Museum communication and storytelling: articulating understandings within the museum structure

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ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to define museum communication as a useful concept and process by applying storytelling as a way of identifying museums' interpretation, relevance and meaning-making focus. Although museums are very familiar with these terms, their impact on how museums communicate has rarely been defined. The paper offers a theoretical definition of museum communication and seeks to implement this in museum practice through the concept of storytelling and the way it influences internal and external museum communication. Defining a clear museum communication requires defining individual practices and approaches at museums as well. For the individual museum this can be approached by stating a clear museum communication definition but more importantly through empirical elements of storytelling. How museums define their communication and form narratives will impact both internal and external practices.

Introduction

Over the last few decades, museums have been using terms like interpretation, relevance, interaction, and meaning making to describe their varied functions and ambitions. Although well known, these terms are rarely precisely defined in connection with museo-logical practices (Holt 2013; Nielsen 2014; 2015; Sperber and Wilson 1995; Wilson and Sperber 2004). This may be due to the fact that most terms are ambiguous and hold several meanings within different museological practices. However, without clearer defi-nitions the concepts, although useful as they may be, risk becoming hollow terms with no proper connection to otherwise useful theories and practices.

Attempting to provide new definitions of well-known terms will always cause discus-sion and disagreement. However, the more definitions are discussed and developed in terms of museological theories and practices, the better equipped museums will be to create their own individual meaning suited to specific practices and methods (Nielsen 2015).

Most concepts will be closely interlinked and often used to describe each other. However, one concept that seems to combine most of the terms used by museums today is communication. Museums communicate on every functional level, internally

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and externally. Communication is at the heart of everything a museum does. Yet, the term has often been connected to marketing functions, for example, yet not to any specific museological practice.

The reason why communication needs to be defined specifically in terms of museology is related to the increasing demands and changing roles for museum professionals. In the March 2013 issue of *Museums Journal*, Director of Museums and Renaissance at Arts Council England, Hedley Swain, expressed the need for a new term for a new generation of museum curators: *'perhaps we need a new term to describe a new breed of museum professionals'* (Holt 2013, 30). The role of curators in particular is under greater transformation than ever before due to a number of circumstances: *'In the face of cuts and cost savings, one-time specialists are increasingly expected to be multi-tasking generalists'* (Holt 2013, 30). The use of technology and social media, the need for forming new partnerships, and the expectations and needs of visitors among other factors are putting the curatorial role under pressure and change, and in doing so new responsibilities have been created for curators. Brendan Carr, curator of Reading Museum, observes that: *'Some people think that curators are a fount of all knowledge; that's fine but I don't think you should just be a human Google and you should, instead, direct inquirers to make discoveries for themselves'* (Holt 2013, 30). It is interesting to note a general scepticism towards experts, an observation that may spark a stronger need for understanding demographic as well as psychological changes in society (Adams 2016, 12–13). Yet, these transformations are not just changing the role of curators, but also how museums understand and undertake essential approaches like interpretation, interaction and meaning making (Nielsen 2014). How museums define these terms is likely going to influence how we see museum professionals as communicators of expertise and how this role is subsequently to be shaped.

Although many welcome this new flexibility within the profession, it has also caused confusion about where the curatorial role is heading and where it leaves curatorial expertise for future generations. Former Chief Executive of the Collections Trust, Nick Poole believes there has been a rejection of the idea of curatorship in an attempt for museums' to become more socially engaged – this may have resulted in an identity crisis: *' … one of the things that makes us relevant is knowledge and expertise. The best way to be socially just is to know what we're talking about'* (Holt 2013, 30). As the role of curators begins to involve everything from research into collections and promoting visitor and community involvement to marketing responsibilities, this transformation will undoubtedly influence museums' formulation of purposes, aims, relevance and strategies in the future. Poole adds: *'We really need to articulate a more confident and celebratory model of what a balanced museum that's both socially engaged and knowledgeable looks like'* (Holt 2013, 30). If such a model is to do all areas of museum practice justice, it will have to acknowledge these transformations and provide room for them to take place as natural developments of museum research and communication.

This will require involving a shared and concise definition of the terms and concepts museums use the most in theory and practice. Many of these terms have been (mis-)used to excess, often (over-)analysed and many of them no longer define exact purposes, aims or visions for either the museum sector as a whole or the individual museum. Often terms like interpretation, meaning making and relevance have become common phrases in academic publications and in many museum statements and visions. Because the terms

are so often used they become ambiguous and rarely offer a clear definition of what exactly they cover or how they are to be approached from a practical perspective.

Creating a narrative

Understanding communication is first and foremost about understanding how we approach the terms we use the most. Professor Emeritus of Museum Studies at the University of Leicester, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill, approached the definitions of meaning making and interpretation by seeing them as interlinked: '*The process of meaning-making is the process of making sense of experience, of explaining or interpreting the world to ourselves and others … 'The making of meaning, the construction of understanding, is reached through the process of interpretation'* (Hooper-Greenhill 1994, 12).

A direct link to communication is explicit in the definition used by the Association for Heritage Interpretation: '*Interpretation is primarily a communication process that helps people make sense of, and understand more about, your site, collection or event*' (Association for Heritage Interpretation). Interpretation is often linked to the process of planning and to creating actual settings or venues for understandings. This makes the act of interpretation very practical as it leads directly to meaning making. Interpretation as a term is therefore often defined as the action of explaining meaning or making sense (Beck and Cable 2002; Black 2005, 211–212; Martin 2011; Nielsen 2015; Veverka 2011a). Interpretation can be informative, exciting and provocative. Creating meaning is also about creating a memory – something museums generally acknowledge through new approaches to their exhibitions (Brochu 2013; Nielsen 2015; Veverka 2011b).

An example of an alternative approach to interpretation is demonstrated by American theatre director and artist Robert Wilson, in his exhibition, *Anna didn't come home that night,* which was designed and installed at The Danish Museum of Decorative Arts (now: Design Museum Denmark) in 2000. In the exhibition, Wilson designed sixteen tableaux with dramatic visual and physical effects that were meant to engage all senses. The tableaux portrayed the last day in the life of Anna, on November 21st, 1917, who went to a dinner party and never returned home. Visitors are never able to meet Anna and do not know what has happened to her, but by looking for clues in each room, they develop an idea of Anna's life and how it has been interwoven with female characters from fairy tales like *Alice in Wonderland* and *Cinderella*. The exhibition created the possibility for visitors to make up their own stories of what happened to Anna that night through the placement of objects in totally new and unexpected settings and the creation of theatrical settings within the exhibition space (Anna didn't come home that night).

The '*construction of understanding*' discussed by Hooper-Greenhill is closely linked to the creation of relevance. If not relevant, the experiences of communication, interaction and learning seem to fail (Falk and Dierking 2000; Nielsen 2015). Combined with varied practices and approaches, a theoretical relevance can be defined as: the creation of meaningful practices (Nielsen 2015). This definition seeks to encompass the subjective process of museological creation, the emotional and personal understanding of relevance as a meaningful approach, and the importance of practical use within meaningful creations (Nielsen 2015; Simon 2016).

It is commonly believed that *what* museums communicate – as complex platforms of communication – is worth communicating. However, what museums also communicate is the *intention* of communicating.

Communication seems to have become a relatively common phrase – at least, for most museums, particularly in connection with the press and marketing. This makes the term very broad and difficult to define, as communication may involve everything from what occurs in traditional classroom learning, storytelling, living history and marketing to social and virtual media. However, the key to understanding museum communication is to identify the complex contexts within which it exists and has been used and developed. This includes taking a look at the relevance and purpose of the individual museum (Alexander and Alexander 1996; Black 2005; Golding 1999; 2009; Harris 1995; McLean 1997; Simon 2016).

Defining museum communication

It is worth defining what exactly communication means. Director of Communication Networks, Uma Narula, begins with a fairly simple definition: '*Communication is interaction with ourselves, with others and with our external and internal environments*' (Narula 2006, 2). This definition states that interaction is part of what defines communication. Alan Barker, a specialist in communication skills, defines communication in more basic terms: '*Communication is the act of transmitting and receiving information*' (Barker 2010, 1). With the word 'transmitting' we can also think of communication as a technical process. This association is not wrong according to Barker since the word communication in the nineteenth century referred to the movement of goods, people and information (Barker 2010, 1–2). Communication is one of the primary functions of museums, and apart from the aforementioned terms, it relates closely to the other main functions of museum practices, notably collections, management and conservation. However, as a direct term, communication seems to deal mainly with the creation of understandings.

Communication in itself can be defined as the transmission and exchange of information. However, museum communication also encompasses central concepts of learning, meaning making and interpretation already heavily used by museums. Communication influences every aspect of how a museum approaches its work. Museum communication is therefore a process as well as a concept, and has to be treated as such. I therefore believe a simple way of defining museum communication is through one single sentence in which both the concept and process can be explained:

Museum communication is the articulation of understandings

Articulation is a process of formulation, transmission, transformation, interpretation and experimentation. Understanding is a concept of meaning making, relevance, learning, experience, interaction and participation. Together, this process and concept define the core of museum work, approaches and responsibilities. The articulation of understandings applies to internal as well as to external museum work. Internal and external museum communication will influence each other and constantly broaden communication practices. Whether internal or external, human beings perceive differently, respond differently, and react differently to communication. This makes the formulation, transmission,

interpretation and transformation process of understanding experimental. Articulation as a process will influence the outcome of understandings and will place different perspectives on how museums approach and create their learning, meaning making and interaction opportunities. It is natural to assume that this process creates a special link to museum exhibitions and display work. This may be true, as exhibitions are the most direct way of interacting with visitors and communities for museums. However, communication is never a one-way process; professionals and visitors will have their own individual ways of perceiving, understanding and contributing to the communication process. Understandings formed will therefore always be subjective and individual in the same manner as the creation of relevance will be (Nielsen 2015).

> At the beginning of the twenty-first century, museums are re-orienting themselves through imagining afresh what they can become; familiar practices are being reassessed and tired philosophies are being overturned. New ideas about culture and society and new policy initiatives challenge museums to rethink their purposes, to account for their performances and to redesign their pedagogies. (Hooper-Greenhill 2007, 1)

Museums have had to rethink their purpose during the last few decades. There are various reasons for this – political, financial, social, cultural and educational. Emeritus Professor at the Institute for Culture and Society at Western Sydney University, Bob Hodge, argues that linear communication models are still alive and well even in what he describes as 'The New Museum' and asks the question: '*Has the revolution really happened?*' (Hodge 2011, 109). Hodge argues that the revolution against linearity so far only co-exists with an effective continuation of linear communication models (Hodge 2011, 109). However, the discussion and re-orientation towards new approaches is not new: '*The question we must ultimately ask ourselves is this: do our museums make a real difference in, and do they have a positive impact on, the lives of other people?*' (Weil 1994, 89).

The main reason why this discussion is taking place seems to be that museum professionals generally feel that they are, in one way or another, failing in their intentions or perhaps failing to see their museums' potential in a fast-changing world. Arguments also seem to oscillate between those who favour changes in museums and those who believe museums will fail in their purpose by embracing too many changes. The development of the postmodern museum can be viewed as an attempt to establish potential and create theoretical and practical approaches in which the concept of purpose is useful. Robert R. Janes, Editor-in-Chief Emeritus of *Museum Management and Curatorship*, sums up some of the dilemmas that museums face (and sometimes create for themselves) in *Museums in a Troubled World* (Janes 2009), in which he discusses some of the troubling questions of irrelevance and lack of purpose with which museums often struggle. He argues that museums have lived a privileged existence as ' … *agenda-free and respected custodians of mainstream cultural values – not ever truly wealthy, but mostly comfortable, and certainly not beholden to the incessant demands of the so-called real world*' (Janes 2009, 16). Janes believes that the failure to ask *why* museums do as they do discourages self-critical reflection; rather, the focus of the discussion has mainly been on *how* – referring to the processes of collection and preserving – museums do what they do (Janes 2009, 15–17; 2013). Museums should instead begin to reflect on why they are indeed privileged institutions: '*Most importantly, museums are privileged because they are organizations whose purpose is their meaning*' (Janes 2009, 16).

Janes notes how future tendencies are rare subjects for museums to touch upon in their work. Although this might be understandable for institutions whose focus is mainly on the past and present, Janes describes this as being slightly schizophrenic *'as museums rush to install the latest technological wizardry or attach whimsical architectural appendages to their buildings'* (Janes 2009, 17). He believes that the future requires serious reflection simply because it is not knowable (Janes 2009, 17; 2013). These issues of reflection, meaning and future thinking pose questions regarding future challenges for museums. It can be argued that museums throughout the world face some of the same challenges regarding creating sustainable learning environments, providing possibilities for meaning making, ensuring visitor participation and providing flexible new ways of thinking about the future (Sharp 2012). It is also worth asking if the current idea of the 'postmodern museum' has outdated itself by now; forming new terms and articulations for theoretical as well as practical museology may also lead the way to a new epistemological approach to museum development (Nielsen 2014).

Storytelling

Whether talking about interpretation, visitor interaction or communication, any museum essentially wants visitors to participate in its stories. This requires creativity and a firm grasp of what can be communicated and understood. A story can be defined as being many things at the same time. However, it can first and foremost be understood as:

A narrative that creates engagement

A narrative is essentially a structure that can be based on emotional, learning, educational, interactive, individual or social, imaginative, fictive or non-fictive, digital or non-digital, subjective or objective engagements. It gains attention by evoking feelings, memories and curiosity. This links the concept of storytelling directly to the definition of communication; although a story does not always make meaning (and does not always have to in order to be engaging), understanding can only develop when something makes sense. Articulating understanding happens through a structure that stimulates memories, feelings and/or curiosity. This structure most often takes the form of stories. Sometimes we are aware of them – although they also often happen on an unconscious level.

Storytelling can be viewed as the concept that combines *the articulation of understandings* that defines museum communication and the *engaging narrative* that forms the story. Storytelling has developed as part of postmodern museum communication (Nielsen 2014). It can be considered a direct way of approaching visitor participation and interaction*: 'If modernism questioned the survival of stories, postmodernism sees stories everywhere'* (Gabriel 2000, 17). Many exhibitions today are oriented towards the framework of stories. Bedford even argues that the one aspect of museum work that will always be '*the real thing*' is storytelling because it supports individual interpretation and meaning making (Bedford 2001, 27). This has also become part of how museums interact with visitors: '*Stories and experience are linked in postmodern discourses like Siamese twins – not only do stories transform into experience, but experience turns into stories'* (Gabriel 2000, 18). Telling stories has always been part of interpretation. However, visitors also make up their own stories, which is another part of the storytelling process. The more museums

interact with visitors, the more detailed and complex their stories become. This is the advantage of interaction that many museums try to build on. Stories are used to illustrate points, to remember things, and to engage audiences. However, the power of storytelling lies in the fact that it provides methods for emphasising meaning, understanding and feelings. Over the last few decades, the psychology behind storytelling has begun to show how stories influence the human mind. Stories, be they fiction or non-fiction, sometimes seem to influence our attitudes, fears, hopes and values much more than academic writing created to persuade through argument and evidence (Guber 2011; Hurt and Metzger 2003). Often the mind tends to be critical and sceptical when engaged in factual reading, whereas the intellectual guard tends to be lowered when the mind becomes emotionally absorbed (Schank 1995; Schank and Berman 2002). Content may therefore be something you share – whereas a story is something you want to retell and personalise (Dimelow 2016). The concept of narrative intelligence is an important part of human cognition as it recognises social communication and the process of making sense as we draw on our own experiences to form understandings (Li et al. 2014). These perspectives make storytelling a powerful tool in interaction activities, fiction and even organisational management.

Storytelling has lately developed in all aspects of organisation and management practices: from being integral parts of developing creative communication strategies to identifying organisational potential and enhancing leadership motivation. These different uses of the concept provide an interesting potential for museums as communication reaches all levels of an organisation. Today, storytelling is used in such varied activities as organisational and management courses and workshops, as means of self-expression and communication for socially excluded community groups, as part of company branding and promotion, to increase historical and cultural awareness of, for example, heritage sites, and as creative teaching and learning in education (Boje 2008; Fog et al. 2010; Scottish Storytelling Centre).

Storytelling as a communication tool

The value of a good story is priceless to any organisation. It can also help an organisation build trust and a stronger connection between staff and users, as well as ensuring that organisational aims and missions are shared internally among staff. A museum that uses storytelling internally has the opportunity to consider the authenticity of stories and enhance external communication with target audiences (Fog et al. 2010, 52–55). It is even possible to view storytelling as 'the tool' that makes museological discussions of change and development clearer: ' … *as the postmodernists have recognized, storytelling comes to the rescue of meaning in an epoch saturated by information in which meaning is constantly displayed and crowded by noise*' (Gabriel 2000, 22). Storytelling can be one of the most important tools for creating meaning – and can ensure emotional engagement among visitors and staff.

Storytelling takes place in museums constantly. However, storytelling is not just a product of guided tours or children's events – it is something that takes place within the brain all the time simply because the brain is constructed to think in terms of narratives and to relate to experiences and conversations by constructing stories (Dodd 2002; Gottschall 2012, 6–12). Stories tend to activate imaginative processes by connecting

with our experiences and emotions. Stories can thus encourage creativity on many levels. It is, for example, possible to be emotionally engaged by experiences that we have not actually had ourselves by listening to someone else tell them. This is also why metaphors work well with most people; as they shape images and emotions in the brain. The brain simply becomes more active when we tell or listen to stories, which also explains why humans do not only dream at night but also daydream many times during the day (Gottschall 2012, 11, 95–99). Storytelling is therefore one of the most powerful techniques we have as humans to communicate and motivate creativity.

It seems to be only in recent years that storytelling has emerged as a powerful communication tool within organisations. The reason for this may be that we rarely think of the presence of stories. Yet, storytelling is very pervasive. This is understandable as it forms much of the communication that takes place between people, their actions and behaviours. However, the narrative and structure that lie behind storytelling are not often considered in much detail.

Storytelling as a concept has emerged as more than just a narrative and has thus been given a whole new meaning. By representing communication or the ways we communicate, storytelling has become central to learning, education, social interaction and emotional engagement:

> If narratives are favoured objects of postmodern discourses, stories are favoured among narratives. Virtually any piece of text, any sign, any object that has drawn a gaze onto itself, tells a story; indeed, the failure to tell a story is a story in its own right. (Gabriel 2000, 17)

This statement from Chair in Organisation Studies at the University of Bath, Yiannis Gabriel, sums up how storytelling has always been part of people's lives and therefore applies to any organisational structure, learning situation and social interaction.

The lack of awareness towards stories is reflected in the way museums generally prioritise their communication development. As an example, the Scottish Storytelling Centre has created a series of organisational development programmes for companies to choose from in order to enhance and motivate internal communication strategies (Scottish Storytelling Centre). As part of my doctoral research, I conducted an interview with Director of Scottish Storytelling Centre, Dr Donald Smith, in 2013. He mentioned that museum staff often participates in courses and workshops as part of visitor engagement training (Kilgour and Martin 1997; Roberts 1997; Rowlands 2002). However, the way museums prioritise these development programmes can seem ambivalent: '*There is a funny thing about that which is quite interesting: The curators tend not to come to those courses. The education people come! Often guides as well.*'[1] Smith believes this has a strong connection to the hierarchy that exists in museums where curators are viewed as 'the priesthood' and visitor communication as a kind of 'performance'[1]. He believes that museums will have to acknowledge the skills and art of storytelling in order to overcome these prejudices. Telling a story in an engaging way is in itself a discipline that requires skills and involvement. Moreover, the articulation can motivate engagement and influence design levels, display approaches and internal and external communication.

The way this part of communication has been prioritised by museums seems striking. When guides or front of house staff communicate stories to visitors it seems logical that this cannot be done in an interesting, relevant or engaging way if curators and researchers have not communicated knowledge, research and analyses in an interesting, relevant or

engaging way in the first place. Essentially this comes down to understanding how your organisation works and with whom the relevant knowledge sits (Brown et al. 2005, 3). According to Brown *et al.*, many of these questions can be understood through stories (Brown et al. 2005, 3–4). A curator's work is transformed during many stages and in many different ways, from research projects or collection analyses to exhibitions, guided tours, workshops, digital media, and live interpretation. A curator has to be involved in every stage of the interpretation process. The internal communication between curators, researchers, guides, storytellers, designers, and technicians is essential before museums even reach the stage of communicating with visitors.

Communication is essentially at the heart of storytelling, which makes it relevant to so many aspects of practical museum communication. Many museums have limited storytelling to visitor communication alone, with a particular focus on live interpretation, living history and guided tours. Exhibition creators, designers and curators seem to be becoming a greater part of the storytelling approach as their roles develop. This change is likely to prepare them for increasingly varied roles. The broadening of communication elements can thus strengthen and enhance curatorial expertise.

Creating a learning community is also essential to visitor communication. It influences how research interpretation is carried out. Community projects and feedback have always shaped subsequent exhibitions and activities – an aspect that makes the intangible communication very powerful. However, it requires that the museum work with its visitors:

> For a museum to truly engage its users, it must cease acting as a controlling gatekeeper to its collections and expertise. Rather, the museum must work with its users and communities to unlock the stories its collections hold, responding to the choices its users make. (Black 2012, 11)

Sometimes community groups can be viewed as 'co-curators' with more or less influence on learning processes or exhibition outcomes. Shaping storytelling with 'co-curators' may not just be a way in to '*the real world',* as Janes refers to, but can also provide an opportunity for the museum to ask the why questions as well as those questions relating to the future of collecting, interpreting and researching (Janes 2009, 16). The concept of storytelling thus becomes a very powerful tool in practical communication processes as well as an integrated part of the museum's everyday life.

Storytelling in the age of social media

Digital stories are currently created in nearly every digital device and they are experienced by almost everyone. They can be very personal or social, fiction or non-fiction, brief or detailed, and involve immense creativity for creators and users (Beck and Cable 2002; Sullivan 2016a). Digital storytelling can be viewed as an extension to traditional oral storytelling, yet it focuses mainly on providing opportunities for people to create and enhance their own stories and influence outcomes. Digital storytelling also makes it possible to combine still imagery, moving imagery, animation, audio, text and voiceover as well as interactive features. This enhances the experience and allows for greater interactivity. Digital storytelling is used as part of informal and formal learning as well as personal entertainment as digital tools and software make it easy to both access and create stories.

Many museums have embraced digital media in their communication practices, although these do not always seem fully integrated as part of the storytelling traditions in museums. In the UK, one of the largest storytelling projects, *Culture Shock!*, took place in the North-East of England (Culture Shock!). The project used museums and galleries to inspire people to create their own stories, stories that have also been added to the relevant museum collections. *Culture Shock!* became one of the largest digital storytelling projects in the UK with almost six hundred participants creating their own digital stories which were then either added permanently to museum collections, or broadcast online and at special events. The projects also involved workshops, exhibitions and a conference focusing on how digital heritage can be shared, developed and created (Culture Shock!).

Another example of how to increase community engagement and engage in social media can be found in the project *The Grand Tour in York*. During the summer of 2008 *The Grand Tour in York* was created in the city of York (The Grand Tour in York: website). The project was carried out by The National Gallery and York Art Gallery and set out to celebrate some of the greatest works of art by '*setting the paintings free*' around the streets of the city (The Grand Tour in York). Tours were created around copies of forty-nine famous paintings, which were hung on various town houses and buildings of the city. It was possible to download audio tours and tour maps created around specific themes: The Grand Tour, The Heavy Hitters Tour, The Escape the City Tour, The Lovers Tour, and The History of York Tour (The Grand Tour in York). Each tour included some insider information about the paintings from curators and other experts.

Interestingly, the paintings became a central element of the town. The blend of old and new buildings, and seeing paintings in parks and streets, may have attracted many to the art galleries, but it also allowed both York Art Gallery and audiences to interact in a whole new way: all of a sudden, art was everywhere as an integral part of the town centre and its people. Because it took place in a new setting, the project inspired curiosity and attracted attention in a way it would not have done in a museum building. The setup also allowed for a certain amount of humour. For example, seeing a copy of Massys's *A Grotesque Old Woman* on the outside wall next to a beauty shop often evoked a smile from passers-by. The project also encouraged people to take their own photos of the artworks as they interacted in the street life of the city by setting up a Flickr group (The Grand Tour in York).

The main purpose of this project was not only to engage people in the city or to increase the Museum's marketing potential, but also to enliven collections in a totally new way by making (copies of) paintings accessible in new settings. The project provided the Museum with possibilities for including social media outside the actual museum, while at the same time tours and further information on artworks could be found and downloaded online. Essentially, the project proved that museums can engage visitors in their collections, encourage visits and provide participatory experiences outside as well as inside the museum's walls.

Similar projects have taken place at museums, libraries and archives across Europe and America and the finished digital stories can have many different uses, from building relations with communities and new visitor groups, to adding to museums' collections, learning and communication (Jones 1995; Lambert 2013; Wiszniewski 2012).

What is interesting in these examples is the social interaction and emotional engagement the projects have encouraged. Nevertheless, '*The social media world is fickle and*

constantly changing. What works for one project won't for another and identifying the right platform for the job can be difficult' (Sullivan 2016a). Projects like *The Grand Tour in York* do not only allow for social media interaction, but also bring a physical part of the museum to the public – even if it is not original paintings that are presented. The use of social and digital media is a regular part of most people's lives; almost all digital projects have a strong foundation in social engagement or sharing of personal stories, and this seems to be the best starting point for identifying a unique digital platform (Sullivan 2016a, 2016b).

Museums can also find use for social media in internal communication and storytelling. An example of a well-known problem was posted by Nina Simon on Museum 2.0's website (Simon 2013). She describes how one of the museum's front line staff members one day expressed her concern in feeling disconnected from the rest of the work at the museum as well as from staff working in the collections and in the offices. Santa Cruz Museum of Art & History decided to try something simple. They set up a private staff Facebook group. At first, Simon felt unsure about this as it would clearly only work if enough members contributed. However, the experiment soon proved to be a great success: '*People use it to share surprises in the archives, inspiring meetings with artists, dead birds in the lobby, and free food in the fridge. People post silly photographs from the basement cleanup and cheer on each other's small successes*' (Simon 2013). The group seemed to encourage the sharing of little everyday things between staff that would normally never have been shared. When members of staff were away for conferences, for example, the Facebook group became a natural place to keep up with news (Simon 2013).

Many museums already have similar forums, for example weekly or monthly internal newsletters, where staff can share experiences. By using Facebook as an internal forum, the Museum has created a social place that:

(1) is already well-known to and used by most members of staff in a private capacity,
(2) is quick and easy to use and where members can post photos, videos and comments on each other's posts,
(3) Creates a sense of connection 'behind the scenes' between staff members from different departments and
(4) promotes creativity among staff as they get a direct sense of how their work interacts with the work of their colleagues.

This kind of internal social interaction naturally requires participation from all staff members in order to work. Discussions can be as formal or informal as agreed however, as an internal communication tool, informal communication seems to promote use as well as encouraging people to share their concerns and successes. At the same time, it can work as an interesting administrative tool for management to spot potential problems, concerns, successes and new possibilities (Velamoor 2010; Weil 1990, 1994).

Storytelling in the future

Stories have always been part of human life and the way we tell stories has evolved with us. For museums that are trying to engage audiences, the collaborative nature of storytelling – exchanging tales and engaging in people's personal experiences – is of particular

interest. Storytelling is linked to many other art forms (film, literature, visual art and so on) simply because it is part of communication. Museums can benefit from this by engaging in all aspects of peoples' lives, histories and experiences. Essentially, museums act as centres of cultural understanding where people have the opportunity to communicate across boundaries, race and religion.

This requires that museums find their own aim on which to focus; most importantly, that they determine a clear purpose. Often, the most basic things are the most obvious and the ones we forget to articulate properly. The cultural, historical, economic, social and sociological values museums set out to represent have to be defined according to the museum's purpose and relevance in society.

Setting a purpose also begs the basic question: what is it we need to know? Museums represent all types of curiosity, imagination and knowledge that all deserve to be addressed. It is the role of all museums to address obvious questions, as well as the questions we dare not ask or do not know how to ask. This requires that the museum create environments where social interaction can take place and develop.

In 2016, Andreas Bonde Hansen from University College Sjælland, Denmark, concluded in his PhD at Copenhagen University that although many Scandinavian museums still enjoy very high visitor numbers, their marketing and interpretation often remain the same and are simply too boring (Beck 2016). Many visitors are getting used to live interpretation, which has enjoyed great success especially in the UK – although the concept does not seem to have developed much during the last decade (Beck 2016). Seeing actors or performers in historic costumes may appeal to a certain type of visitor, but it also tends to distract from what a museum actually has to offer and from finding new inspiration in interpretation as well as marketing. Hansen believes that what is missing is a better focus on the historic stories and uniqueness of a place or museum. He outlines three important aspects that any museum should consider in its interpretation and marketing strategies:

(1) Uniqueness: what is special about this place?
(2) Assets: what makes this place attractive?
(3) Marketing: both of the above need to be promoted in the correct way (Beck 2016).

Hansen has been analysing museums in Denmark, Sweden and Germany as part of his research. He has concluded that finding the uniqueness and focus on specific assets is not something that needs to be costly. At the moment, there seems to be a large potential in so-called Slow Tourism – where an institution offers space and possibilities for reflection (Beck 2016). The interesting point about this research is that it reveals how focusing on a strong identity creating story not only seems to work as a sharp marketing perspective but also helps the museum find its uniqueness and hone the interpretation assets that make the museum attractive. What audiences enjoy and museums benefit from the most is a clear and rigorous strategy.

Questions that help a museum find its focus stories often deal with that special attraction that comes from social interaction: where do people gather to talk in this place? What is the sociability? These questions do not simply address the physical layout of museums but also how visitors choose to participate with spaces of reflection and interaction. These

perspectives will be some of the most important for museums to consider in the future as their physical exhibition spaces become online or community spaces.

Conclusion

Linking a narrative structure to the way a museum articulate understandings and meanings, is in itself a challenge. However, storytelling has proven a way of not only combining stories and communication strategies, but also a method to develop new internal as well as external meaning-making approaches.

If museum communication is to be considered a concept as well as a process, the theoretical definition of everything it encompasses has to be connected to practical approaches. In this way, museums can articulate a useful individual understanding of the term and the practices involved. However, museum communication becomes crucial when museums have difficulties defining their purpose, use and relevance. It is perhaps no wonder that many museums have felt insecure about their role in the aftermath of financial and political tumult (Adams 2016). However, that is also the most important time for any museum to hold on to its aims and perspectives. By clearly articulating aims, finding what makes your museum special and unique, museums are not only clarifying central terms or making themselves relevant in practical approaches, they are also defining the understanding of why they make meaning and why they are important for everyone.

It is no secret that museum professionals tend to use terms like meaning making, interpretation and relevance frequently – often the words are interpreted from a theoretical perspective, but rarely are they bound to any kind of museological practices. In the English literature, communication seems to be even less discussed; the term has been linked to digital initiatives, social media, and sometimes directly to visitor interaction or participation. Some museum studies or cultural heritage courses have smaller modules on communication – however, so far only one postgraduate MA degree in 'Museum Communication' exists at The University of the Arts in Philadelphia.[2] That said, there seem to be more and more websites taking up the discussion of museum communication and related subjects.[3] Also, the impact of storytelling and forming a narrative is increasingly discussed.[4]

Many younger museum professionals will likely gain a stronger understanding of these terms. This will hopefully provide a better focus for creating and honing a unique identity-shaping story at museums in the future. However, it requires that the concept of storytelling be implemented as an essential part of museums' internal and external communication strategies and approaches. Likewise, it requires a stronger grasp of how the individual museum applies the definitions of communication and stories to their own narrative.

Notes

1. Interview with Director of Scottish Storytelling Centre, Dr Donald Smith in: Nielsen 2014. 'Museum Communication: learning, interaction and experience', School of Art History, University of St Andrews. Accessed 10 December 2014: http://research-repository.st-andrews.ac.uk/handle/10023/5770.

2. MA in Museum Communication, University of the Arts in Philadelphia. Accessed 5 February 2015. http://www.uarts.edu/academics/camd-cross-college-programs/ma-museum-communication.

3. Accessed 5 March 2013. Among others: Center for the Future of Museums: http://www.futureofmuseums.org/, Communicating the Museum: http://agendacom.com/en/communicating_the_museum/ctm/, Engage: http://www.engage.org/home/index.aspx, Group for Education in Museums: www.gem.org.uk, International Committee for Museology (ICOFOM): http://network.icom.museum/icofom, MuseumsNext: http://www.museumnext.org/, National Association for Museum Exhibition: http://name-aam.org/home, The Strategic Museum: http://bcom.au.dk/research/academicareas/ccc/forskning/currentresearchprojects/detstrategiskemuseum/.

4. The American Alliance of Museums' 2013 annual meeting and MuseumExpo was entitled 'The Power of Story'.

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