Social Media on Social Media

Reviewed by **Maggie Dennis**

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For some months now, Gretchen Jennings and I have been casually discussing social networking and museums, exchanging our observations and concerns along with blog links and book suggestions. But when she asked me if I would write a blog review for this issue of **Exhibitionist,** I hesitated. I am not engaged in any new media activities at my museum, although I do dabble in social networking in my free time. But once I started reading blogs more closely for this review, I realized that perhaps standing on the periphery of this discussion is a good place to reflect on this topic. For one thing, people deeply engaged in getting museums involved in social media (and those who are opposing it) have passionate views on the subject. And I imagine that, like me, readers of this journal are wondering what to make of it all.

Reflections on Social Media in Museums

There are a lot of blogs out there, and here I'll refer to only a few that specifically discuss the role of social media in museums and the practical details of how museum staffers can get involved. The most well-known and extensive blog addressing this topic is of course Nina Simon's Museum 2.0 (http://museumtwo. blogspot.com/). Simon makes her posts compelling by posing intriguing and difficult to answer questions, such as "What are you doing, and how could you be doing it better?" and "Why isn't anyone commenting on your blog?" These questions keep me coming back for more.

Simon is prolific, and trying to keep up with her is daunting. But there are useful navigational features that will drive the reader to specific content. Clicking on "Web 2.0" in the word cloud on the right column, for example, will take you to posts specifically addressing social media and museums. Posts that I have found especially useful include, "A Simple Argument for Why Museums and Cultural Institutions Should Care About Social Media" (April 13, 2009), "How Much Time Does Web2.0 Take?" (April 10, 2008), and "How to Develop a (Small Scale) Social Media Plan," (June 9, 2009). These posts offer both nuts and bolts advice on how to get started with social media, as well as philosophical reflections on the benefits and challenges of putting museum resources towards these efforts. Museum 2.0 is your best first stop for exploring this topic.

While Museum 2.0 has about 10,000 readers, it only averages about seven comments per post. Simon herself notes that this is a lousy percentage, though very few successful blogs do better. Probably much of that conversation is happening offline at conferences and around water coolers. One place where you can go online to discuss this topic is Museum 3.0 (http://museum30.ning.com/), a social network created by Lynda Kelly, Head of Audience Research at the Australian Museum in Sydney. Museum 3.0 serves as a central location for finding group discussions related to the future of museums. Groups related to museums and social networking include: Museum audience research in a web2.0 world (currently 41 members) and Engaging with social media in museums (currently 124 members).

Kelly is a frequent contributor to another blog, Social Media and Cultural Communication (http://nlablog.wordpress.com), which examines social media, cultural institutions and digital participation. It is based on the research projects "Engaging with Social Media in Museums" and "New Literacy, New Audiences." Located in Australia and attracting an international

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audience, these blogs offer a variety of perspectives on museums using social media as tools for engaging new audiences.

Smithsonian 2.0 (http://smithsonian20.typepad.com/blog) is a blog focused primarily on addressing the institution's efforts to get involved in social media as a means of increasing public access to its vast collections. Launched this past January in order to continue discussing topics raised at a two-day forum of the same title, Smithsonian 2.0 invites the public to participate in this internal discussion. While it remains to be seen if this agenda has popular appeal, the posts do reflect issues of wider concern to the museum profession. For example, Michael Edson's entertaining March 6, 2009 post, "Web Guy and Angry Staff Person" accurately reflects the internal arguments going on in many museums between the true believers in new media and those who oppose it—the cantankerous curators who are concerned that limited resources are being diverted towards a fad that detracts from museums' traditional position as the authority on its collections. While poking fun at this stereotype, Edson points to evidence suggesting these fears are unfounded.

Museum curators aren't the only ones questioning why and how museums should embrace social networking. Museumssuck.com (http://www.museumssuck.com) is William Crowley's challenge to museums that dive into social media thinking that it will increase attendance in a time of economic hardship. Admittedly, Crowley's creation isn't really a blog. He's simply using this format to encourage museums not to lose sight of their core strengths. Crowley states, "My point is if your museum had the Venus de Milo, your museum

wouldn't suck. A priori. And you'd never have to stand up and tell the room your name, the museum you work for, and a little bit about your background before joining in a provocative group exchange session about how to stay relevant by leveraging Flickr."

In other words, museums are supposed to be about their collections, and if your museum doesn't have anything the public wants to see then no amount of social networking is going to fix things. (It's important to note that Crowly is not a curator. He is a designer of interactive exhibit features). Crowly concludes, "Be a museum. And try harder not to suck at it." While I believe that museums need to continually evolve to stay relevant, I appreciate Crowley's reminder that we must not lose our identity as we navigate the maze of social media. For me, the real question is, "how can we use social media to build on our strengths?"

What's Missing?

While considering the various points of view on this topic, I started thinking about what might be missing from these blogs that could significantly contribute to this discussion. I came up with two things that I would like to see. First, I think we need a much better general understanding of how social networking functions in a web 2.0 world. How many people are museums really reaching with these tools? Who are they? And do they really want to engage in shared authority?

Understanding the Demographics

In another article in this issue, Nina Simon points to the 90-9-1 rule: 90% of users are consumers, 9% are occasional producers, and 1% are frequent contributors. So, while on the face of it social media may give the

appearance of greater engagement, this rule suggests that these tools are no better at achieving interactivity than traditional museum methods. But just getting beyond museum walls to reach more people is important, so how much of our museums' limited resources should we be putting towards social media projects? And how can we make our efforts in this arena more effective? To explore these questions, I think these blogs can be good places to review and discuss the new body of demographic research on social networking. In addition, I've listed below some recent books on this subject. For a humorous take on social media demographics, see Despair, Inc.'s Social Media Venn Diagram t-shirt, at http://www.despair.com/somevedi.html.

The Need for Evaluation

The second thing that would help immensely is the development of evaluation instruments for measuring the impact of using these social tools to share museum content and engage audiences. Those museum professionals who have now had time to get their feet wet in the web 2.0 world could lead this effort, and share that information with the many museums that are just beginning to get involved in social media. It's time to get some meaningful and measurable feedback from our audiences so we can focus our attention on what really works. ✳

Recent Works on Social Media:

Li, C. & Bernoff, J. (2008). *Groundswell: Winning in a world transformed by social technologies.* Boston: MA: Forrester Research, Inc.

Reich, B. & Solomon, D. (2007). *Media rules!: Mastering today's technology to connect with and keep your audience.* Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Shirky, C. (2008). *Here comes everybody: The power of organizing without organizations.* New York, NY: Penguin Press.

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