

# How Web 2.0 Tools Impact The Museum-Visitor Relationship

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**Abstract** Cultural institutions such as museums increasingly rely on social media to achieve their missions. However, little attention has been paid to museums' strategies of communication with social media. Even if some research has focused more on visitor experience, there has been neither a particular stress on visitors' experience with social media nor on an evaluation of museums' strategies with these tools. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explore how museums use social media to enhance their relationship with visitors and to determine if visitor empowerment is real. Since information systems (IS) research has paid scant attention to the role played by social media in museums' strategies, our work in-progress can help to fill this gap. This study has practical implications as well, because we try to identify how social media can help museums to be more competitive.

## 1 Introduction

According to a recent report on social media adoption, 86% of online US adults and 79% of European online adults engage with social media (Elliott and Sverdlov, 2012). Indeed, an increasing number of people across the world engage actively with online activities. Social media can be de-

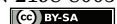
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defined as “a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of user generated content” (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010, p. 61). Social technologies have emerged with the Web 2.0 paradigm which puts the emphasis on participation, sharing, accessibility, and user empowerment. These characteristics of the new Web have transformed companies’ relationships with their customers (Bernoff and Li, 2008; Foster et al, 2010; Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). The phenomenon of participation is not limited to the business context only, since cultural institutions such as museums increasingly rely on these social media to achieve their missions.

As a matter of fact, most of the well-known museums, such as The Louvre, the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), the Guggenheim Museum, the Victoria and Albert Museum have online presences on Facebook and Twitter. During the first quarter of 2012, the MOMA located in New York has reached one million fans on Facebook demonstrating the potential of these tools to create huge communities of visitors and to expand knowledge beyond the museum wall. Among the fifty most active museums on social media, The Tate Museum was ranked second in February 2012 with 547,102 followers on Twitter (Lochon, 2012). While Russo et al (2008) contented that museums were slow to adopt social media technologies, we now observe higher enthusiasm and a multiplication of museums’ initiatives with social media. In 2010, 43% of the French museums reported having a Facebook account, 18% a Twitter and Youtube account and 31% a Dailymotion account (Groupe EAC, 2011).

Cultural heritage institutions, like museums, are worthy of being studied because they contribute to social and economic developments of countries (Dümcke and Gnedovsky, 2013). France, which is the number one cultural tourism destination in Europe, lists 1200 national museums attracting more than 70 million visitors per year (France Diplomatie, 2006). Consequently, museums can also contribute to the economic growth of countries. This occurs not only in Europe, but, according to the Association of American Museums (AAM), they are “drivers of economy” in many places in the world.

However, little attention has been paid to museums’ strategies of communication with social media. Even if some research has focused more on visitor experience, there has been neither a particular stress on visitors’ experience with social media nor on an evaluation of strategies of muse-

ums with these tools. Therefore, the objective of this paper is to explore how museums use social media to enhance their relationship with visitors and visitors' participation with these media. Our research questions are the following:

- To what extent do social media help museums to meet visitors' expectation?
- Do visitors have a voice with these technologies?

In order to answer these research questions, we will review the literature on museum strategies with social media.

Since research has paid scant attention to the role played by social media in strategies of museum, our study can help to fill in this gap. This study has practical implications as well because we try to identify how social media can help museums to be more competitive. "A museum must be accountable for the economic use of resources at its disposal in an efficient manner and meet the standards for public trust and accountability" (Zorloni, 2012, p. 43). Therefore, museums can no longer be elitist institutions and must now try to attract the largest possible client base. Social media represent a potential solution to connect with visitors and to attract new publics. However, we want to determine if visitor empowerment is real.

This paper is structured as follows. First, we define and present the missions of a museum. Second, the context of the research is set out by analysing the relationship that exists between museums and their visitors. Third, we review the literature on social media and strategies of museums. Fourth, we conclude this research by introducing the methodology that may be employed in future research.

## **2 Definition and Missions of a Museum**

Several practical definitions of museums are available. The one that is the most recognized and used widely in the museum field is that of the International Council of Museums (ICOM). According to the statutes of ICOM, "A museum is a non-profit making, permanent institution in the service of society and of its development, and open to the public, which acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits, for purposes of study, education and enjoyment, material evidence of people and their en-

vironment.” (2001, Article 2). Consequently, museums are different from firms. Indeed, a museum is a non-profit making institution so even if it might contribute to a country’s economic growth by attracting tourists, its existential goal is not profit (Bloch, 2004). Furthermore, museums have four principal missions. They are: (1) acquisition, (2) research, (3) communication and (4) exhibition. Porter (2006) described the museum value chain and he suggests a slightly different classification of these main missions. The primary activities of a museum are: (1) collection, (2) exhibition and programs, (3) visitor services and (4) marketing and sales.

Šola and Museoliitto (1997) also contend that museums and their visitors have a mutually beneficial relationship. Consequently, museums should try to develop ties with their visitors and this implies a two-way relationship. Museums communicate and exhibit their artefacts to the public. Conversely visitors should be able to communicate and share their thoughts with museums.

### **3 The Relationship of Museums with Their Visitors**

The aforementioned characteristics of museums lead to the conclusion that there is a two-way relationship between visitors and museums, which supports the “mutual relationship” concept articulated by Šola and Museoliitto (1997). The contour of this relationship between museums and their visitors is elucidated below.

For a long time, a museology based on artefacts was dominant. In other words the objects were supposed to speak for themselves (Gob and Drouguet, 2003). More and more frequently, curators have become conscious that just displaying objects is not enough and that they need to give them meaning. Therefore, in addition to collection and documentation of artefacts, curators also have a mission of communication. They provide information in order to make objects more accessible (Gob and Drouguet, 2003).

Today, museum experts increasingly acknowledge that visitor interpretation plays an important role in their experience. Curators have become “visitor-centred” (Ross, 2004, p. 86) by putting more emphasis on visitor interpretation than on artefacts.

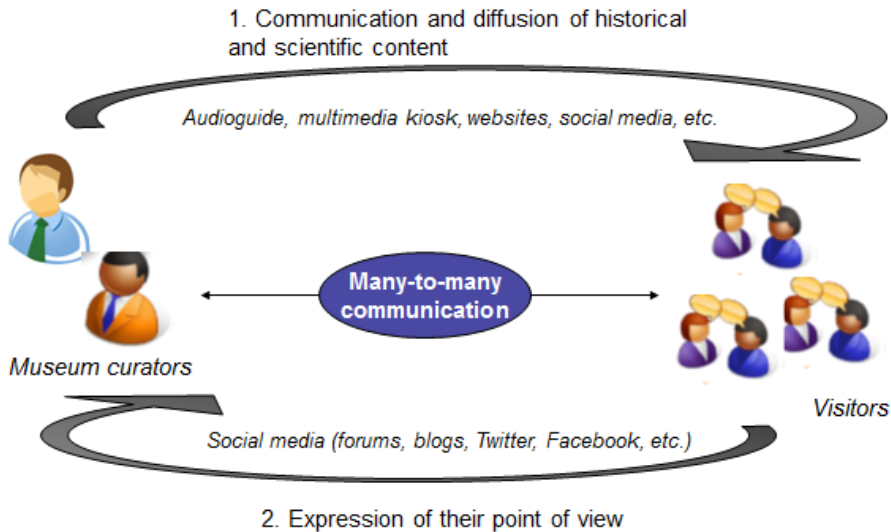
Furthermore, visitors are increasingly taking an active role within museums (Cameron, 2005). They try to give meaning to objects and not just take curators' interpretations for granted. Indeed, museum visits are more and more often perceived as an opportunity for individuals "to explore and make up their own minds, to test their own interpretations against the experts" (Hooper-Greenhill, 2000, p. 30). Visitors want to be able to develop their own thinking about phenomena or objects.

Museums have been for a long time influential institutions, since they were the only ones to convey meaning. The communication in this tradition was one way and visitors did not really have the chance to express themselves (Hicks 2005; Ross 2004). But today, power between curators and visitors is better balanced, especially through the usage of social media (Russo, 2011; Russo et al, 2008).

Social media introduce a new dimension, as they give "an enhancement of the traditional one-to-many information transfer model with a more genuinely interactive many-to-many communication model" (Russo et al, 2008). The traditional communication of museums with their visitors used to be one way and even when using technologies to communicate, curators focused on the diffusion of scientific content in a unilateral way. The recent development of social media enables visitors to react to this scientific content. Visitors can now communicate their thoughts or emotions directly to museum professionals or they can also discuss with other visitors (see Figure 1).

#### **4 Social Media Strategies for Museums: Literature Review**

What is clear is that even if museum attendance is growing, museums still struggle to accomplish their four core missions of collection, exhibition, education, and communication (Burton and Scott, 2003; Hooper-Greenhill, 2000; Russo, 2011). These challenges are partly due to new financial constraints. As a matter of fact, museums that used to be mainly public institutions tend either to become private or to see their governmental funding reduced (Russo, 2011). Furthermore, like companies museums also try to reach competitive advantage (Porter, 2006). Actually, museums are in competition with leisure and entertainment activities such as theatres, cinemas and concerts (Zorloni, 2012). Consequently, mu-



**Fig. 1** The Museum-Visitor Relationship

seums need to raise money and manage their activities more efficiently through organizational excellence. The performance of museums seems to be related to four perspectives: governance and finance perspective, public perspective, learning and growth perspective and intellectual perspective (Zorloni, 2012). Social media have the potential to contribute to each of these four perspectives.

For instance, social media could be used by museum professionals to create new forms of knowledge and innovation (Russo, 2011; Russo et al, 2008). By enabling visitors to contribute to cultural discussions, museums can enrich their intellectual perspective. Social media also impact the learning and growth perspective as they democratize access to cultural content (Proctor 2010). Table 1 summarizes some recent research on the role of social media in museums.

As presented in Table 1, prior research tends to focus on a specific facet of social media, namely the communication between museums and their visitors. This perspective is very important and is defined by Gallagher and Ransbotham (2010) as the Magnet and Megaphone communication. More precisely, Gallagher and Ransbotham (2010) argue that there are

**Table 1** The Role of Social Media in Museums

References	Research objective	Methodology	Role of social media
(López et al, 2010)	To explore the extent to which Web 2.0 tools are being used by museums on their websites	Analysis of 240 museum websites belonging to four categories (arts, natural sciences, social sciences, and specialized)	The availability of Web 2.0 tools in museum websites is still very rare. Anglo-Saxon museums have a more extended usage of social media tools, than French, Italian and Spanish museums.
(Mencarelli and Pulh, 2012)	To identify the new roles devoted to museum visitors and to discuss their impacts on museum missions	Careful examination of sites and social media features offered by museums	Social media offer three new roles to museum visitors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Communication manager</li> <li>• Online curator</li> <li>• Artist</li> </ul>
(Proctor, 2010)	To delineate the new role of curators in the age of social media	Conceptual paper	Democratize control of and access to culture
(Russo, 2011)	To understand how the implementation of strategic social media programs can drive on-line cultural exchange and create new connections with diverse communities	Critical assessments of two examples from the cultural sector: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Global event</li> <li>• Online networking in design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• New forms of innovation (crowdsourcing)</li> <li>• Emergence of design communities</li> <li>• Creative connections</li> </ul>
(Russo et al, 2008)	To discuss the potential of social media for retaining and extending museum authority	Conceptual paper	Create or improve popular knowledge sharing networks Provide audiences with a voice, allowing them to participate in cultural debate

three important flows of customer communication and conceptualize the 3-M framework to assess each of these flows of communication:

1. the firm-to-customer communication is named the Megaphone,
2. the customer-to-firm communication is represented by the Magnet and
3. the customer-to-customer interaction is labelled the Monitor.

The 3-M framework was then applied to analyse Starbuck's communication paths.

If we apply the 3-M framework to museums, the Megaphone corresponds to Proctor (2010)'s description of the new role of curators in the age of social media: Curators or museum professionals using social media to communicate with their publics. For instance, the Metropolitan Museum of Art's Web site has an attraction called "Connections," where behind-the-scene staff members talk about their favorite works in the collection. Curators, but also directors of exhibitions share their personal point of views with video and audio testimonies. On the website, it is explained that "their voices range from the authoritative to the highly subjective, and touch upon any number of themes and concepts."<sup>1</sup>

Museums also can use social media like "a Magnet to draw inbound dialog" (Gallaughner and Ransbotham, 2010, p. 200). The participation of online visitors can be used for diverse strategies such as exhibition curation, collections enhancement, community of interest and museum learning (Russo et al, 2008). For instance, the Smithsonian museum extensively relies on crowdsourcing and user-generated content to classify its observations, to identify works of art, and to create online databases. "Philatelic experts around the world can research – and sometimes pinpoint inaccuracies in – the museum's collection." (Olson, 2011).

Nonetheless, Table 1 also indicates that very few empirical studies have examined the effective participation of visitors in museum strategies. A better balance between curators' and visitors' voice is desirable and social media can encourage it, but more research is needed to validate if social media actually contribute to visitors' participation. As a point of fact, López et al (2010) found that the Magnet usage of social media was still rare on French, Italian and Spanish museum websites. These museums tend to have a limited usage of blogs and forums especially, because they consider these sources of knowledge as unauthoritative. Consequently, more research is needed to assess participation profiles of museum visitors with social media.

## 5 Outlook on Future Research

The survey methodology will be designed to conduct this research. Through online questionnaires with museum visitors, we will try to iden-

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.metmuseum.org/connections/about-connections>



tify different profiles of visitors' participation with social media. Another objective will be to test the Expectation-Confirmation Theory (Bhattacharjee, 2001; Oliver, 1977) in order to determine if visitors' expectations regarding online participation with social media are met when communicating with museums. Our findings can be interesting to researchers who work on social media by providing new insights from the cultural and non-profit sector. This research will also be of interest to museum professionals who have recently discovered the potential of social media but keep using these tools as a Megaphone and ignore the Magnet perspective (i.e. visitors' voice).

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