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Keep the Conversation Going: How Museums Use Social Media to Engage the Public

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Abstract Museums and cultural institutions increasingly use social media to communicate with existing and potential visitors, calling attention to their collections, exhibitions, and events. As social media adapts and new platforms emerge, museums have also adapted to accommodate new trends in technology. In this article, different types of social media are discussed to provide an overview of the platforms most commonly used by museums. An analysis of different museums' social media usage explores the costs and benefits of individual institutions' relationships with social media. Specifically, this article analyzes social media from the Brooklyn Museum (New York), the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), and the Bexley Heritage Trust (London).

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Museums have increasingly utilized social media as an important method to communicate with current and prospective audiences. Social media platforms, including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Tumblr, provide diverse opportunities for museums, libraries, and other cultural institutions to share their unique offerings to people around the world. Social media's ability to make cultural institutions more accessible has transformed the way in which these institutions operate. Social media now allows the general public to see behind closed doors. With this new type of access, museum departments like collection management, research, education, and conservation are better able to directly reach people. Museum departments that are often perceived as elusive can now be revealed, enabling the museum to demonstrate its core values.

Social media challenges the "traditional flow of information throughout our institutions and out into the world,"¹ while at the same time giving identities to multiple museum departments within these institutions. Social media has blurred the lines between traditional roles of exhibition developers, designers, educators, and conservators, merging with roles previously assumed by marketing and public relations departments. Before the emergence of social media, marketing and public relations staff members were responsible for representing the image of an institution, yet social media now enables the public to view a museum's diverse identities. Instead of seeing the pristine image of a newly renovated work

of art ready for redisplay, social media participants can witness the process from the viewpoint of a conservator. Followers can watch a video of exhibition designers mapping out the early stages of a new exhibition or an interview with educators and curators on particular subjects. Many experts believe that sharing internal museum processes with the public is the driving force behind online public engagement. According to the former chief digital officer Sree Sreenivasan at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (New York), or the Met, people do not always want to see the perfect end result: “They want to get a sense of how things are made. You want to build an audience before you have the big launch, rather than just sit on something and have it appear. Rather than hoping for an audience, you can build an audience.”²

Along with advertising exhibitions and events, museums have realized that they can use social media for much more, like understanding their audiences, for example.³ With new ways to connect with people across multiple technology-based platforms, institutions using social media are faced with questions about how to use that technology effectively. Elizabeth Stewart asks: “Will your museum employ social media to complement your museum’s educational programs? To build visitor numbers in the museum? To break out of the four walls with projects? To crowdfund or crowdsource exhibits or other projects?”⁴ By engaging with social media, museums can transcend “into a world of interactive education and user generated content,”⁵ which is a useful tool by which museums can generate feedback on exhibitions, programming, and events. Permitting social media users to interact with a museum’s post gives voice to the public. Visitors can ask questions and provide feedback about the museum, and the museum can respond in real time.⁶ Social media followers can actively participate in an open dialog with a museum, a goal that was hard to accomplish prior to the advent of social media.

Often museums turn to platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr because they are effective at conveying concise messages and can be accompanied by images that can quickly attract a viewer’s attention. Blogging, Wikis, and other long-form platforms can be equally appealing, though for different reasons. Long-form social media can market the museum in ways that other social media platforms cannot, including those with news feeds that require shorter entries. “A well-written, engaging blog has the potential to build relationships by bringing readers back to your site repeatedly, to enhance your museum’s educational program, to pique interest in current and future projects, and generally to meet museums’ mission to stimulate new thought.”⁷ Blogs are effective for an audience that is familiar with the institution, or have academic or personal interests in the subject matter discussed. However, museums may find that blogs are not the best method to attract people to visit the collection, a special exhibition, an educational program, or an event. When it comes to meeting these needs, museums will use short-form media platforms to get a message across quickly and effectively. Simply put, long-form media requires more time and effort on the part of the visitor.

Time constraints and competition for attention have forced museums to communicate in a concise manner with the public. Institutions now take advantage of opportunities to grab attention and to be effective in the ways they communicate. That is why institutions are now turning to platforms that rely heavily on visuals, as a short video or an interesting image can communicate as effectively as a blog entry. Facebook, for example, brings the best of both

short-form and long-form communication into a concise platform with which the public can engage. Facebook can be an advantageous tool for cultural institutions that wish to get to know their audience better.⁸ Museums can easily post status updates to Facebook that appear on followers' news feeds, can create photo albums to show their collections and to tag visitors who have attended events, and museums can share videos or write blog entries that the public can comment on or share with others. While it is an unscientific approach, the institution can informally gauge their Facebook followers' interests. Analyzing individuals' public comments, or the number of times a Facebook post has been 'shared' or 'liked' demonstrates a museum's success at engaging followers via this platform. Further, the Facebook page provides demographic breakdowns of individuals who engage online, such as gender and age. This is valuable information for the institution to have because it can tell them who is likely coming to the museum, and more importantly, who is not.⁹

One museum's successful social media strategy to reach and engage their intended audience may not be successful for another, as each institution will have its own priorities and challenges. The platforms chosen and the ways in which these platforms are used varies greatly depending on an institution's desired goals. Even if an institution begins with an extensive and ambitious social media strategy, through trial and error the museum may alter course. The Brooklyn Museum (New York), located in one of the cultural capitals of the world, faces heavy competition for visitor outreach. As a result, the museum attempted to implement a social media strategy that would expand their audience globally. After struggling to meet their goals, the Brooklyn Museum's social media team reevaluated their social media strategy.¹⁰ The team began to focus their efforts on local outreach and to build upon the diverse aspects of their museum. Their decision to close many of their digital platforms, such as Flickr, was seen as controversial in the museum world and prompted discussion about the value and impact of social media on other museums. Now the Brooklyn Museum uses the internet to highlight local Brooklyn artists, taking visitors on a virtual tour through the artists' studios, which has proven to be a very successful program in terms of visitor attendance and satisfaction.

Some large and renowned cultural institutions are using social media to expand upon their image as prestigious organizations. The Met, for example, has social media accounts with large numbers of followers. While the Met receives approximately 6 million physical visits a year, the museum's website receives approximately 29 million visits, and its Facebook page reaches over 92 million people.¹¹ The Met's Facebook page frequently highlights parts of its collection linking visitors to the "Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History" on the museum's website. This feature is an unprecedented educational tool that leads visitors through a chronological tour of the museum's collections with accompanying essays and it accounts for roughly one-third of the museum's web traffic.¹² The Met has also developed a visually enticing and linguistically accessible digital gallery, "One Met. Many Worlds," that allows worldwide visitors to interact online with works from the museum's collection. The Met is finding ways to reach new audiences that are unable to visit the museum in person and give these individuals the opportunity to enjoy the collections the museum offers. However, making the collections accessible to so many people is complicated and does not come without sacrifices. "The values of virality in this Buzzfeedian age and the values of traditional museum curating are, to put it tenderly, different values."¹³ The Met's digital team faces the challenge of balancing the values of education with accessibility, often questioning how to

present material in an approachable way without “watering down the scholarship.”¹⁴ This is not a new struggle in the museum industry, which for decades has sought to break down the idea of cultural institutions being reserved for the elite. The new dimension of social media increases a museum’s responsibility to be inclusive and relatable.

Discussion regarding social media usage in cultural institutions often focuses on museums with large and significant permanent collections. However, smaller institutions, including local heritage sites, can arguably gain more than larger organizations by having a significant online presence. Because smaller museums are often only known on a local scale, the museums can benefit from having an active Facebook or Twitter account to regularly post about exhibitions, events, and educational programs in order to attract wider audiences. Many times even local residents are unaware of their town’s heritage sites and smaller museums. Social media can aid in strengthening community identity and awareness in these situations. Bexley Heritage Trust, developed in 2000 to promote the London borough’s cultural heritage, manages two historic houses with two separate Facebook pages to represent the different identities of each house. According to Sarah Humphris, a Public Relations and Media manager at Bexley Heritage Trust, the social media posts range from “observations about the weather to celebrity spotting, historic facts, linking with other organisations, local wildlife and Friday fun in the office!”¹⁵ For this local organization that manages Hall Place and Danson House, a Tudor house and Georgian mansion respectively, social media is valuable for connecting to the local community about things beyond the museum collections. Focusing on community and pride in local history gives the Bexley Heritage Trust a loyal following. Humphris adds that the Trust does not focus on social media statistics that Facebook provides because their social media posts do not particularly align with the Trust’s mission, saying that she “can appreciate the value of this for larger organisations, but in our case, concentrating on regularly sharing our news with great imagery, replying to people as soon as we can and increasing the size of the online audience works for us.”¹⁶ While larger institutions rely on statistics to drive their social media strategies, smaller organizations might not have the time or resources to concentrate solely on numbers. Instead, smaller museums can build rapport with their local communities and amplify their audiences by marketing events, education programs, and more to other localities.

Museums are encouraged to take advantage of social media because of its ability to reach a multitude of people in an instant, and the general goal for the majority of museums is to get people through their doors. The desired number of visitors varies by institution, but it is valuable for a museum to have consistent visitors who enable the organization to remain in existence. No matter the type of museum, each seeks to keep up with technology. This can be a tremendous cost for institutions, both figuratively and literally, even for those that are financially well endowed. For some museums, the cost of competing against other institutions that use the latest social media platforms and create highly interactive elements is too high. Sometimes maintaining a Facebook or Twitter account to keep in touch with visitors is enough, or having a Tumblr or Flickr page where visitors can upload their own content is more important than having an interactive online catalog sharing works from the collection. Regardless of how an institution utilizes social media, it is becoming increasingly apparent how important any social media presence is to museums, heritage sites, and other cultural institutions. Social media has undeniably changed the way in which such institutions

function, and has changed how each interacts with its audiences. While there have been concerns that the digital element diminishes the necessity of having physical institutions, evidence suggests otherwise. Social media continually breaks down barriers between institutions and visitors. Additionally, social media strengthens the public voice, enabling people to be a part of the institution's history. Utilizing social media to engage in conversation with the public helps museums to shift from groups they have traditionally attracted to develop new audiences. Thus, it is mutually beneficial to the institution and their audience to keep the conversation going.¹⁷

Notes

¹ Jeff Gates, "Clearing the Path for Sisyphus: How Social Media is Changing Our Jobs and Our Working Relationships," in *Conversations with Visitors: Social Media in Museums* ed. MuseumsEtc Ltd. (Hudson House, Edinburgh, 2012), 94.

² Anand Giridharadas, "Museums See Different Virtues in Different Worlds," *New York Times*, August 7, 2014.

³ Zoe Fox, "5 Ways Museums Are Reaching Digital Audiences," *Mashable*, August 11, 2011.

⁴ Elizabeth Stewart, "Developing A Social Media Strategy," in *Conversations with Visitors: Social Media in Museums* ed. MuseumsEtc Ltd. (Hudson House, Edinburgh, 2012), 15.

⁵ Fox, "5 Ways Museums."

⁶ Carol Vogel, "The Spirit of Sharing," *New York Times*, March 16, 2011.

⁷ Stewart, "Developing A Social Media Strategy," 17.

⁸ Chern L. Liew, "Participatory Cultural Heritage: A Tale of Two Institutions' Use of Social Media," *D-Lib Magazine* 20: 3/4 (2014).

⁹ Stewart, "Developing A Social Media Strategy," 19.

¹⁰ Giridharadas, "Museums See Different Virtues."

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Sarah Humphries, "Facebook: how it works for us, from the perspective of a small heritage organisation," last modified December 3, 2013.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Jeff Gates, "Clearing the Path for Sisyphus," 95.

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