making a staggering 410,088 evaluations between them.[24] In the Victoria and Albert's crowdsourcing initiative [see figure 2], members of the public are tasked with cropping the digital archive in order to display the most useful images in the online archive. There are 120,072 images to crop, and (as of Sept 2010) 33,486 contributions from the public.[25]
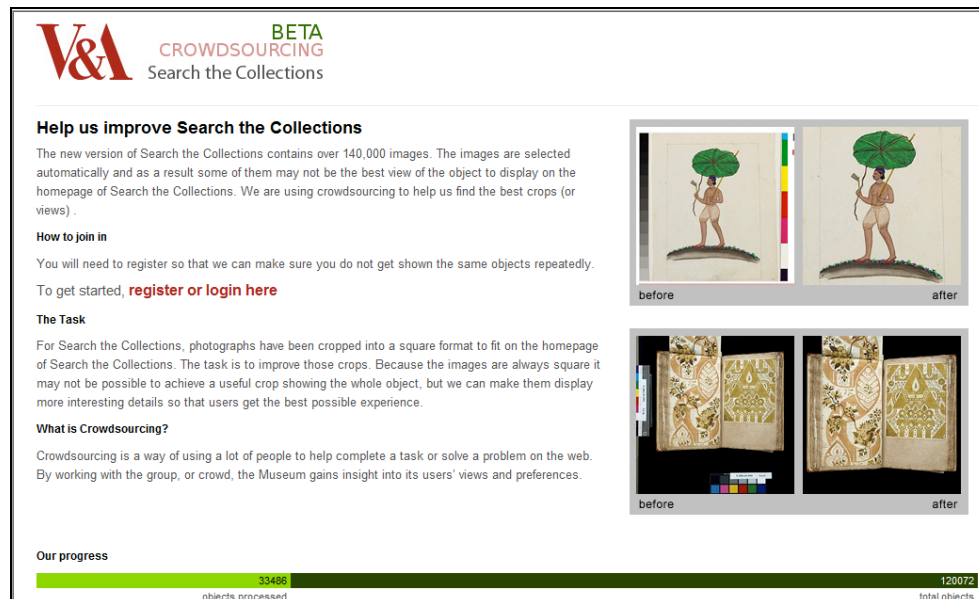
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[22] Such narratives can be immensely powerful, instructive and informative, yet their current framing (in terms of their elicitation and their dissemination) often does little to inspire engagement. The rhetoric of democracy that surrounds such projects is one that is currently misleading.
[23] See http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/click/, and also http://www.createdemocracy.com/home.html for another example of group curation
[24] According to their statistical analysis at http://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/click/stats.php
[25] http://collections.vam.ac.uk/crowdsourcing/

[Figure 2: the V & A crowdsourcing initiative]

Such projects are interesting not only because they harness members of the public's creative work, but because there is honesty in their articulation (and framing). Such a model invites the public into a creative partnership with an institution where the outcomes of and expectations for the project are clearly articulated from the outset. Conversely, the story-making model, at least as it is currently realised, sees members of the public purely as sources of data with ambiguous ongoing use-value, making no clear articulation of their relationship to the core activity of the institution, that is, beyond a rhetorical commitment to community and collaboration.

Conclusions

The above discussion of current (and potential) uses of social media highlights very vividly the importance of contextualizing such activity. Making statements about *why* the activity is being encouraged/recognized, *where* it is happening, *who* is representing the host institution within the various forums, *what* forms of activity will be most 'useful', and *how* the audiences themselves can sculpt and navigate the engagement are all crucial to the success of

social media activity. Understanding how to read the frames within which such activity is being encouraged and experienced (or within which it happens unprompted or unfacilitated by the institution) is also crucial. When frame alignment is achieved, a user will better understand the context for the activity, what is expected of them, how their contribution will be valued and crucially, how it will be 'institutionalised'. In many social networking spaces and 'sharing' communities, there is also an expectation that content can be downloaded, embedded elsewhere or doctored in some way. It is important that museums also think carefully about how such expectations can be managed or met. Contemplating the risks inherent in more genuinely sharing content, which necessarily means letting go of some authority, can encourage institutions to think in more creative ways about how they and their users might collaborate, and to ask questions about how permeable and fluid the walls of the museum may be becoming.

Risk-averse museum cultures often mean participatory projects do little more than pay lip-service to notions of empowerment, interactivity and democracy. Social media initiatives run the risk of following suit. Nina Simon says that the 'holy grail of social discourse [is] where people interact directly with each other *around* content' (Simon, 2007. My emphasis). In social media forums, the participants and their voices *become* the content, and the ethics of this need more consideration. There is something of a commodification of community occurring; online communities arising around cultural institutions are being ascribed value, but what kind of value is less clear. Perhaps, for the moment at least, being seen to be involved in this kind of activity is the end goal in itself. Conflating the ease of launching social media initiatives with assumptions that the dialogues they elicit will be easy to 'manage' shows a fundamental mis-understanding of the nuances of the specific 'Technological Frame'.

The museum continues to highlight a number of knotty juxtapositions; public experiences and private engagements, personal and communal pasts, singular narratives and multiple viewpoints, subject and object, onsite and offsite, interpretation and re-presentation, history, memory and forgetting. Social media can of course potentially help the museum to illuminate and explore some of these tensions with their visitors, but only if their use is framed and understood in alignment. Without such alignment, museums run the risk of alienating,

frustrating, appropriating or dis-empowering through the very media whose rhetorics of democracy, community and inclusion they have found so seductive.

Frame analysis (and an understanding of frame alignment) enables museum staff to think more carefully about how they articulate, organise and understand practices of participation. For the researcher, it provides a tool and a language for beginning to question notions of 'experience' within social media spaces: How does the online experience extend, complement or even replace the 'offline' museum? How might the use of social media inform current debate about ethics and responsibility in the re-presentation of heritage? How can participants' contributions be evaluated? What challenges must be overcome before those currently defined as 'user', 'visitor' or 'audience' can demonstrate more sophisticated forms of agency? And crucially, is the challenge such media present to the authority of the museum archive one that the project of 'history' can bear?

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