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Title
How will social media affect museum communication?

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Abstract
Social media enable cultural participants to both explore images of themselves and distribute those images across broad online social networks. Museums worldwide are starting to use social media such as blogs, wikis and vlogs to engage online participants with new interactive experiences. This represents a shift in the ways in which museums:

- act as trusted cultural online networks;
- distribute community knowledge; and
- view their role as custodians of cultural content.

It is this broader distribution of community knowledge which sets social media technologies apart from more traditional outreach models where museums work with audiences. As the products of social media are readily available online, their existence within museum communication programs presents debate around an institution's investment in its own continuing cultural authority. This paper will investigate some of the issues surrounding the use of social media in museum programs and will argue that there are strong epistemological reasons for social media to add value to museum programs.

Keywords
social media, museum communication, web 2.0

Introduction
Museum communication systems such as exhibitions, public programs, outreach and education seek to provide complex cultural interactive experiences. This interaction is framed within the convergence of various disciplinary phenomena including visual communication, media studies, collection and cultural studies, cognitive science, human computer interaction, behavioural studies, screen studies, visual, spatial and temporal design techniques. Social media are a growing issue in the museum environment as they challenge existing communication models, and few museums have clear strategies for engaging communities in content creation. Additionally, museum bureaucracies can present barriers to the kind of agile business processes which could leverage social media.

The ability for an individual to create and display content within an authoritative cultural environment - such as a museum - reflects a growing global interest in the sharing of individual and collective experiences. It also represents changes to the ways in which users interact digitally using different communication models:

- one-to-one (i.e. user to user);
- one-to-many (i.e. museum to user - web pages and blogs);
- many-to-many (knowledge to knowledge - wikis).

1

Historically, the one-to-one and one-to-many communication models have provided the framework for authoritative cultural knowledge as provided by museum programs. This authority is historically derived from the primacy of object collections and the patrimony of the museum in their storage, display and interpretation. The recognized authority which museums have within the community provides audiences with the means to interpret history and science, which in turn justifies the use of mediated representations of artefact and culture (Thomas 1998: 1-18). The outcome of this cultural transaction has traditionally placed museums as provider of both authoritative and authentic knowledge. Such authenticity is critical to the *post-museum*[1] environment in which social media allow for the evolution of a many-to-many communication model. This shift in cultural practice, while initially seeming to undermine the primacy of objects, can provide significant interpretative knowledge. The notion of authenticity - as provided by the museum - organizes collections of narratives into recognizable and authoritative histories, mediating the relationship between visitors and objects. Social media can extend this authenticity by enabling the museum to maintain a cultural dialogue with its audiences in real time.

An example of this extension of authenticity can be found at the Sydney Observatory blog site (Powerhouse Museum 2006). In July 2006 the Senior Curator at the Sydney Observatory posted this comment:

> 'There is an email circulating in cyberspace saying that the red planet Mars will be exceptionally close on 27 August (2006). According to one version "It will look like the Earth has two moons"!!! Once again this is a good lesson in not believing everything on the Internet. The email is a hoax…'(Lomb 2006).

Over the next month, one hundred and thirty five visitors to the blog responded to this comment. Some examples of their comments include:

> 'Ah, I thought the email was a little too exaggerated to be true.... Thanks to the Observatory for setting the record straight and informing the public (Eve Aug 19th, 2006 at 6:01 pm).'

> 'Ah ha …. it sounded too good to be true and I headed straight on over to the "professionals" here at the Sydney Observatory to set my mind at ease that the email is as STUPID as I thought it sounded!....Thanks Sydney Observatory….' (Koobakoop Jul 27th, 2006 at 1:26 pm).

It is not insignificant that many of the responses to the Senior Curator's comments credited the Sydney Observatory with providing the "truth" in this matter. This example illustrates how social media can be used to enable cultural and scholarly dialogue while strengthening the veracity of museum knowledge. The subsequent communication demonstrates how the many-to-many model can enhance both audience interaction and experience and museum authority. At the same time, this example poses new questions for museum authority:

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[1] Hooper-Greenhill uses *post-museum* to describe the contemporary museum. She proposes that it could be regarded as the product of changing agendas, broadening boundaries and changes in the relationship between visitors and the museum (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000: 1).

- How much does the museum invest in revealing knowledge held in the community?
- How far is the museum willing to relax its own authority in these areas of knowledge?
- To what extent is the museum willing to promote community knowledge over its own?

It is also important to consider whether the Sydney Observatory (or any other institution) would usually respond in any way to a hoax email. Most cultural institutions would leave the job of responding to hoaxes to tabloid media or current affairs/news programs. In this case, the existence of the blog allowed the Observatory to respond in a way that didn't threaten its status amongst its peer organizations.

The Sydney Observatory example demonstrates how blogging can be used by museums to encourage a many-to-many discussion. When audiences had the opportunity to engage in cultural debate, they responded in a variety of ways:

- Asking the community of bloggers whether they could provide information on other related phenomena:

   '…can anyone shed any light so to speak on Alcyone the central star our solar system is supposedly tracking on a spiral up and down cycle that lasts 24,000 years. There is a growing school of thought on the www that by 2012 we will be fully immersed in its photon band for a period of 2000 years' (Magnaklor Jul 27th, 2006 at 11:14 pm).

- Extending the social network by linking others to the museum website:

   'Thanks for the info... I've linked all my family and friend to this page and hopefully they'll circulate it around the world' (Annette Aug 4th, 2006 at 11:59 pm).

- Asking the community and/or museum to verify other related knowledge/websites:

   'Strangely enough, I found this claim where "Mars is closest to Earth" phenomenon on this link: www.space.com/spacewatch/where_is_mars.html This link is not real?' (Bustdin Aug 24th, 2006 at 3:29 pm).

These responses illustrate the reach of cultural information beyond the blogging community and the way in which the audience found innovative links between the information and the museum.

Another example which predates social media technologies but illustrates some of the characteristics of a many-to-many communication system is the Collections Australia Network (CAN). CAN aggregates collections from museums, galleries and other organizations Australia-wide. Focusing on small collecting organizations, usually in regional Australia, CAN offers accredited and sanctioned tools, thesauri and preservation tools with which untrained community contributors can properly document objects. In doing so, CAN provides tools which are often beyond the financial and technical reach of regional galleries and museums (which are often

community run, staffed by volunteers, and poorly funded). Regardless, many of these communities wish to preserve their heritage, stories and narratives and often partner with CAN (and larger museums) for assistance in carrying out preservation in a 'professional' and 'effective' manner. The CAN example demonstrates how a museum might not necessarily be willing to democratize its collections via community engagement, but can still extend its professional practices into the community (see also Sumption 2000 and 24hrmuseum.org).

CAN illustrates how museums have used the online environment to share the knowledge, stories and narratives which both they and other museums have within their collections. As CAN continues to evolve, small organizations have a lot to gain from the accessibility and low infrastructure cost of social media which may offer them new ways to tell local stories and remember histories. In the most recent Collections Plan (2006), the Collections Council has identified networks and collaborations as one of its three priority strategies. Networks are seen as both physical and virtual and offer "a means for supporting and resourcing those who work with collections, for linking collections with other collections, for connecting communities of audiences and users with collections, and for stimulating collaborative projects"(CAN 2006, 16). Partnerships with CAN and other larger museums ensure that these relationships are built upon a solid foundation laid upon professional preservation and record keeping practices.

Both examples demonstrate the groundwork for the inclusion of social media in museum programs. Each uses audience interaction and engagement as a vehicle to strengthen museum authority. In each case, the product of the interaction does not change the purity of the 'record' or the museum knowledge; rather it adds community knowledge in different formats to that record.

Examples such as these go some way to addressing the question of how far the museum is willing to relax its authority. It appears that while social media do not oppose museum expertise and knowledge, they can provide a vehicle for scholarly debate. At the same time, community knowledge can be shared across museum networks suggesting that communication and audience interaction may take on different currency in the social media environment.

Cultural Communication and Museum Learning
In the post-museum environment where cultural participation through museum learning gains increasingly greater importance, such communication precedents hint at how audiences and communities could work in partnership with museums to extend both the knowledge situated around the collection record and the reach of that information. While museums have used their outreach and education programs to innovatively involve audiences in cultural knowledge and exploration both online and offline, social media networks provide a significant and possibly more efficient way of "making public" the ways in which audiences respond to cultural content. The two examples above demonstrate how social media can facilitate many-to-many communication through their recognised role as custodian of cultural content

So how do social media affect museum communication and learning experiences? How far is the museum willing to promote community knowledge over its own? As collections remain at the heart of museums, it may be worth considering the location

of meaning in the display of object collections and how this is affected by user interaction and engagement.

When social media are used in museums, they provide an open-ended cultural information space which is structurally ambiguous. This structural ambiguity can result in many unforseen issues:
- the museum is unable to predict the ways in which social media will be used;
- it is difficult to predict the number of people who will participate (affecting download speeds and time);
- it is difficult to plan for consistent length/duration of participation.

These issues are compounded by barriers to agile business practices within museum bureaucracies which are often slow to respond to changes in audience behaviour (Weil 2002, 3-23). Additionally, while audiences can explore collections and create new content, the resultant information they construct is a product of individual realizations of the relationship between phenomena. Unlike museum professionals, and regardless of the scholarship which may underpin the discussions which audiences bring to the social media forum, there remains a notion that this interaction is in the realm of the amateur. How will social media in museums contend with notions of authenticity and quality?

In the early 1990s, as the World Wide Web was beginning to be used in major museums around the world, debates ranged around how audiences would find their way through a newly attained freedom to access information, and what this would mean for cultural institutions (see for example Trant 1998, Teather 1999).

In the late 1990s Trant (1998: 123) suggested that it was critical to consider the effect of the World Wide Web on object collections in particular through the creation of meaningful pathways into and through digital cultural heritage collections. At that time, Trant proposed that if museums did not take a proactive role in the establishment of authoritative web-based cultural information sources, their audiences would seek cultural information elsewhere, possibly through less reliable sources.

As is the case with emerging discussions of social media, issues which arise are often discussed on blogs. Trant's arguments for "trust" and "authority" resurfaced recently in response to a comment posted by Darlene Fichter:

> 'We can only build emergent systems if we have radical trust. With an emergent system, we build something without setting in stone what it will be or trying to control all that it will be. We allow and encourage participants to shape and sculpt and be co-creators of the system. We don't have a million customers/users/patrons … we have a million participants and co-creators. Radical trust is about trusting the community….. As an online community we come up with safeguards or mechanisms that help keep open contribution and participation working' (Fichter 2006).

Fichter's posting - while only a few months old at the time of writing - is gaining a great deal of attention, particularly when the term 'radical trust' was used by Styles (2006) on the Assembly blog (http://maeg.textdriven.com). Following a presentation at the Australian Historical Association conference in Canberra, a number of

prominent museum bloggers commented on the use of the term "radical trust" and the effect it had on museum communication. Yet the notion of "radical trust" is not dissimilar to musings by Trant from ten years ago, when she described how - through the use of networked information tools - cultural heritage institutions could weave a new reality and new interpretations, to communicate the material past to a generation comfortable in an immaterial world (Trant 1998: 125).

Recently, Trant responded to Style's posting and provided valuable insight into the constantly evolving notions of trust in relation to social media in museums:

> 'Trust is built on identity; identity requires identification... Trust is also built upon assumptions that behaviour will be appropriate. Assessments of trust require a history of an individual's actions - linking their trace with a distinct identity… Personalization could be a great way for libraries, archives and museums to build connections between collections and individuals, and between people and collecting institutions... Once again, though, we need to realise that we're creating an on-line space that doesn't share all the characteristics of our past space, on-line or on-site' (Trant 2006).

In the social media environment, one of the challenges for the museum is to ensure that the veracity of information surrounding cultural content is not abandoned. This is not a new challenge but one which is described over and over as emergent systems, technologies and paradigms affect the museum program. Over the past 30 years museum communication has progressed from the 19th century information transmission models used in the early modernist museums, to social constructivist models which acknowledge the experiences that audiences bring with them when visiting the museum (Watkins and Mortimore 1999). This shift has focused on the partnerships between the museum and its visitors in the "making of meaning" (Hooper-Greenhill 2000) and is in keeping with more general evolutions in digital media which describe how different modalities combine to create meaning (Snyder 2002).

Summary
The field of social media in museums is still very much in its infancy. Few scholarly papers have been written on the subject and while some museums have incorporated social media into their programs, a discussion of their effects has only just begun. We propose the following discussion topics:
- changing communication models;
- connecting youth audiences to museum content;
- barriers to agile business processes in the response to social media;
- strategies for engaging communities in knowledge sharing.

By examining some of the issues which surround museum communication design and learning, this paper asks many questions which are relevant to the adaptation of social media in museums. In particular, the paper has explored:
- the effect that readily accessible and digitally networked communication will have on the "voice and authority" of the museum;
- the way in which social media will engender types of online, networked user interactions;
- notions of identity through museum learning.

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The examples of the Sydney Observatory and the Collections Australia Network indicate that there is an innovative and effective role for social media to play in evolving a many-to-many communication model within the museum whilst maintaining and perhaps even strengthening its voice and authority. If the ability for audiences to share knowledge across trusted online cultural networks is to play a role in future museum practice, then the questions this paper raises will need to be addressed. Without a strong theoretical and business oriented framework, there is the danger that social media - like other technologies before it - will become yet another fad for connecting museums to audiences. Our research indicates that there are strong epistemological reasons for social media to add value to museum programs. The next few years of research and practice will determine whether this growing practice can be sustained.

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Web resources
Assembly of the Museums Australia education group
http://maeg.textdriven.com

Sydney Observatory
http://www.sydneyobservatory.com.au/blog/

CAN
http://www.collectionscouncil.com.au/

24hrMuseum
http://www.24hourmuseum.org.uk/

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