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Is Your Community Better Off Because it has a Museum? Final Thoughts About Participatory Culture (part III)

Department: Research, Technology, and Engagement | By [Rob Stein](#) | [10 Comments »](#)

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In the first two posts of this series we examined some of the [challenges and opportunities for museums and libraries](#) in an era of participatory culture, and also highlighted a few of the [more pressing questions](#) that popped up in discussion among colleagues during a recent meeting at the [Salzburg Global Seminar](#).

In a gathering that could ostensibly have been about how technology and social media have changed the landscape of museum practice, I was so thrilled to find that almost all of our discussion focused on how museums and libraries can make significant and lasting changes in our local communities. Working in a museum, I've taken that as my context, but many of these issues have important corollaries in libraries as well.

Perhaps the most useful change in my own thinking is an understanding that the era of participatory culture is not a new thing, but rather – enhanced by recent trends in technology – one that has its roots in the very reasons why museums exist in the first place. While technology, social media, and mobile adoption influence the ways that we engage museum audiences and the expectations they bring into the museum, an attitude that invites participation has the potential to transform individual and community experiences that enhance the public value of the work we do.

Why is your community better off because it has a museum?

I'm challenged by the courage and convictions of colleagues I met in Salzburg, who take a commitment to their local community very seriously. Whether helping neighbors recover from devastating storms in the Philippines, reaching out to the homeless and poor communities in Sao Paulo, or bringing libraries to rural Kenya on the backs of camels, I found myself inspired to think about how a museum in Indianapolis can learn from such tangible demonstrations of public value.

In his book "Making Museums Matter," Stephen Weil talked about a mandate for museums to demonstrate real value within our communities:

"Why is your community better off because it has a museum? [The answer] must necessarily be something more than, because otherwise it wouldn't. Museums matter only to the extent that they are perceived to provide the communities they serve something of value beyond their own mere existence."

This topic surfaced repeatedly during the conversations about participatory culture in Salzburg. The consensus among the group coalesced in an assertion that museums have an inherent mission to deliver public value driven by a universal right to cultural access.

The Occupy Museums protests demonstrate a growing frustration with the way museums see their role in today's society

It is clear to me that although museums have long enjoyed a privileged place in the public's confidence, societal and economic changes, as well as the public's expectation of museums, have significantly augmented the landscape of public value. New questions about what constitutes public value and who sees the benefits of that value need to be considered seriously by those museums that want to see real impact from their effort. Lest we think that the value of museums is secure, the nascent "occupy museums" movement reminds us that a growing frustration exists with the way museums think about their role in society.

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The real test for public value is not what the museum says it is, but rather the value attributed to us by our communities and stakeholders. Simply declaring that the museum is valuable isn't a substitute for actually demonstrating that value on a consistent basis.

At the heart of the issue is the museum community's willingness to take a harsh look in the mirror and ask hard questions about whether or not we actually do a good job of bringing value to our constituents. In my opinion, a more wholehearted embrace of participatory culture may be the tonic we need to really delve into the ways that museums can change their current practice. To realize the benefits of participatory culture will require an openness to welcome new opinions about the museum.

Serhan Ada, from Istanbul Bilgi University had a wonderful way of framing the difference. He notes that, *"Participation occurs when someone welcomed as a guest feels as though they have become a host."* Are visitors to your museum truly guests in this sense? Perhaps the benefits of participatory culture are most easily witnessed with such a shared sense of ownership.

Access is about more than just digitization

When museums talk about access, we typically mean one of two kinds of accessibility: 1) The digital availability of collection objects with correct metadata and quality digital imaging, and 2) a set of provisions to accessing collections for those with physical or cognitive disabilities. Throughout the conversation in Salzburg, I was repeatedly struck by the fact that my own ideas about access are too small.

As we developed the concept more completely, it was clear to me that a truly accessible museum will provide appropriate and comprehensive support to the physical, intellectual, and attitudinal facets of a museum visit that allows guests to engage most successfully. Of these facets, the attitudinal changes in museums seem to be the most challenging. As we discussed in the previous blog posts, are museums really ready to embrace and value the inclusion of all audiences?

In Brazil, Gabriela Aidar works with the Pinacoteca do Estado de Sao Paulo in the museum's department of social inclusion. Rather than focusing only on those audiences the museum is already successful at reaching, Gabriela decided to pursue so-called "non-audiences" who are typically marginalized by museums and therefore miss out on the rich cultural offerings contained there. During her presentation in Salzburg, Gabriela highlighted a number of quotes that really piqued my thinking. First, from Annamari Laaksonen of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies:

"Participation in cultural activities, together with access to them, forms the backbone of human rights pertaining to culture. Access is a precondition for participation and participation is indispensable to ensure the exercising of human rights."

Laaksonen, Annamari, *Revista Observatório Itaú Cultural*, n.11 (jan./apr.2011). São Paulo, SP: Itaú Cultural, 2011, pg. 50.

Furthermore, Gabriela points to Mark O'Neill who states that:

"... any organization that is not working to break down barriers to access is actively maintaining them. Neutrality is not possible."(p. 34)

and

"If social inclusion means anything, it means actively seeking out and removing barriers, of acknowledging that people who have been left out for generations need additional support in a whole variety of ways to enable them to exercise their rights to participate in many of the facilities that the better off and better educated take for granted."(p. 37)

O'Neill, Mark, "The good enough visitor". In: Sandell, Richard (ed.) *Museums, society, inequality*. London & New York: Routledge, 2002, p. 37.

These points have really challenged my own thinking about how museums seek and pursue our local audiences. I think it's true that there are whole segments of individuals that don't feel the same right to access the museum as those of us among the "better off and better educated." There's frequent coverage in the press about the consequences of a widening "technology gap," but is there also a corresponding "culture gap" that carries many of the same consequences? Much of the beauty and power of museums lies in their ability to level the playing fields of society and to offer a place for discourse and exchange with diverse audiences. Sadly, much of this potential beauty is latent and waiting to be activated by museums with a vision to change the status quo.

The changing role of Authority

All this talk about participatory culture eventually ends up begging an important question about how the changes we are witnessing will eventually impact the role and authority of museums. The care and creation of knowledge has always been an important part of the mission of museums, and continues to be so. However, with today's ubiquitous access to information that is afforded by the web, museums are keenly

aware that we are not the only producers of content related to our own collections, and many times not even the best source of content. Perhaps this has always been true, but technical advances are only highlighting a reality that has long been hidden. In any case, museums are struggling to understand their relationship to an ecosystem of information that sometimes defies categorization and authority.

While discrete sources of information seem to be ever expanding, it's reasonable to assert that unique and high-quality sources are becoming relatively more scarce. In an information landscape that privileges the popular over the credible, low-circulation-high-quality results can be easily lost. Couple this idea with what's been written about the state of digital media literacy and critical thinking skills among the general public and you quickly see the problem. While it's never been easier to discover a diverse variety of information about virtually any topic, discriminating quality between those sources is becoming more and more difficult.

This is – in my opinion – is where content specialists in museums can play an important part. Reference librarians are specifically trained in how to support researchers and scholars who dig through a litany of resources to find the information they need. These skills transfer directly into a similar role for information-seeking on the internet. The principles and practice remain the same, even though some of the tools may be different. Museums would be well served to include their library staff as consultants to efforts of web design and information delivery both online and in the galleries, as they are perhaps better equipped than most staff to make sense of such a diversity of source material.

Secondly, as the true content experts in the museum, curators have an incredibly significant role to play in connecting both scholars and the general audience with the important concepts, facts, and narratives that drive the mission of the museum. With their knowledge of primary sources and their expertise with the museum's collection, curators can be an incredible facilitator for the audience, especially when well supported by an enthusiastic staff of educators.

On the surface, this doesn't seem terribly different than the standard operating procedure for museums. The difference, however, lies in an attitudinal shift among museum staff concerning an approach to authority as it relates to participatory culture. An authoritarian approach requires the museum to assert its authority by definition and then leaves us scratching our heads when the crowd of followers starts to thin. Conversely, an authoritative approach demonstrates the expertise of the museum's staff in a participatory context that recognizes the museum's role in facilitating access to cultural objects and information. The difference between authoritarian and authoritative is subtle, but crucial. In the latter case, authority is ascribed to the museum by the audience, and not the other way around. You may notice that this is similar to the earlier assertions about public value. In both cases, the audience is the central determiner of value, but the museum is responsible for building an appreciation for cultural access and preservation.

Final thoughts

The shifts in our culture that result from a technology and information surge are pervasive and persistent. A rise in participatory expectations among communities around the world offers a variety of opportunities and challenges for museums to deal with. I'm hopeful that the conversations spurred by the Salzburg Global Seminar and the online conversations concerning these issues will prove as challenging for you as they have for me. Museums and libraries are home to the best stories the world has to offer, how we determine to manage, share, and cultivate those stories will determine the relevance and value we bring to the public in years to come.



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10 Responses to "Is Your Community Better Off Because it has a Museum? Final Thoughts About Participatory Culture (part III)"



Paula Says:

November 3rd, 2011 at 3:41 pm

Bravo, Rob!! Well said.



Seb Chan Says:

November 3rd, 2011 at 10:25 pm

Great post and one that I hope keeps these value conversations going.

I always find it helpful to remember that public value isn't *only* our responsibility. We operate in an ecosystem of other cultural attractions, educational experiences, and public media – and many of these, too, have a public value mission.

That doesn't let us off the hook but instead compels us to work collaboratively and collectively across sectors and institutions – opportunities which have only increased and expanded as a result of digital technologies.

I find great hope that this is possible at the big end of town when institutions like the British Museum collaborate with the BBC and then hundreds of local museums, historical societies, and heritage sites to deliver [A History of the World](#). Or when, in Australia, the ABC delivers [ABC Open](#) for connecting stories from regional communities. Possibly even in the work we've done at the Powerhouse working with regional communities and volunteers to create the [Australian Dress Register](#) to create and hold 'museum-standard' documentation of public and privately held colonial costume of significance to communities.

There are many other examples, of course, and the challenge for museum executives and boards now is to look beyond their own institutional brand and see how their institutions are explicitly part of a much bigger cultural project.

Seb Chan

<http://www.freshandnew.org>



Susan Says:

November 4th, 2011 at 2:21 am

Rob – beautifully written and spot on!

I was struck in Salzburg from many of our auspicious colleagues at the seminar by the idea that participation starts in the home – that is when leadership calls to the staff to actively participate in the institutional vision and agenda this has a snowball effect that draws in the community and subsequently the clients (to use the Zehava Doering connotation) to effect a resonance of participation at all levels.

Thanks for your blog post and keeping our conversations going !



Liz Says:

November 4th, 2011 at 8:46 am

Great post, Rob. It made me think about parallels in re-imagining education in terms of authority and active participation. I wonder if we can learn anything from research in that field. How to shift in a

meaningful way is such a challenge.



[Rob Stein](#) Says:

[November 4th, 2011 at 9:56 am](#)

Good points Seb, I agree that a go-it-alone approach here won't likely succeed. Good to remember that there are lots of other places invested in the success of these efforts. The Powerhouse has been a wonderful example of this over the years. I like thinking about the ecosystem of a 'bigger culture project' as you suggest... great stuff.



[Rob Stein](#) Says:

[November 4th, 2011 at 10:00 am](#)

Ahh... good one Susan. I totally forgot one of my favorite quotes from the meeting related to the changes in participation beginning inside the museum. Something like:

"It's always darkest just under the lamp"

Very important to highlight that it's important to consider the opinions and participation of those staff members of the museum who are perhaps under-represented in the decision-making of the organization. Really, who else is MORE invested in seeing the museum succeed... and more knowledgeable about what it might take to make that happen. This doesn't have to lead to decision-making by committee – only that important perspectives and ideas can come from any corner of the organization.



[Ed Rodlet](#) Says:

[November 4th, 2011 at 12:59 pm](#)

I knew you wouldn't disappoint, Rob! A great synthesis. The whole discussion of the changing role of authority is spot on!

One of the great benefits of these kinds of conversations for me is that they almost always speak some truth I've been unable to put into words, or into the right words. Your statement that, "The difference between authoritarian and authoritative is subtle, but crucial." went through me like an electric shock. I'm totally appropriating it (with proper attribution, of course) for discussions we're having here.



[Karen Desnick](#) Says:

[December 20th, 2011 at 7:04 am](#)

I recently did a blog post that I think you might find interesting. It addresses the issue of creating a participatory environment. Dr. Elizabeth Rodini, Senior Lecturer in the History of Art Department at The Johns Hopkins University and the Associate Director of the interdisciplinary, undergraduate Program for Museums in Society, The Andrew W. Mellon Foundation. and The Baltimore Museum of Art formed a creative partnership to help students and their community engage in a very hands on manner.

<http://metroframe.com/blog/>



Jason Stevens Says:

February 27th, 2012 at 9:32 am

A great essay, Mr. Stein. Your conclusion is spot on.

I take issue with Serhan Ada's quotation. It assumes a false hierarchy of host and guest. In fact, being a well-treated guest is a wonderful thing. Being a host can be stressful. Beyond all that, the sentiment behind the statement strikes me as misguided. Perhaps we are refining the host-guest relationship, but we certainly are not trying to reverse it. I think your comments regarding "authority" are more to the point.

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