

# **Multimedia Narratives: co-production between museums and their audiences**

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In this paper I want to briefly talk about the increasing trend within museums for using new digital media technologies to engage members of the public as participants in the patterns and processes of representation. Starting with an overview of the ways in which models for communication are being redefined I will go on to talk specifically about what the implications might be for the museum.

It is generally acknowledged that we are experiencing a shift towards multi-directional, many-to-many communication, with the result being a system (or indeed systems) modelled upon the conversation rather than the lecture; dialogic, supposedly democratic, and free of barriers to entry (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2001; Bowman & Willis, 2004; Gillmor, 2006). The philosophy (and binary function) behind new media technologies has enabled limitless creative exploration of the notions of 'producer' and 'consumer'. As a result perhaps, legitimacy no longer resides solely with the (predominantly white, Western, male) 'producers of knowledge', but circulates throughout society. This of course presents a challenge to those institutions whose responsibility it falls upon to teach, represent, and reflect upon the things that continue to speak and contribute to who we are both personally and in the collective.

Museums have long assumed the role of (unquestioned) curators and exhibitors of an objective, knowable, tangible 'truth' (see Crane, 2000). However, the new museology movement has sought to problematise the assumptions of this position, confronting it with the multitude of narratives which we now recognise as comprising 'truth' in actuality. This movement, which began in the 1970s, was very much characterised by a new reflexivity in museum practice (Ross, 2004), and a recognition of visitors as active meaning-makers. As Burton and Scott said in 2003, 'the visitor is recognised as bringing a lived reality to the museum experience rather than the morally and intellectually blank slate assumed by museums in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries' (Burton & Scott, 2003). Thus, museum output, including research and curatorial responsibility, has become increasingly about dialogue with the communities a Museum serves (and also, of course, those communities *not* being served). 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<sup>i</sup>, 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.<sup>ii</sup>

The original cabinet of curiosity served as a frame for the presentation of that which constituted the 'spectacular'. This notion of the spectacular has, in more recent years, proved to problematise institutional purpose, leading to much debate not only about how we represent cultures other to our own, but which aspects of our own culture have been ascribed value. The new museology movement however meant a step toward realising the everyday truth of the 'ordinary' as 'intrinsically interesting' in itself (a phrase coined by Richard Hoggart in discussion of the 'ordinary' in cultural studies, 1957: 120). As a consequence of this, and alongside the more recent recognition of intangible (and even e-tangible) heritages, there has been a shift toward what Tony Bennett calls 'representational adequacy' or 'parity of representation for all groups and cultures' within the various different activities of the museum; 'collecting, exhibition and conservation' (Bennett, 1995: 9). Also there has been an appreciation that there are perhaps no grand narratives of truth about the world (see also Hooper-Greenhill, 2000).

In the closing decades of the 20th Century, there was evident a concern within 'the media' and other cultural institutions with the narration of previously unvoiced lives and stories. As a part of this practice, supposedly democratic media formats have increasingly been utilised as means of engaging new communities in 'conversations' and demonstrating responsiveness and accountability; essentially, beginning to fill the gaps. The movements associated with the 'new museology' and 'user-generated content' (for example), are touted as spearheading a radical overhaul of the ways in which we collect, value, filter and appropriate personal and communal memories, and new media is a central tenet of both movements. In order to make their offering unique and relevant, cultural institutions have to speak and listen to as many individuals, groups and communities as is possible; and this is where we see the increased employment of new media. Some might call this an exercise in democracy, others, a way to put ticks in boxes. What emerges is not only the prospect of dialogue between institutions and their 'users', but also the possibility for co-production.

Not surprisingly, increasing reference to co-production sits quite comfortably alongside the increased currency of new media projects 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 co-production (at least in the rhetoric). Riverside Museum in Glasgow for example has a Community Panel, an Education Panel, an Access Panel, a Teen Panel and a Junior Panel. Of course there is within this debate an emphasis not only on the need for communities to be involved in decisions pertaining to the look and feel of institutions, but a similar concern that museums should be visibly and actively invested in the growth of sustainable communities. New media is increasingly being seen as a means of canvassing opinion, getting people involved in decision making processes, and enabling them to feed back on their experience of the museum offering. See for example websites for the Manchester Museum, the National Galleries of Justice (NCCL), Plymouth Museum and Art Gallery, Norfolk Museums and Archaeology Service, The Lynn Museum Consultation Project (2006-2008), Slough Museum's *Community Curators* project and Fitzwilliam Museum's *African Gallery Project* (providing online access to collections for prisoners in conjunction with those prisoners).

Alongside this trend for co-production, there is also a recent glut of projects using new media in order to voice the stories and interpretations of members of the public - these do not represent co-production necessarily, but are more participatory in spirit. That is, rather than having control over the look, feel and outcomes of a project, members of the public become involved as *participants* whose opinions and interpretations (or so it appears) are of particular value to that project and its outcomes. Such projects are now collecting a wealth of information (or data) that represents a yet to be explored (or I suspect exploited) value in terms of source materials. Examples include the Museum of London's *Belonging* project (voices of London refugees), Manchester Museum's *Collective Conversations* project (where members of local community groups re-interpret objects from the museum archive), Luton Museums Service's *Luton Voices* project, the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum's *Queering Coventry* project, Bristol Museums, Galleries and Archives Service's *Bristol Stories* and the Royal Armouries' *Memories* project.

Both of these forms of endeavour, co-production and participation, according to (James) Bradburne, 'signals a far-reaching and courageous re-examination of the museum's 'top-down' role' (Bradburne, 2000: 387).

My worry is that whatever the intentions at the sharp end of such projects, notions of professionalism, a desire to put ticks in boxes, attitudes toward 'user-generated-content' (as it's often called), and instilling feelings of privilege amongst those who take part, mean that contributions – ultimately – will be undervalued. Is being seen to be involved in this kind of

activity the end-goal in itself? What happens to the wealth of information (in a wealth of formats) that is being captured (or created)? With digital media meaning that much of this activity is free to trial, and with everything seeming so very possible, does it automatically follow that it should be done? The outcomes of these projects are messy, the voices that come through may be dissenting; once we turn our audiences and users into producers, what happens if we do not like or value (in traditional artistic or curatorial terms) what they create? I am not convinced that the museum sector is ready for the challenge to its authority that this project necessitates.

## *Bibliography*

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Vergo, 1993

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<sup>i</sup> As recognised by Delingpole, 2006 and also Vergo, 1993 who said: 'In the acquisition of material, of whatever kind, let alone in putting that material on public display or making it publicly accessible, museums make certain choices determined by judgements as to value, significance or monetary worth, judgements which may derive in part from the system of values peculiar to the institution itself, but which in a more profound sense are also rooted in our education, our upbringing, our prejudices' (Vergo 1993: 2).

<sup>ii</sup> The historical development of the Museum – architecture, patronage, form and function - is detailed in Tony Bennett's 'The Birth of The Museum'. See also Hooper-Greenhill, 2000.