



Social conversations

by Scott Billings

As the social media explosion rolls on, more and more talk centres around the possibilities – and realities – of interaction, collaboration and dialogue. Now we are all so easily connected, conversations may flow back and forth like never before; at least that's the promise.

For museums, this is an enticing prospect: the offer of readymade channels through which to converse with the public, near and far, at relatively low cost. But have social media really brought about genuine dialogue between cultural heritage institutions and society at large? And what are the implications of trying to promote such two-way communication?

Many museums are no strangers to dialogue and debate with their visitors. Some of the larger institutions have already developed dedicated physical spaces in order to host and promote debating events. The Natural History Museum's Nature Live Studio¹ and the Science Museum's Dana Centre² are two high profile examples of science-based dialogue and discussion forums. In fact, the Dana Centre was specifically established, eight years ago, as a facility to engage adults in scientific dialogue away from the notionally kid-friendly main museum. Focus groups had revealed that this kind of two-way debate would appeal to adults and help draw them into the Science Museum³.

Online social media would appear to offer an even simpler route to spark up conversation with anyone interested in the work of a museum. In particular, social media allow for ongoing, sustained conversations, as well as one-off themed events. Yet despite this promise, social network sites such as Facebook and Twitter are still predominantly used as marketing and public relations channels, occasionally providing question and answer type interactions between the public and the museum.

But do these question and answer exchanges necessarily connote conversation and dialogue? 'Crucially, for communication to count as dialogue, it needs a third statement to be

¹ <http://www.nhm.ac.uk/visit-us/whats-on/daily-events/nature-live/index.html>

² <http://www.danacentre.org.uk/>

³ <http://www.sciencemuseum.org.uk/>

made in order to demonstrate that both parties are responsive,' says Kevin Bacon, curator of photographs at the Royal Pavilion and Museums, Brighton & Hove⁴. 'It's great, of course, that social media are being used for Q&A sessions and marketing, but these are essentially traditional activities that are using new media for much the same ends as before. I think we need to look at social media at a much more elemental level and consider how this can transform museums' relationship to society.'

At their best, museums are fantastically rich repositories of knowledge and sites of investigation about the world and our lives within it. Because these subjects are so vast, museums arguably have as much to receive from the public as they do to give. Interpretation is often personal and it can be enriching for curators to hear about other people's knowledge and experience of an object or collection. In a recent science fair at the Pitt Rivers Museum⁵ in Oxford, for example, I used a West African talking drum to demonstrate the properties of pitch in sound, but an African visitor to the event actually knew a lot more about how the drums were used indigenously than I did.

When it comes to dialogue, museums need to ask what they might want from conversations with the public and what social media can offer. 'The best dialogue aims at reconstructing collections' original contexts, enabling people to make new meanings and cultural works and applying this knowledge to the future,' says Bridget McKenzie, director of Flow Associates⁶. 'The ultimate goals of the best kinds of practice involve wider social or cultural transformation, the creation of a learning society, for example. These are far more important than corporate goals, although bonus outcomes might be raised profile, participation and support for the organisation.'

According to McKenzie, online interactions range widely. There is the 'superficial and fragmentary' testing of social media, as well as more focused corporate programmes that engage people in order to sell tickets, boost membership and generally increase visitor numbers. As we move toward educational dialogue, exchanges can become richer. Traditional 'informative' methods offer information about collections, ideas and histories, but at the far end of the spectrum there can also be transformative dialogic learning, 'where the goal is to solve problems or create a shared horizon of understanding through activities ranging from conversation through to collaborative research or creative experiment,' says McKenzie.

The depth of these kinds of objectives is a far cry from a few question and answer posts on a Facebook page. They are bound up in the definition of the role, purpose and even operational structure of a museum. Corporate and PR messages do not rely on dialogue, but effective transformative learning surely does. Nurturing this level of communication requires a concerted effort to promote a culture of conversation amongst all museum professionals, not just those who operate the Twitter account. But according to Nina Simon, a leading US consultant on museums and web 2.0, most museums 'don't have the resources or policies to support real dialogue with the public, even if they are present in social media-land.'

⁴ <http://www.brighton-hove-rpml.org.uk/Pages/home.aspx>

⁵ <http://www.prm.ox.ac.uk/>

⁶ <http://flowassociates.com/wordpress/>

But the numbers are there: Facebook page 'Likes' for some of the bigger museums are well into the tens (or even hundreds) of thousands. The real question is what to do with them. For Bacon, using social media for dialogue and conversation could be a step towards embedding museums more directly into everyday life.

'Museums have changed substantially in the last ten years or so, but I suspect that most people still perceive them as little more than a place where there are things to look at,' he says. 'Social media are a very good means of conveying what museums actually do and by showing what goes on behind the scenes there is much better chance of threading museums into the popular imagination. This can then provide a platform for developing new audiences, philanthropy and, perhaps most importantly at present, political support. None of that requires dialogue necessarily, but any conversations that we can hold will enormously enhance and strengthen these new relationships.'

Needless to say, cultivating any kind of ongoing dialogue requires commitment and an investment of time, resources and energy. If museums really want to set themselves up for deeper conversation – something beyond online events listing, status updates and 140-character Q&As – there's doubtless plenty of work ahead.