All change please: your museum and audiences online

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It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single museum in possession of a good collection, must be in want of online audiences (as Jane Austen never said). It is now axiomatic that a museum’s online presence is distributed across its websites and social media. Audiences encounter a museum both through its formal marketing campaigns and outreach, and in the informal conversations others have about it.

In 2010, the Nielsen Company declared that one in every four and a half minutes online in the UK was spent on social networks and blogs, an increase of 340% in absolute terms from 2007. Reporting on the same study, UKOM stated that the top 20 brands had a 49% share of online time (including web and applications). According to Hitwise, 2010 also marked the first moment that social networks received more UK Internet visits than search engines. The rate of change is astounding, but also absolutely familiar - YouTube was created in 2005, Facebook was opened to non-students in 2006 and overtook former leader MySpace in 2008.

Audience expectations are constantly changing and innovation in design is expected by critics, yet museums are tasked with delivering quality content to those at all levels of technical capabilities and specialist knowledge. How will museums cope in an era when it has never been easier and yet paradoxically more challenging to engage with audiences? How should museums incorporate online audience engagement into the quotidian life of the organisation? How can museums make the right decisions for projects when the delivery date may be several years in the future?

This chapter presents a framework for choosing the most appropriate technologies and platforms for a museum's digital project by exploring its goals, audiences and content. The chapter also provides prompts to prepare for the resultant changed relationships between museums and their audiences and examines some organisational issues that impact on museum teams when implementing digital projects. Finally, it looks at some ways in which digital projects in museums can succeed despite these constantly-changing organisational and technical challenges.

A decision framework for digital projects

The following framework is designed to help museum staff explore the issues around technology and platform decisions for digital projects, and to understand how to weigh various factors against the requirements of their projects. It
includes sample questions about audiences, content and organisational goals for online projects. The responses will help discover the relationship that audiences could have with a museum’s content, with each other and with the museum itself. In turn, focusing on the types of social and functional interactions desired will determine particular choices about the website and interaction metaphors suitable for the project.

These questions should be tailored for your own use, and updated over time as new social networks and interactions styles rise, fall and plateau across the 'hype cycle', allowing the characteristics of each to become settled. Questions for a specific project might come from a review of past digitisation projects, from talking to front of house, education and marketing staff (who are already in close contact with possible audiences), from an analysis of similar websites, or from your own experience of social media and websites. Each online platform, design genre and interaction metaphor will carry particular associations and expectations about the types of content and interactions it supports and the levels of on-going moderation or responsiveness required, though these may vary by audience.

Decisions about technical tools and infrastructure are only as good as a museum’s ability to understand the technological and social contexts which their audiences currently inhabit, and some of the questions may seem rather daunting, but by involving staff from a range of disciplines in the project’s earliest scoping stages, you gain a greater variety of perspectives and produce a wider range of possible solutions. For example, most museums contain people who spend their days talking to audiences and watching them interact with exhibits and interpretative content – observations that can help bridge the gap between the physical and online audience experience. Similarly, museum technologists are not merely passive conduits in the online publication process but often have skills, expertise and experience that can profoundly shape and improve the delivery of services.

**Goals**

What does your organisation want to get out of this project? How does this particular mode of access relate to your overall mission? What resources are available during the content development and technical implementation phases, and on an on-going basis? Is funding time-limited, or does it require on-going core-funded resources for long-term success? What’s your appetite or capacity for risk? How will you recognise success? How would you alleviate failure? How well do your metrics match those set by the project funders or sponsors? Can you measure a positive engagement and long-term impact or merely register a site visit? How will content and functionality be archived? How sustainable is the infrastructure? What’s your ‘exit strategy’ in case of the failure of commercial or public partners? Which existing standards and technologies can you use? How can you enable re-use of the museum- or user-generated content, with clear rights statements and with programatically re-usable data? Can you re-use existing data produced by other organisations, or partner with others in the same field or aiming at the same audiences? Can you publicly reflect on the lessons you’ll learn during this project, to share both successes and failures?
How open are you to learning from your audience? Is this really a digital project or are you just following a trend?

**Audiences**
Where do your audiences already congregate online? How will they discover your content? What physical or digital metaphors are they already familiar with from the physical world or other sites? Should the project integrate with their physical experience of the museum or exhibition? Are they experts or novices? How will they negotiate issues of authority and trust? How will they engage with the content? Will they contribute to your own knowledge? If audiences are to create or share content, is it specialist material, reminiscence, a simple “I like it/I’ve got one of those”, a creative response or a challenge? Will their questions require a researched response or a simple acknowledgement? Do members of your audience have any particular accessibility or inclusive design requirements, whether access to affordable technology and broadband or physical accessibility?

**Content**
What will draw audiences to your website, given the mass of content available elsewhere on the internet? What types of content are you planning to produce – how many levels of interpretation and narrative, in what media, from which sources? Is your content modelled on museum traditions - wall captions, learning objectives, live tours, traditional museum models or something drawn from more general forms – books, television, film, social media, debates? Who creates the content – the organisation, the audience? Should the site provide for collaboration or comment? How much room is there for audiences to make their own meaning? Can audiences augment or edit museum content? How much authority can the museum share with audiences while remaining a trustworthy resource? Can content created be re-used outside the project? How much context and knowledge from the audience is required to engage with the topic, theory or object?

**Pre-launch reality check for participatory projects**
Before embarking on your digital project, take some time to look ahead and double-check that your plans are both viable and appropriate. Set aside time, ideally with someone who hasn’t been directly involved in the project design, to run through possible future scenarios of all shapes and sizes, from your project going 'viral' to getting no (or negative) responses. Allocating time for moderation and community engagement from staff before launch can be problematic - it is inherently difficult to predict which projects will attract audiences and how consistent that attention will be.

If you can’t provide on-going resources for a participatory project, think hard about the possible damage to relationships with audiences that asking for engagement then not responding might cause. Expectation management about response times is important. Simon (2010) points out that “[w]hen participants contribute to institutions, they want to see their work integrated in a timely, attractive, respectful way. Too many participatory projects have broken feedback loops”. A greater offence is to ask for constructive responses without the ability or will to value the resulting work by audiences. The recent failure of
decisions are made during the process of interpreting print branding or designs for digital contexts. Interaction design requires decisions about movement within and between pages in response to user actions. Content management system and social media-driven sites must also be able to deal with dynamic content of variable lengths and granularity. In these cases, organisational consensus is required about how these decisions are validated and reviewed against the original designs and the requirements of the digital medium.

One particular challenge for museum projects is the futility of focusing on specific technological implementations too early in the specification or design process when the audience-facing deliverables and technological platform are still subject to (r)evolutionary changes before the project is delivered. Robust infrastructures, interoperable standards and a separation of presentation and application logic can help build ‘future resistant’ (if not ‘future proof’) projects. Ideally, project leaders should be encouraged to pitch the project goal, not the implementation method, to funders or sponsors, who would ideally apply appropriate metrics in response. Because online interaction metaphors, interface designs and audience expectations may change over the 3 to 5 year life cycle of a typical museum project, metrics that provide both flexibility and accountability provide the best chance of acceptance and uptake by the target audience and overall project success.

Museums should also plan and provide resources and time for post-launch or later improvements in response to user testing and as the online context around the ‘finished’ project changes. As Chan (2008) says: “the ’research it, build it, launch it, move on’ model that museum Web teams have inherited organisationally from the exhibition focus of museums in the physical world […] prevents museum Web teams from developing the necessary agility required to respond to rapidly changing on-line audience behaviours and expectations, and quickly leads to a sub-optimal on-line experience for users”.

Living with participatory projects and social media
The project framework questions may have already signalled the extent to which online projects may disrupt existing museum practice, and the demands they can make on existing processes, infrastructure and staff.

When discussing participatory projects, Simon (2010) says an institution "should thank visitors immediately upon participating, even if their content will now go
into a holding pattern”. The same process should apply when dealing with visitor questions or complaints online - your social media communicators may not have the authority to deal directly with complaints, but they can acknowledge them and thank the visitor for bringing it to their attention for investigation. The advantage of a respected social media presence is that audiences may be more willing to put up with the delays involved in chasing an answer down through several departments and layers of approval if you are able to be transparent about process and inform them of progress as necessary.

Authority 2.0?
Museum staff have always spoken in public and semi-public contexts such as lectures and journals while identifiable as museum staff, but the consequences of the new visibility and potential de-contextualising of this activity through social media are still becoming apparent. Concurrently, museums such as the Tate are aiming to "become more porous though a move to the emergence of individuals within Tate expressing their views and engaging directly with audiences" (Stack, 2010). Antenna, the UK Science Museum’s contemporary science news gallery, lists the first name of staff members on their articles and on-site interactions to help audiences identify individual voices without providing too much personally identifiable information about employees.

The challenge of distributed authority and the dissolution of the 'official' museum voice requires clear guidelines so staff know when they can respond directly to audiences and when they should seek further guidance. Consider running a workshop so staff can run through various scenarios, testing stated policies against examples, and using the resulting discussion to create shared understanding of approaches and most appropriate actions. Taking part in events like the online 'ask a curator' day may help establish robust teamwork in a forgiving environment, and 'bring your own lunch' meetings can provide an informal forum for staff interested in sharing ideas, research and experience with digital projects.

'The only constant is change'
Dealing with constant change, particularly when resources are limited, means maximising the effectiveness of existing resources. This may include optimising working practices, valuing the centuries of experience in the collective of staff, encouraging creativity and forgiving intelligent failures. Encouraging staff who can act as audience advocates is also important.

In digital teams, keeping up also means providing room for experimentation. Google's famous 20% time for experimental projects may not be within reach but quarterly 'hack days' are manageable. Hack days are events (usually over 24 or 48 hours) where people gather to hear inspirational talks, share ideas and hopefully build something during the event - usually a web application. Not limited to technical teams, hack days provide an opportunity for content and design teams to work with education and curatorial staff alongside programmers.
Avoiding 'shiny toy' syndrome

Over the past decade, museums have learnt the hard way that lengthy, resource-intensive projects should not be lead by the desire to experiment with a new technology if there isn’t also a demonstrable existing or potential audience need. Experimental projects should be balanced between the opportunity cost of not experimenting and the level of risk the museum will accept in that context. For many museums, promoting beta, let alone alpha, projects to their audiences may provide a challenge. The UK National Archives have established a 'Lab' site (http://labs.nationalarchives.gov.uk/) as 'a test area for you to try out our new ideas without affecting the main website' and that may provide a good model for museums practicing increased transparency and experimenting with the ability to learn with the public.

Drink your own champagne

Providing access to, and increasing the visibility of the conversations and content created around your museum, is important for the success of social media projects. A central page listing your presence on all relevant social media sites helps visitors discover them while also providing evidence of the authenticity of official accounts. Some museums include content from their social media feeds on their main website, and even better, on their intranet. Born-digital content such as Facebook comments, tweets, images or emails make it easy to share visitors comments and dialogue with non-customer facing staff. This ability to show content providers the impact of their work is exciting, and it can also help departments learn about each others work.

Museums should provide staff with access to the tools they are expected to understand and those that are used by their audiences. Ensure you have clear guidelines for staff using social media but also be aware that as sites such as Facebook engineer the collapse of the divisions between professional and private identities, it may be difficult for employees to say anything online that could not be linked to their employer in some way. As these problems are not unique to museums, other organisation's social media policies may prove useful.

Working smarter

A survey of the challenges experienced by museum technologists (78 respondents) conducted as research for this chapter revealed that many felt frustration caused by poorly defined or unrealistic objectives, the inability to influence projects, a lack of understanding of the digital domain by other staff members, sub-optimal leadership, a lack of strategy and planning, issues with IT service provision, bureaucracy, and the undervaluing of their domain expertise. Lack of staff was felt both as a lack of resources and a lack of peer interaction; this may also be related to frustration about the difficulties of experimenting with new technologies.

In order to manage the scale and pace of change involved in web projects, many museums have implemented lightweight agile software methodologies. These agile frameworks for web projects must be responsive to the methodologies used in the wider larger organisation - for example, agile sprints can run within a larger PRINCE2-style project, but expectations around levels of documentation, up-front specification must be negotiated. Explaining these methods may take
patience and some trial and error on all sides. It is best to experiment with pure web projects, or with experienced contractors or consultants, before integrating with larger, more traditional projects.

Discussing the use of agile methodologies to cope with constant change, Burnette et al (2009) said: "[g]iven how quickly technology changes, we have entered a new era in which we will always be in a redesign! And as new social media sites are integrated into our daily workflow, our sites need to expand and relate to those unforeseen initiatives that contribute to our comprehensive on-line presence".

Inviting a wide selection of staff to participate in the initial stages of the project design process is a good way to discover reusable resources, bring to light any internal duplications or conflicts, and to 'reality check' your idea against organisational mission and operational reality. It also helps unlock the innovation and expertise that already exists within the organisation.

Conclusion
In a rapidly changing environment, creating excellent digital projects requires comprehensive planning, an understanding of the audiences, goals and content, a modicum of luck, and flexibility in implementation. The opportunity to learn how to tell great stories to receptive audiences through museum content is both a privilege and a lot of fun - enjoy!

References


